

Emerging from the Darkness

Passion of Christ from Mark 14-15

Holy Week. The Passion of Christ. Every year during Holy Week I spend time quietly reflecting, pondering, trying yet again to grasp the depth and breadth of what Jesus endured that last week of his life. I do this much more at this time of year than I do at Christmas. Christmas is joyous and celebratory. I get Christmas. During the yuletide season we frequently remind ourselves that “Jesus is the reason for the season.” Yes, he is, but I think that acknowledgment is even more important during Holy Week. Notice I didn’t say Easter, but Holy Week. Easter is like Christmas in that it too is joyous and celebratory. We get it. What we don’t really get is what happened this last week of Jesus’ life leading up to Easter. Oh, we read the scriptures and sing the hymns, which we have just done. We can relate the events of Holy Week to someone else. But at the deepest gut level of our viscera, we struggle to fully understand it.

I have always maintained that we can’t really know the totality of Jesus’ suffering. We should try to know. It’s good for us to struggle to understand who God is and what God has done for us. I tend to look at Holy Week from my own perspective. I haven’t suffered the way Jesus did; I haven’t been tortured as was he. Thus, I have trouble grasping his pain. What happened on this night was that Jesus was plunged into extreme darkness – disciples who didn’t understand what was happening; a friend who betrayed him; arrest; interrogation; torture; denial by more friends; humiliation; agony; thorns; nails; pain; blood; death. That was as dark as it could get for Jesus.

You may have the same problem I have. You haven’t experienced that kind of torture and pain. But I would submit that you have been thrown into deep darkness in your lives. And while those experiences don’t rival that of Jesus, they have, nevertheless, been our darkneses and we have been challenged to summon every ounce of strength and courage we have to deal with them. To be told you have a dreaded disease and that you will face surgery and follow-up treatment with no definitive assurance of survival is to be thrown into darkness. To have the love of your love torn from you in death is to be thrown into darkness. To watch helplessly as the livelihood you spent most of your lifetime building up vanish in a rapidly decaying economy, stripping you of your security, is to be thrown into darkness. To dive into a bottle of alcohol every day, or stick a needle into your arm, is to have already been cast into darkness.

During Holy Week, as I try to grasp Jesus’ suffering and pain, I also reflect on my own darkneses. There have been a few. One stands out as the worst, and Susan and my darkness came because of our youngest daughter’s deep darkness. Heather was a head-strong teenager. She couldn’t wait to drive. At age 15 her girlfriend borrowed her boyfriend’s full-size pickup truck and let Heather drive. Heather is fairly petite. She had trouble reaching the pedals and looking over the steering wheel. After driving a couple of blocks on a quiet residential street, Heather lost control of the truck, jumped the curb, and ran up onto a front yard. In the yard two elderly sisters were picking weeds out of their lawn. The truck hit them and they both died instantly.

Heather was instantly plunged into a world of chaos and darkness, and we were pulled in with her. The family of the two sisters was equally thrown into darkness. Heather was arrested and charged with two counts of vehicular homicide. Denver television cameras followed the ensuing court proceedings. Our entire family was suddenly living in a world we knew nothing about. It was numbing and terrifying, especially for Heather, but also for us. It was the longest year of our live.

Here’s what we learned about our darkness though. We emerge from it. We don’t need to put down roots into the chaos and darkness of our lives. Diseases can be controlled and lived with, and sometimes conquered. The pain of losing a loved one stays with us for a long time, but we discover that the darkness eventually dissipates as we interact with family, friends, and meaningful activities. Someone gets through to the alcoholic and drug addict, gets them into treatment, and a life turns around, coming

out of the darkness. Businesses fail, and then families begin new endeavors, slowly climbing out of the darkness of the miry pit.

In our case, Heather was convicted, but because of her age and the absence of any alcohol or drugs, she was sentenced to several years of probation. Restitution was paid to family of the victims. Heather is married and is the mother of our three granddaughters. She just turned 41. It was only three years ago that she found the courage to get behind the wheel of an automobile and learn to drive. Even so, she self-limits her driving, doing so only when necessary.

Experience teaches us that we can and will emerge from our darkneses. But there is an even more profound reason why we know this – Holy Week. What is penetratingly painful and glorious at the same time about Jesus' Passion is that he chose to do it. We don't choose our darkneses. We stumble into them through stupidity or carelessness, or poor decisions or unexplained circumstances. Sometimes life just happens and we're in the wrong place at the wrong time. But Jesus was willing to endure his torture and to die for only one reason – so that we might be able to become free of the darkness of our sins, and to overcome the dark oppressiveness of our personal experiences.

It goes one step further. Jesus emerged from his darkness on a Sunday morning – Easter. Jesus overcame death. He defeated the final enemy. In fact, Jesus turned death into something for us not to fear. You and I will emerge from our darkneses because our Lord has shown us that we have nothing to fear but fear itself. Armed with the knowledge that we are loved so much that God's Son willingly gave up his life so that we might become impassioned about ours, now and forever, then we can stand fast. We can hold on. We can live with hope, and the God whose peace passes all understanding will guard and guide us as we also emerge from our darkneses. I don't know about you, but the only thing I can say to that is thanks be to God! Amen? Amen!

- Pastor Richmond B. Stoakes, Carbondale Community United Methodist Church, 21 April 1011
[Maundy Thursday]