

# SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

*Fifth Avenue · New York City*

**Saturday, April 8, 2023**

Holy Saturday

**The Great Vigil, Baptism, and First Eucharist of Easter**

5:30 p.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Elaine Farmer

*on*

Genesis 1:1-2:4a; Genesis 7:1-5, 11-18, 8:6-18, 0:8-13; Genesis 22:1-18; Exodus 14:10-31, 15:20-21; Isaiah 54:9-14; Isaiah 55:1-11; Proverbs 8:1-8, 19-21, 9:4b-6 [or Baruch 3:9-15, 3:32-4:4]; Ezekiel 36:24-28; Zephaniah 3:14-20; Romans 6:3-11; Matthew 27:57-66

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## **Touching the Mystery From a Sermon Series of the same name for Holy Week 2023**

Jesus the Christ. We've been with him all week. On Palm Sunday we stood with the crowd as they cheered him. On Maundy Thursday in that upper room we felt his eyes upon us. Yesterday we heard the crowd condemn him. We went to Golgotha, that 'soft place for weeping'<sup>1</sup>, and watched him die. We have sensed 'the black feet of the night go walking down the sky'<sup>2</sup> — and, so, on through this day, when the angels folded their wings, their songs were stilled, their voices silent and they stared with anxious eyes towards God's empty throne ... for God had withdrawn to ponder the passion of Jesus and to grieve the iniquity, the fickleness, of humankind. This was the dead day when God was silent. Grieving.

But now the nature of our Holy Week journey changes. This night brings us to the matter of forgiveness and its foundation stone, resurrection. Or should I say, the problem of resurrection. That inexplicable wonder Christians say overcomes death, ensuring us eternal life.

But responsibility and complicity still demand attention along with forgiveness. So let us turn back to Jesus, standing as he always has in the middle of this week's clash between God's ways and the ways of the world, and that unflagging authority that pervades the story of his Passion.

Jesus-the-man could have been crushed by Rome's authority, through the might of its soldiers. And he was. Jesus-the-man could have been routed by the authority of the religious leaders, through their manipulation of the crowds. And he was. But his authority survived all this. It has shone through the darkness of this week. It didn't die yesterday on the cross. Because it was, and is, an authority based, not on armed might, or power, or even political skill. It is an authority based on a lack of armed might or power but, instead, on powerlessness in the face of the mighty ones, on trust, on faith, and on love. It is an authority grounded in the mystery of a gracious God but, as we've seen over the last days, it must do battle with our lesser instincts, what Jesus called the *power of darkness*.<sup>3</sup> What I've been calling 'the fact of evil, the difficulty of virtue, the fickleness of one's own heart'.<sup>4</sup> Driving all three, the ram of human pride determined to have its way.

we faced those lesser instincts in ourselves when we reflected through the week on Peter and Judas, and beat our breasts a little. We felt like the crowds who fled Golgotha.<sup>5</sup> Shamed. Now what? Easter light may well soon glimmer on the horizon but this is the night when we have to make the choice embodied by Peter and Judas, between the hope of resurrection and that *power of darkness*. There's a moment in Luke's account of Jesus' arrest that helps us, I think, to embrace the 'invasion of God's grace' into the world tonight.<sup>6</sup> Do you

remember how one of Jesus' supporters — John says it was Peter — swung his sword and *struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his right ear? [And] Jesus said, 'No more of this!' And he touched [the man's] ear and healed him.*<sup>7</sup>

This is the night to say *'No more of this!'* This was the very last instruction Jesus gave his disciples before his arrest. And it is, if you will, his very last instruction to us. No more violence. No more hitting back. No more misuse of power. No more insiders and outsiders. No more victimisation of the weak and the powerless. Break these prohibitions and we will have immediately become betrayers like Judas with our backs turned to the Christ. And Jesus said, *'no more of this!'*

Unfortunately, following Jesus makes demands that we can never satisfy. Hence, Judas' frustration as he followed Jesus through Galilee. Hence, the disciples' frustration as Jesus failed to defend himself, simply standing there and letting himself be taken. It's familiar, isn't it? We face such frustration regularly. Too often frustration ends in lashing out with some kind of violence. And violence uses many weapons: fists, knives, guns — and just words. We see it between nations, between political parties, in parliaments, in school grounds, in churches and, God forgive us, in families. All, Jesus says, unacceptable. *Enough! No more of this!*

This sad and conflicted muddle is our creation and God, emerging from grief over humankind's rejection and killing of Jesus, invades it this night. Through the mystery of the resurrection, God's grace invades us, giving power and strength to choose a different way. May I suggest the futility of trying to understand the 'mechanics' of the resurrection — how Jesus was raised from the dead? Those mechanics are known to Jesus and God alone. We're not being let into the secret. Call that thinking a cop-out, if you want, but what matters more than the process of resurrection is the outcome in your lives and mine.

That outcome means turning back, as Peter did, and making a better fist of things. And it brings us to the business of forgiveness, a matter not always taught well by the Church. For too long, uncompromising teaching about forgiveness as being compulsory — in all situations — dishonoured the gift of resurrection over and over. Because forgiveness demanded makes grace easy and sin a matter of not much moment at all. But sin does matter! Sin matters because it damages, whether the sin is great or small.

Forgiveness also costs, and it cannot occur in an atmosphere of coercion and fear, or retribution and payback. It means those who have done wrong need to admit it, repent, and ask for forgiveness. And those who have been wronged need to give up their right to punish their persecutor. *Vengeance is mine ... saith the Lord*<sup>8</sup> but too often we prefer to think it is ours. The bottom line is repentance, turning back to God. At the same time, forgiveness is not about forgetting. Wrong cannot be undone, dismissed, or treated as if it didn't happen. If someone has been wronged and they are told 'forgive and forget' that means what happened to them doesn't matter which is the same as saying they don't matter. And they do matter. Most particularly to God.<sup>9</sup> The goal of forgiveness is freedom. And it is not easy to achieve. There is a price that has to be paid that says, "I have done you wrong; I repent; I am sorry."

Peter knew that. So did Judas. Peter had the courage to hope for forgiveness and the possibility of resurrection. Courage shared, by the way, by the good thief on his cross. But Judas didn't have that courage, and he received the same response betrayers always get: contempt. He may have thought hanging himself was an act of recompense, but it was recompense lonely, loveless and bleak. There was no life won from Judas' gibbet.<sup>10</sup> For life we need to turn away from him swinging on that tree in the Potter's Field and face Jesus on his cross. Jesus' atoning death was as different from Judas' death, as night is from day. For Jesus' atoning death was grounded in love, not guilt, in giving, not despair.

And what of us? We now stand facing the empty tomb. This is the place and the time for choice. Will it be the ways of the world, or God's ways? Will we be like the dumbstruck guards who saw that startling angel loitering nonchalantly outside the tomb? *For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men.*<sup>11</sup> Will we be paralyzed, locked into fear and the familiar human way of things? Like Judas. Remember, the angel said to the two Marys who had gone to the tomb that dawn, *'don't be afraid. Jesus who was crucified ... is not here ... he has*

*been raised.*<sup>12</sup> O, like Peter, will we take a deep breath and say our stories are not ended? Jesus is not here? He is raised? New futures are possible?

Christ invites us to follow him away from the empty and barren tombs in our lives, to take the risk of embracing the world like lovers, without demanding any return, to repent of the wrongs we have done and the hurts we have caused, to accept forgiveness, and begin writing new stories that may cost us but, will keep us on the path towards being full human beings.

This is how Resurrection works and the grace of God invades our lives. Have we, like Peter, the courage to believe in resurrection hope and welcome that divine invasion?

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<sup>1</sup> Colm Tóibín, *The Testament of Mary*, Picador, Sydney, 2008, p.86

<sup>2</sup> Dame Mary Gilmore DBE, "The Myall in Prison"

<sup>3</sup> Luke 22:52-53

<sup>4</sup> A.N.Wilson, *The Vicar of Sorrows*, Penguin, 1994, pp.286-287.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 23:28

<sup>6</sup> Fleming Rutledge, *The Undoing of Death*, William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., Grand Rapids MI., 2002, p.45.

<sup>7</sup> Luke 22:51. This story is replicated at Matthew 26:51, Mark 43:47 and John 18:10. Only John says it was Peter who struck the man.

<sup>8</sup> Romans 12:19 *KJV*. See also *to me belongeth vengeance and recompence.* (Deut 32:35 *KJV*)

<sup>9</sup> Material here is from "Father, Forgive Them, by Richard John Neuhaus, Copyright (c) 2000 First Things 101 (March 2000): 27=28. <http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft0003/articles/neuhaus.html>, p.22

<sup>10</sup> Note Deuteronomy 27:25 whereby anyone who an innocent person for money is cursed: *Cursed be anyone who takes a bribe to shed innocent blood.*

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 28:4

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 28:5-6