

Good Friday Homily

Jesus is dead. His body has been sealed inside the tomb. Mercy has been condemned, compassion has been crucified, and hope has been destroyed.

This is where the Passion of our Lord ends. This is Good Friday, the lowest point in Holy Week. It's a long walk from the joy of Palm Sunday to the despair of Holy Saturday, or Easter Eve. And right now, we are in the most uncomfortable, most distressing, most heartbreaking moment.

We know, of course, how the story ends. We know that our tears of grief and sorrow will be transformed into tears of joy on Easter morning. But if we jump ahead, if we allow ourselves to rush past the messiness of the crucifixion without any reflection, our Easter celebration becomes a shallow ritual of self-congratulation. Easter without Good Friday is like a plastic egg with nothing inside it -- shiny and colorful, but cheap and hollow and meaningless.

I don't want to dwell here. I don't want to sit at the foot of the cross; I don't want to stand vigil at the door of Christ's tomb. And yet, I know that God asks this of me, of all of us who call ourselves Christians. The work of redemption and mercy and salvation, which will come to completion on Easter morning, depends upon the tragedy of the cross. Our Lord suffered greatly for us; the very least we can do is to wait and watch with him.

This is part of the walk of Holy Week. And even though it's disturbing and unpleasant, Good Friday also offers each one of us a unique and precious gift. In the passion and death of Jesus Christ, God has encountered and absorbed all our human suffering.

What are our greatest sorrows, our deepest fears? The phone call in the middle of the night, the terminal diagnosis, the police officers knocking on the front door, the bomb or the plane crash or the mass shooting... our world has plenty of Good Fridays. That moment when the bottom drops out, when our world comes crashing down, when there's no light at the end of the tunnel and we can't go on -- that moment exists in God's story, too. That moment exists for Jesus, and for his mother, and for his friends.

The gift of Good Friday is not that we will never have to suffer or grieve or die. We might wish it so, but suffering and pain and death are all facets of the beautiful jewel that is life.

Do you know, do you remember, the story of Kitty Genovese? She was the 28-year-old bartender who was stabbed to death while walking home from work in the early morning hours of March 13th, 1964. Her death became a symbol of cultural decay and callous indifference because, according to the news reports, more than 30 people in her Queens neighborhood witnessed the attack and did nothing to intervene or get help.

A horrible, horrible story, right? Kitty Genovese's younger brother, Bill, who was understandably haunted by his sister's death, spent ten years researching what happened that night, and his quest was profiled in a 2016 documentary called *The Witness*. Bill pored through

police and medical records, tracked down his sister's coworkers, and even interviewed her killer's son.

So why am I telling you all this? There's a touching moment, near the end of the documentary, that implanted itself in my heart, and it helps me understand the gift of Good Friday. For 50 years, Bill Genovese has believed that his sister bled to death in the doorway of her apartment building, completely alone. As he tracks down the building's former residents (many of whom are either dead or completely untraceable) he meets one man who was 7 or 8 years old at the time of the murder, living in one of the upstairs apartments with his parents. His mother, Sophia Farrar, was a friend of Kitty's. He tells Bill all about his memory of that night -- waking up to hear the commotion of his parents in their living room, his father turning on the lights and calling the police, and his mother racing out the door and down the stairs in her nightgown to get to Kitty. The most beautiful, affecting moment in the documentary comes when Bill visits Sophia Farrar in her home, and hears for himself how this woman cradled his sister in her arms at the bottom of the stairs on that night, rocking back and forth, speaking words of love and comfort and holding Kitty as she died. His sister died horribly and tragically, yes; but she did not die alone.

This is the gift of Good Friday -- that we do not have to suffer or grieve or die alone. Christ is with us through our pain; he remains with us through every trial, and he stays with us to the end and beyond. When we cry, Christ cries with us; when we grieve, Christ grieves with us; and when we die, Christ dies with us. There is no greater friendship, no greater love than the love that stays and holds one who suffers, the friend who will not abandon nor forsake us in our time of need. We have such a friend in our crucified Lord. Thanks be to God! Amen.