

SERMON for April 6, 2007  
Good Friday

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### Living and Dying with Jesus: Hope Suspended

This is the day in the Christian year when all time stands still, when our internal sky is dark, when the heavens are torn in two, when disbelief hovers, and hope is suspended. And we wait. We wait for God to right the wrong that has been done. We wait for God to speak words of comfort to we who sorrow. We wait for God to wipe away the tears of the ones who mourn. We wait for light to shine in the world's dark places of terror. We fearful and broken wait for the healing and blessing of peace to descend. We wait, and nothing happens, at least right away. We wait, and hope is suspended.

A common practice of Holy Week prayer, especially for those of Roman Catholic or Anglican tradition, is to pray the *Stations of the Cross*, which are pictures or words or statues that commemorate the Passion of Christ. Fourteen stations, fourteen scenes of the slow march to the cross and to the tomb. Either physically, around the perimeter of the sanctuary, or mentally, the stations lead the devout in following Jesus in the hours of death and sorrow, so to better follow him in faith. On this Good Friday processions along streets of cities ancient and modern, to places of suffering and places of suffering love are taken by many faithful. One devotional for children on the stations of the cross began with this explanation, *Stations are places where people wait while they are going from one place to another. A school-bus stop is like a station. People wait at train stations or bus stations or airports. Think of some stations where you have been. Stations are also places where people take time to think about Jesus as he went to die on a cross. They are 'Stations of the Cross.'* They show us how much Jesus loved us.

We are at a station tonight. We will mark in scripture and song and symbol the death of Jesus. We are uncomfortable with this place. We would prefer not to live into the depth of this Friday, and would much rather move quickly to the dawn of Easter promise. That we know. That we know for sure, when sunrise and trumpets and flowers and bright colors will herald what we call the glory of Easter. But there is no glory here. We have been here before, and each time we are caught by surprise on our Lenten journey. We don't plan stopping and waiting at this station. But here we are, glancing at our watches to see how many minutes have too slowly ticked away, reshuffling our feet and our heart's baggage as if we by our apparent readiness can will some action, and we anxiously peer into the future. But God says, *Not yet.*

It is as if we have stepped out on that new walkway over the Grand Canyon on the Hualapai (WALL-uh-pie) Indian reservation in Arizona. Seventy feet out over the rim of the canyon, four-thousand feet above the Colorado River, this steel and glass observation deck is cantilevered so that as you walk its curves you are held in only by a slim rail and a four-foot high wall of glass, and as you look down through the transparent glass floor, if you dare, you can stare at the space beneath your feet.

Hope is suspended this night for the people of Darfur in the African country of Sudan, where in the past three years there have been more than 300,000 deaths and more than two million people have been driven from their homes by the government's internal strife and warfare. And hope is suspended this night for many

in New Orleans and other parts of the south, who have no way to rebuild their homes, their routines, their community structure a year and a half after Hurricane Katrina blew devastation. And hope is suspended this night for those whose children have run away from home, who wonder if their teenager is out in the cold, is hungry, is safe. And hope is suspended this night for those who sit and watch and pray and reach out their hand to their husband or wife or mother or father as disease consumes the final hours. And hope is suspended wherever fear has taken over the hearts and minds of a nation's people. And hope is sometimes suspended in us.

Is that where God would have us be, at the station of death, waiting? We wonder about that part of this story. In every modern theatrical production of these last days of Christ, from *Jesus Christ Superstar* to the most recent depiction in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, the death scene is graphic and horrible, with the ringing of the hammer as the nails are pounded in echoing in your ears and brain, with the reality of blood and bodily fluid etching itself in your mind's eye, with the agony of the last breath catching your own breath in your throat. I know that it is significant that we stop at this station of the cross, so that we will truly understand that Jesus was fully human, that his birth and life on earth and process of death was not somehow endowed with a mysterious, magical, slightly out-of-body quality, that he wept and suffered and laughed and struggled and ate and walked and slept as all other humans were created to do and be. Understanding this gives us an important insight into the mystery of the holy, the magnitude of Jesus' death for life – our eternal life and the whole life of the world. If we merely skip over the slow procession of this week, and move quickly from waving palms to the joy of the rolled away stone we will not know the complete truth. For it is in our waiting that we will know truth, the truth of the unending presence of God, the magnificence of God's love.

World-renowned Jesus scholar Marcus Borg writes, in his book *The Heart of Christianity*, a word about faith that speaks to us as we wait at this station of death and darkness, *Faith...is like floating in a deep ocean...If you struggle, if you tense up and thrash about, you will eventually sink...To help an adult class see this meaning of faith, my wife asked them, 'How many of you have taught a small child to swim?' Many had. When asked to describe the experience, all said that the biggest hurdle was getting the child to relax in the water. Their consistent refrain was, 'It's okay, just relax. You'll float, it's okay.'* *Faith... is trusting in the buoyancy of God.\** Even at this station of death, even at the cross, we are not alone. God is with us in our pain and suffering even as God was with Christ.

So now let us attend to the spiritual matters at hand: to open our ears and hear as the gospel truth is read, the passion of Christ. And let us open our souls to the music of the *Requiem*, the words of anguish and commendation of the dead to God. And let us wait in darkness, our hope suspended. And let us remember, with nineteenth century American poet James Russell Lowell,

*And behind the dim unknown,  
standeth God within the shadow keeping watch above His own.*

Amen.

\* Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, HarperSanFrancisco, 2003, p.31