

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, UCC, Columbus, Ohio, Good Friday, April 6, 2012, at Trinity Episcopal Church, Capital Square, dedicated to Trayvon Martin and his family, to women of faith who have faced abuse, to the children in our world who have witnessed too many deaths at too young an age and to the memory of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on the 44th anniversary of his assassination (4/4/12), and always to the glory of God!

**“If There Were
No Cross . . . ”
Mark 14:1-15:47**

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Today, we receive the blessing of the Gospel of Mark as our text for the Passion of Jesus Christ our Lord. Mark, as you know, is the earliest of the Gospels, though not the earliest writer to speak of the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. Paul has that honor, all of whose genuine letters were written before any of the gospels. Paul refers to the FACT of Jesus' crucifixion many times. He speaks again and again of Jesus' death, of the cross, of Christ crucified.

Paul proclaims that the “*cross is the wisdom and power of God,*” though it is a stumbling block to the Jews, it is foolishness to the Gentiles. It is the demonstration of God's love for us, the sacrifice that makes our redemption possible, and the path of personal transformation as dying and rising that lies at the heart of the Christian life (I Cor. 1:23-24;

Romans 5:8; 3:24-25; Galatians 2:19-20; Romans 6:3-4).

Paul says even more about what happened on Good Friday. He refers to Jesus' death **and burial**. He says that "*in the cross, God disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a real public example of them, triumphing over them, in the cross*" (I Cor. 15:3-4; 2:8, Col. 2:15) (*The Last Week*, John Dominic Crossan & Marcus Borg, Harper/San Francisco, 2006, pp. 140-141).

While Paul has much to say about the alluring power of the cross (to which we will return this day), this early writer, church planter, theologian, and saved by grace saint, never tells the story. Neither Paul nor anyone else gives us a narrative in these early days of the Christian church.

With the cross at the center of our faith story from the time we begin counting ourselves as Christians, with the cross as central to our faith formation, why does it take so long for **the story** of the cross to become central in our faith's formation?

In *The Last Week*, John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg say why they believe the story is missing in the early texts. "*It is not difficult to see why (there is no interpretation of the death of Jesus). The followers of Jesus in the years and decades after his death sought to see the **meaning in the horrific execution** of their beloved master, whom they saw as God's anointed one. Looking back upon this event, they retrospectively see providential purpose in it*" (*Ibid*).

Caught up in understanding the trauma of the event, people did not need to walk through the details of the trauma. Later, as the generations of Christians roll on, those who experienced the moment, the day, the horror, find it necessary to tell the story from beginning to end so that generation-to-generation, we who followed would get it.

We can relate to our brothers and sisters in Christ on

this common ground. We, too, seek meaning in the cross. Or do we?

I sometimes think we tell the story to keep emotional distance from the deep and powerful meaning of the cross. We read the narrative as if it is police report chronicling the events of one Friday on one hill outside the walls of Jerusalem. We appear to be CSI agents looking for splinters under microscopes and finger prints on this wooden electric chair. We want “hard” evidence that Jesus was crucified. Like CSI’s Gil Grissom. we proclaim, “The evidence doesn’t lie.” In the midst of our cross examinations, our over-analyzing, our over-criticizing and critiquing, we lose track of the trauma of the cross. We lose track of the cross’ meaning, its mystery, its power! When we have lost track of all that, we have no cross at all.

I know what it is like to have NO CROSS.

In the summer of 2010, I prayed, worshiped and lived with Jews, Christians and Muslims in Israel, Palestine, Egypt and Spain. I fasted and prayed through the hot days of Ramadan with Muslims in Egypt and grew close to many during these days of fasting, praying and breaking fasts after the sun went down. I found companionship and friendship in the days of Ramadan with the faithful of Islam.

For several weeks, Abdul and I had grown closer as our friendship deepened. As the nights of feasting after days of prayer and fasting moved closer to the end, I could feel Abdul struggling with something. He said he had a question that had troubled him all his life. He didn’t know how to frame his question, so, he blurted out, “*Why do churches have crosses? It makes no sense.*”

I asked him to say more. He continued, “*In the Quran, Jesus is a great prophet - the greatest outside of Mohammed (peace be upon him). But the truth of the Quran tells us that, like Mohammed, Jesus ascended to God. He was never killed*

on a cross. He was not resurrected, as you claim. So, why do churches have crosses in them? It is as though you ignore the truth of God's word. I see it as a form of lying - and I know you wouldn't want to be part of a lie, Mr. Tim."

There is no cross and therefore no resurrection of Christ in Islam. When we have our interfaith dialogues and my Muslim friends have to speak to this vast difference in our Abrahamic faiths, they never struggle. The cross just doesn't exist. So, what is there to struggle over?

If you, as a Muslim, believe the Quran to be the true and final revelation of God to humanity (which all do), and if you believe that no other truth can supersede this truth, then how can you meet at this crossroad and reconcile the differences of understanding between the two faiths?

My Muslim friends are on the "straight path." In their heart of hearts, they believe that we are on the wrong path following a faith which is built on this one foundational (and monumental) "lie" - that Jesus Christ was crucified, died, buried and on the third day he rose from the dead.

At the impasse on this difference, on a hot night in Cairo, I told Abdul that this is where we part in our understandings. The cross means everything to me as a Christian. It is not glitter or gold. It is not jewelry or make believe. It is the place where my savior died for me. With no cross and no resurrection of Jesus Christ, the gap of understanding between Christianity and Islam is one that might not be able to be bridged. I say this with no judgment, just sadness.

But, I ask you - is there no cross in your faith, too?
Is the cross central to your faith and your understanding of who you are and whose you are as a person of faith?

In her book *Trauma and Grace*, the Rev. Dr. Serene Jones, president of Union Theological Seminary in New York City, writes of the Alluring Cross and the Mirrored Cross. She

talks of our attraction to the cross and our constant struggle to find ourselves in the story at the cross. She writes: *“We are at one moment a weeping mother, a long-suffering friend, an abandoned lover; the next we wear the skin of shamed betrayer, scavenging soldier, terrified devotee. Then without missing a beat, we are up on the cross and looking down at our offenders, lifting up prayers, and wondering how it was that this horror came to pass . . . Where we land in the story changes as quickly as the thoughts and desires triggered in us by the characters and the plot line. We are here and then there. Sinners, saints, victims, God.”* (Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World*, 2009, pp.72-73).

Dr. Jones concludes: *“No matter how people analytically solve the riddle of the cross’s relation to grace, the meaning that counts most on a day-to-day basis is the one nestled deep within the beholder’s heart - and hearts are unwieldy and often unpredictable sites of meaning-making”*(*Ibid*).

She goes on to speak of how the cross serves as a mirror into our lives of faith. The trauma drama and the passion play out in our lives and reflect the stories within our hearts. If you will, our Christologies, our understanding of Christ worked out in our lives are personal and powerful - so much so that we have to acknowledge that all theological tomes and non-fiction books written, all the sermons delivered, all the narratives created, movies made, and musicals performed telling of the Passion of Christ are mirrors into our understanding of this traumatic and dramatic telling of our Lord and Savior’s death. That mirror, in the end either reflects the immense grace and forgiveness of God or the bitterness and judgment of this looming beast called “THE CROSS” that turns us into bitter and tiny people with small and hateful faith.

It would be easier to have no cross at all. We would not wrestle with God if he had lifted his son on the clouds and not abandoned him on the cross. With no cross we could forget Friday and move right to Sunday. We could dance and sing

and release butterflies and smell the lilies and the crocuses with no cross and feel no pain. With no cross we could walk out of here and never look back. We could go on living in happy town and turn our focus to positive thoughts and optimism and glee.

But, with no trauma, no drama, no cross, there would be no grace, no love and no hope. There would be no resurrection with no cross. So, until the day when our texts disappear and our crosses leave the landscape of our lives, look up and weep. Then, let us say together the words of the unbelieving centurion in the Gospel narrative of St. Mark:
“Truly, this man was God’s son!” Amen.

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