

St Mark's, Niagara on the Lake
Good Friday, year 'C'
15 April 2022
The Rev'd Leighton Lee

Stat crux, dum volvitur orbis.
While the world spins, the Cross stands firm.
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One of the masterpieces of Western Art can be seen in the small French town of Colmar. It's a sixteenth century altarpiece painted by Matthias Grünewald for a hospital which treated sufferers of St. Anthony's fire, a disease which we now call ergotism. This tremendous and dismal work was commissioned by Antonite monks for the chapel of a hospital at the order's monastery in Isenheim. There the monks ministered to the patients suffering from the painful and often fatal disease named (as were the monks themselves) for a figure who had himself known great suffering. The painting depicts in gruesome and awful detail a monstrous crucifixion scene. Jesus is shown dangling and twisting on the cross, his hands gnarled by pain, his body covered by lacerations and boils and blisters and rivulets of blood. Those are the painful and horrific physical symptoms of St. Anthony's Fire. Sufferers were meant to pray in front of this bleak and cruel altarpiece and to see their own afflictions in Christ. It was a powerful statement of how on the cross Christ was at one with them in their agony and of how he is at one with all who suffer—that is to say with each and everyone of us.

There's a remarkable scene between Jesus and Pontius Pilate in the Passion gospel we just heard. Pilate's trying to figure out if there's anything to the charges that have been levelled at Jesus. Jesus says, "My kingdom is not of this world," and Pilate asks—perhaps thinking he's got Jesus cornered—"So you are a king?" But Jesus doesn't take the bait. He answers, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." And then Pilate asks that question that has echoed down through the centuries, that elusive and tantalizingly ambiguous question: *What is truth?*

In his book *The Shaking of the Foundations*, Paul Tillich writes about the meaning of the word "truth":

The Greek word for truth means: making manifest the hidden. Truth is hidden and must be discovered. No one possesses it naturally. It dwells in the depth, beneath the surface. The surface of our existence changes, moving continually like the waves in the ocean, and it is therefore delusive. The depth is eternal and therefore certain.

Of all the questions we seek an answer to in the midst of this troubling life, the question "what is truth?" is the one that we are most desperate to find an answer to, since we need to find a way to live the truth in a world of illusions. And that's a very

difficult thing to do because, as Tillich says, truth *is* so often buried, so often obscured, so often perverted. Those who seek to do wrong try to keep it hidden. Those who want to preserve the status quo try to discredit it. Those who believe that ignorance is bliss try to ignore it. But it can't be done. As the old saying goes, truth will out, for beneath our desire to hide and to discredit and to ignore the truth, there is a deeper and more insistent desire: the desire to really know.

The American preacher Frederick Buechner once wrote of a dream that a friend of his had. In the dream the friend was drawn to a mysterious woman standing alone in an arid landscape. She was very beautiful, and as he went up to her, the man asked her the question that Pilate asked, "What is truth?" And as he asked the question, he reached out his hand to the woman, and she grasped it. Only what she grasped it with was a claw, and when she took his hand in the claw, she answered his question, but the man could not hear it because excruciating pain had drowned it out.

No doubt about it: there's a lot of anguish and confusion and trouble in the world, and we're desperate to make sense of it. But when we seek the truth of our deep anxiety, hurt, and longing, and reach out for answers, we experience only numbing confusion and excruciating pain.

Meditating on his friend's dream, Buechner writes,

My friend in his dream asked, "What is the truth?" and it might have seemed that the answer was the pain itself; that the ultimate truth is the pain of discovering that there is no ultimate truth. Except that beyond the pain was the answer that, because of the pain, he could not hear.

Yes, there's unimaginable pain, and there are sorrows and miseries world without end. We don't know why—and that's the truth. But there is an answer, and the answer is the truth that Good Friday reveals: God is not unjust, sadistic, and remote, but rather is merciful, compassionate, and closer than breathing. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer so memorably said, "Only a suffering God can help."

In the agonized figure of Calvary, we see the love of God displayed to the whole world in full view. It's a love that is profound, unbreakable, and everlasting. In the wracked and twisted figure on the cross we see God's hidden truth revealed once and for all. That is what atonement means: at-one-meant. In the cross, God is at one with the world in its confusion and turmoil and violence. And he is with us in our hurt and sorrow and despondency.

I've not finished the story about the Isenheim Altarpiece. An altarpiece, as you know, is a painting much like a book: it can be opened. That horrible crucifixion is on the front—on the cover, as it were. But inside, all of the darkness and horror and pain is banished by incredible light. For the interior panels of the painting depict the most glorious scene of the resurrection ever painted, with Christ bursting—literally bursting—out of the tomb, with the sun in full strength blazing behind him. He still bares the wounds, but now those wounds have become the marks of glory.

That's the glorious truth of our faith, and the reason we dare to call this day Good. When you open the book of suffering, when you open the book of this day, you open the mystery of God's love, the mystery of the Resurrection. And you discover, even while living in a world of illusions, the truth that darkness and stupidity and pain and horror are not the final word for us—or for God. Out of the pain of Good Friday Christ exploded from the grave to save and to heal and to give us the victory. For the greatest truth of all is that God isn't a God of death, but of life.