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Good Friday, Year B / John 18:1—19:42.
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Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Good Friday Cry of Victory

Two hundred and fifty years ago today, British troops marched out of Boston on a mission to seize the American arsenal at Concord. As the British departed Boston, Patriots Paul Revere and William Dawes set out by horseback on their famed midnight ride to warn the Minute Men. Later today, a crowd will gather just up the road at the historic Old North Church to commemorate this pivotal event in our national story. Just as a crowd will gather tomorrow in Lexington and Concord to honor the Semi-quincentennial of the “shot heard round the world.”¹ Common to both these events is an element of historical re-enactment, and while I’ve never attended such an event, I can picture the scene. Three-cornered hats. Revolutionary-era muskets. Royalist militiamen and patriot soldiers clad respectively in red and blue coats.

The dramatic liturgies of Holy Week can, at times, feel like historical re-enactments. We rehearse events from the last week of Jesus’ life. We get down on our knees and wash each other’s feet. Moments from now, we will venerate a wooden cross resembling the one on which Jesus was crucified. And perhaps most profoundly, we lift our voices to cry, “Crucify him!” echoing the cries of our ancestors who demanded Jesus’ crucifixion. But let’s be very clear. *Our project is not one of historical reenactment.* When we celebrate the liturgies of Holy Week, we do not simply look back, re-tell, or re-enact God’s work in history. The liturgies of Holy Week draw us into the ongoing story of salvation.

When we wash each other’s feet, we enter into humble, self-denying service – not as historical re-enactors, but as the living body of Christ. Our shouts of “Crucify him” are not merely reminders of our forebearers’ culpability for our Lord’s death. Our cries confront us with our

¹ The “shot heard round the world” is a phrase that refers to the opening shot of the battles of Lexington and Concord on April 19, 1775, which sparked the American Revolutionary War. (per Wikipedia).

present participation in the crucifying power of Sin. This confrontation is what gives this day its solemn character. As we behold “the instrument of shameful death”² on which our Lord was crucified, we are brought face-to-face with the devastating, heartbreaking consequences of Sin. The sinful systems in which we are inextricably bound. The Sin that nails innocent victims to crosses every day: The sins of Poverty, racism, and gun violence, just to name a few. And if that were the cross’ only meaning, then Good Friday would be an occasion only for sorrow. If the cross’ only function was to bring the death-dealing power of Sin into our sights, then Good Friday would be an occasion only for mourning. But the cross is not just a pious memorial to our Lord’s horrifying death. The cross is a symbol of our Lord’s *triumph*. God’s *victory* over the Power of Sin and Death.

I realize that we have been formed to associate “triumph” and “victory” with Easter, and not so much with Good Friday. I urge you, though, to consider the language of the anthems appointed by the Prayer Book to be sung on this day, vestiges of which we’ll hear moments from now, as a wooden cross is borne into the church.

*We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you,
because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.*³

*We glory in your cross, O Lord...
For by virtue of your cross joy has come to the whole world.*⁴

Joy coming to the whole world! We readily associate joy with the Christ Child at Christmas, but do we see the cross as an occasion for joy? Far too often, the somber character of our Good Friday liturgies obscures the full meaning of this day. Indeed, liturgical theologians lament that Good Friday is often made to feel like a funeral for Jesus. Leonel Mitchell, one of the foremost liturgical scholars of the last century, reminds us that Good Friday is decidedly not a funeral for

² “Collect for Tuesday in Holy Week,” in *The Book of Common Prayer: And Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church: Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David* (New York: Church Publishing, 2007), 220.

³ “The Proper Liturgy of Good Friday,” in *The Book of Common Prayer: And Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church: Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David* (New York: Church Publishing, 2007), 281.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 281.

Jesus. “It is,” he writes, “a participation in...the salvation of the human race through the victory of Christ, who by dying destroyed death.”⁵ While the Easter resurrection is the vindication of Christ’s death, make no mistake: the victory was won on Calvary. A victory proclaimed by our Lord himself in his dying words: “It is finished.”⁶

For the author of John’s Gospel, Jesus’ death is synonymous with his glorification. “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified,”⁷ Jesus says, as he announces his approaching death. In making this link between Jesus’ death and his glory, John highlights the wonderful paradox of the cross: that this “instrument of shameful death” has been made for us “the [very] means of life.”⁸ Jesus’ dying utterance – “It is finished” – marks a dramatic climax in John’s Gospel. What began with the turning of water into wine at a wedding in Cana ends with Jesus crucified at Golgotha. Beaten, naked, and left to die an agonizing death, Jesus declares, “It is finished,” before, in the language of the King James, he “[gives] up the ghost.”⁹

If we are to grasp the full implications of Jesus’ dying words, we must first reckon with the woefully imperfect English translation: “It is finished.” A more accurate translation of the original Greek would have our Lord say, “It is completed,” or “it is fulfilled,” or even perhaps, “Mission accomplished.”¹⁰ Even if you don’t understand a word of Latin, you can hear the full force of our Lord’s dying words in their Latin rendering: **CONSUMMATUM EST!** For Jesus, “it is finished,” does not mean, “The End” or “it’s over.” These are not words of resignation. Far from an admission of defeat, “It is finished” is a resounding declaration of victory. The great irony is that

⁵ Leonel Mitchell and Howard Galley, *Lent, Holy Week, Easter, and the Great Fifty Days: A Ceremonial Guide* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2007).

⁶ John 19.30 (NRSVUE)

⁷ John 12.23 (NRSVUE)

⁸ The Collect for Tuesday in Holy Week.

⁹ John 19.30 (KJV)

¹⁰ Strong’s Greek: 5055. τελέω (teleó) -- to complete, to finish, to fulfill, to accomplish., accessed April 18, 2025, <https://biblehub.com/greek/5055.htm>.

nothing in the scene resembles victory as the world understands it. The onlookers who beheld Jesus' bloodied, lifeless body hanging from that cross would surely have been convinced of his defeat. Confident that his mission had ended in total failure. But Jesus makes the outrageous claim that his death *completes* his mission. That his death *accomplishes* the will of his Father. As the words "It is finished" cross Jesus' lips, a new day dawns in salvation history and the power of death loses its grip on humanity forever.

I will concede that this Good Friday, perhaps more than ever, I need this reminder. Because exactly one week from today, I will gather with my family on the plains of south central Kansas at a cemetery. The burial ground where generations of my family on both sides have been laid to rest. As the priest in the family, I have been entrusted with a privileged role in this sacred assembly. Which is to hold in my hands the urn containing the earthly remains of my maternal grandmother. To set it in the ground. And to hallow this act with prayer. Less than twenty-four hours later, I will reprise the very same role in the very same ritual. This time, with the earthly remains of my father.

I have spent much time in anticipatory contemplation of these events. In the rendition of the tape that plays in my mind, the aroma of freshly dug earth fills the air. My vestments flutter in the Kansas wind. The sound of my mother's tears is faintly audible as I intone the ancient words of the Committal liturgy. But I simply cannot imagine what it will feel like to hold the ashes of two of the greatest loves I've ever known. My mind cannot fathom how love so big can be reduced to dust and contained in such tiny vessels. On my own, my mind can only see, in the dust of these lives, a story of apparent defeat.

But thanks be to God, the Church today gives me – gives us – a different story. A story that tells us that *despite* the outward signs of death's power, *despite* the war and violence that plagues our world, *despite* the safeguards of human dignity unraveling before our eyes, *despite* all the signs our world offers that Sin has the upper hand: our Savior's dying declaration of victory tells us otherwise.

His dying words give us the gospel truth. With arms outstretched to bring the world into his saving embrace, from the cross Jesus assures us: “It is finished.”

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