



“Why We Say, ‘Christ Has Died, Christ Is Risen, Christ Will Come Again’”

A homily by the Very Reverend Michael R. Ruk

Sun., Apr. 14, 2019

Gospel this week: Luke 24:1-12

Each Sunday, we say in our liturgy, “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.” It’s almost rote, because we say it every week. But what exactly is it that we’re saying?

We say it’s the mystery of faith. But it’s also the paradox of faith. Because this day celebrates so many conflicting emotions. It starts off with the palms, where Jesus comes into the temple area, to the city of Jerusalem, as a king, a victor, a celebrity. And then we quickly move to the story of the passion – of betrayal, of suffering, of pain and, finally, of death.

Those paradoxes that we hear in the stories of the gospel, and throughout this week, is a tension. But it’s a tension that we all face in life, a tension that we all face with pain in our life, with brokenness, with despair and, yes, with death. Because all of us will face those pains, those deaths – anger, frustration. All of us. None of us are beyond that.

For the early Christian, the symbol of the cross was just too much, because it was too close to them. Really, the cross wasn’t embraced by the Christian faith until about the 3rd century. Because it was just too much. And maybe it’s too much for us sometimes, too. I’m always amazed how some people either love Holy Week, or can’t deal with it. They either really get it, or they really want to step away from it.

It requires us to look at things in our life, in our faith, that are sometimes very difficult for us to understand. It’s interesting that so many people skip over this week. I know lots of churches that have Palm Sunday, and then – boom! – Easter Sunday. And they literally avoid everything between.

But you literally can't get to next Sunday unless you go through Holy Week. You simply cannot do it. It's just like you simply can't get to the joys of Easter Sunday without experiencing the suffering of the cross.

And we all experience pain and suffering in our own lives. So we can't look to that Christian hope at the end unless we go through the pain of our lives sometimes.

I served at a church once that had nothing [during Holy Week]. When I came there, it had no Holy Week liturgies at all. I got there as a new priest, I was 30, and I was the rector there, and I said, "OK, what did you guys do in the past?" And they said, "Oh, we didn't do anything. Father said it was too depressing. So we didn't do anything." (Obviously that changed when I got there.)

And it's interesting, even Bishop Daniel tells me this story all the time, that when he came to the [Pennsylvania] Diocesan offices for the first time, and he said he was shocked – and I know, Reverend Kathy, that you've probably heard this story before – he was shocked that all the walls of the Diocesan offices were lined with, as he called it, old dead white men. But there was no cross in the Diocesan offices.

And he said, "OK, this dead white man is coming off the wall." And up goes a crucifix. So as soon as you walk into our Diocesan offices, there's a cross. Because he wants people to know the importance to our faith, of what that symbol is.

And even two weeks ago, a priest just told me, in our deanery, that he wanted to introduce a crucifix for Lent. And the people rebelled back against him and said, "We only worship a risen Christ."

Well, we do. But you can't get to the resurrection unless you embrace Good Friday. And I think that's why it's so important for us to take time out this week and embrace that retreat which is Holy Week. And I say this to you every year.

So many of our churches are quickly forgetting about that. They're becoming churches that go from Palm Sunday quickly to Easter Sunday. The clergy get discouraged, because no one shows up, because it's too depressing. We just don't want to deal with it. But we have to deal with it. Because that's part of life.

I think about the people of Guatemala. And I know some of us in this room have been to Guatemala. It's the poorest country in Central America – huge suffering, civil unrest, death squads, mass graves.

The Guatemalan people have a devotion to what they call The Christ in Repose – the dead Christ. It's kind of jarring to see it, because it's a life-size statue of Jesus taken down from the cross. And in typical Latin tradition, there's real hair – made of horsehair – and lots of blood. It's really jarring, and it's almost disturbing.

I remember when I was in Guatemala about 10 years ago, and I was having a conversation with a woman about why all the Guatemalan churches have this image. And she said to me, "Why would we not? How else can we connect with our Lord in His suffering, with our own suffering? We have seen so much death in this country, we've buried so many of our sons, so many of our daughters. How could we not connect with the suffering of Jesus and the pain of Mary at the loss of her son?"

So this week is a complicated one. A complicated one of the mystery of faith, of Christ dying and rising and, yes, coming again. But it's one we have to go through. One we have to have courage and patience and strength to go through.

Because if we don't, we're shortchanging ourselves. We're shortchanging the story of our faith, of our journey that each and every one of us will go through in life. Because each of us will embrace that pain and suffering at some point in time.

So we need the strength. Just like that Guatemalan woman needed the strength to embrace her suffering Christ, we need the strength to embrace our suffering Christ. Because when we do, we know, as Christians, that the ending is not there. The ending is not there. The ending comes in resurrection, in life, in hope.

So this week, take time out. Maybe it's the first time you've ever done Holy Week. Give it a go. Or maybe it's the 80th-something time you've done Holy Week. Take time out. Embrace it. Walk in it. Because I think you'll be better off. Because when we do that, Easter Sunday, the resurrection, will mean something different.

So that when we say, "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again," we know why we say that each Sunday.