

Readings: Isaiah 50:4-7; Psalm 22; Phil. 2:6-11; Luke 22:14 – 23:56]

Once upon a time, a little boy had a devastating blood disease but recovered. However, his sister was not so fortunate. She needed a transfusion and because the boy had the same rare blood type, he was asked to donate his blood to his sister. He seemed stunned, but wanted to help his sister and agreed to do so. As the process began, he smiled at his sister bravely, but by the time it was over he seemed tense and quiet. The silence was broken only when he looked up and asked, “Doctor, when am I going to die?” He’d thought that giving his blood for his sister would mean that he was going to die. Yet even believing this he had managed to say, “Yes.” Imagine that!

Palm Sunday is more accurately called Passion Sunday. In this context, Christians often assume that “passion” is the word for the suffering and anguish of Jesus’ death. However, the word first describes something felt deeply, powerfully, almost absolutely. The story of the little boy, recounted by Robert Emerson Coleman in his book *Written in Blood*, reminds us that a person can love so passionately that she or he would be willing to give up life itself out of love for another. The solemnity of this day and the reading of the Passion of Christ means most when we realize it’s not just about the pain. It’s about the love (meditation by *Father Larry Janowski*).

If Holy Week had ended on Good Friday, we might call it Unholy Week. It would describe only too closely the path of Isaiah’s faithful servant, who comes to rouse hearts yet endures a brutal reception as his words fall on deaf ears.

Passages from prophecy and psalms warn us down through the centuries that being just and innocent in no way guarantees success.

We like to think of religion as spiritual life insurance. If we walk the moral line, God will protect us from harm, keep our children safe, fend off disease, spare us evil times. But Scripture reminds us repeatedly that it doesn't work that way. The most obedient man who ever lived was arrested, humiliated, tortured, and killed by a means that should make the delicate person look away.

If we learn anything from Passion Week, it's that being good is no inoculation against suffering. But this isn't the takeaway lesson of Holy Week. Through it all, we catch glimpses of the merciful Father in whom Jesus put the steeliest kind of trust. We see this mercy in the meal Jesus transforms from a simple supper to an everlasting promise of life. We hear the tinkling bell of hope in the assurance Jesus gives Peter that despite an initial failure to respond with courage, he'll find the grace to be strong in time.

Jesus restores the ear of His enemy's servant damaged during His arrest, as if He didn't have more pressing concerns to worry about. Though Jesus shows such attention to a servant, He ignores the powerful people who stand before Him that day: the governor from Rome and the king of Judea, either of whom could have spared Him. The Way of the Cross, we come to recognize, is not primarily about suffering, but the path of God's mercy. It is the safest journey any of us in history can take. Let us take it with Him this week (meditation by *Alice Camille*). AMEN!

[Readings: Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14; Psalm 116; 1 Cor. 11:23-26; John 13:1-15]

This is a special day in the Christian world. As we begin the Easter Triduum, we celebrate the gift of Eucharist, priesthood, and the call to ministry and service. Part of tonight's liturgy should involve the symbolic washing of feet, but because of COVID-19 concerns, we were cautioned not to do it. Also, if Deacon Marion and I had to bend down 12 times, we may not get up again!

Jesus washing the feet of the apostles teaches us about power and humility. We can never say that we are too good for any act of service to another person. Nothing falls beneath our dignity. No act becomes too unimportant for us to worry about. Nothing is a waste of our talents. Jesus lays claim on us. That claim is to offer the washing of forgiveness, helping people find the refreshment of release from guilt. We offer the washing of service, cleaning off the dirt of poverty, hunger, suffering, violence, hopelessness and despair.

Why do we do this tradition two thousand years later? For three reasons. First, feet are smelly and unattractive. Washing each other's feet represents the power of love. It is not always easy to love one another. We allow others to love those parts of us that are not very loveable, and I do the same for you. We love every part of the Body of Christ, warts and smells and all.

Second, Christ asks us not to place conditions on our love. Christ loves us not because we deserve it, because you and I need loving. As we receive Eucharist tonight, we see that Christ asks us to love each other fully – without reserve or conditions, and to love as He loves us, where love is most needed.

Finally, we must be willing to receive Christ's love. Hold nothing back. We give Him every part of ourselves, even the parts that bring us shame. On this special night, let us taste Christ's desire that everyone may share in the desire to be Christ for one another in here, and out there.

The Eucharist makes present to us the whole of the saving work of Jesus. We remember and celebrate everything that Jesus did, taught and suffered for our salvation, until He comes again in glory. His self-giving at the Last Supper was an act that looks backward and forward.

His self-giving looks ahead to Good Friday, when it would be completed by His sacrificial death on the cross. By giving us the Eucharist, His Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity, Jesus anticipates His self-offering even unto death on the cross, His final act of complete obedience to the Father, made for love of us.

It was love for us that led the Son of God to share our life in the Incarnation – the Word Made Flesh. It was love for us that led Him to destroy our sin and death in the Crucifixion.

It is that love that is Christ's farewell and eternal gift to us in the Eucharist. But that love we receive at this table is not only for us gathered here. Our communion in the Body and Blood of Christ requires us to serve others as He did – throughout life, even unto death. As we receive Christ's gift of love, we are to proclaim His death by becoming one with Him in His sacrifice.

The Last Supper was the most intimate moment in the life of Jesus. It is the most intimate moment in the life of His Church. This is the night when people who are personally close to Jesus know that He does not want to eat alone. Tonight, of all nights, He wants someone to talk to, someone to be with.

When He gathers His friends into a safe circle of concern, He washes their feet. As a kindness, because they are tired; as a courtesy, because He is their host; as a sign that in the long run, service to them is more to the point than teaching or leading or saving them.

Then He gives them bread and wine. As a kindness, because they are hungry; as a courtesy, because it brought them together; as a sign of His Body and Blood, and a promise that whoever lived in His memory would never die.

Tonight, Jesus invites us to His supper. He will serve us, extend His peace to us, and give us His Body and Blood. As a kindness, because we desperately need His peace; as a courtesy, because we are His awkward servants; as a sign, because we need to clean ourselves and each other.

May Christ fill us, wash us, and cleanse us of all fear and anxiety, all pettiness and greed. May He fill us so that we may love others. May peace abide among us as we learn to serve. AMEN!

[Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Psalm 31; Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9; John 18:1-19:42]

How can we make sense of suffering? Christians know the life of a disciple will not be easy. Christ did not mince words about this — telling his disciples they must take on life's sufferings as in the form of capital punishment that would later be used to take his life: "If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Lk 9:23).

How do Christians make sense of the crosses they bear? The question of why suffering exists finds its answer in Christ's transformation of suffering through love. Christ's cross makes sense of our own, hence the universal appeal of popular devotions like the Stations of the Cross.

The universal reality of suffering makes devotions inspiring meditation on the passion and death of Jesus particularly relevant in Christian life. Such prayer forms like the Stations of the Cross are popular in the season of Lent. They have become a primary opportunity for the faithful to learn the purpose of their crosses.

It makes sense, then, that those who have "put on Christ," becoming members of his body through baptism -- a bond renewed and strengthened in each reception of holy Communion -- should expect nothing less than a share in Christ's own passion and cross. In light of Christ's passion, it likewise makes sense to understand suffering's purpose as rooted in love. "If you really want to love Jesus," St. Gemma Galgani said, "first learn to suffer, because suffering teaches you to love."

Christ's own suffering and death has untold value and immense purpose — through which God bought us back from the slavery of sin and death. So, too, does ours, because, as St. John Paul II described it, "everyone, in their suffering, can also become a sharer in the redemptive suffering of Christ" (*Salvifici Doloris*, No. 19). The Stations of the Cross make real every imaginable aspect of human suffering that was on full display at Christ's passion. And they teach us to see the fruit of suffering.

In meditating on Christ's passion and death, comes the realization that life's sufferings can be joined to Christ's -- by which one learns that love forms suffering's foundation. "The road is narrow," St. John of the Cross said. "He who wishes to travel it more easily must cast off all things and use the cross as his cane. In other words, he must be truly resolved to suffer willingly for the love of God in all things." The cane I use when I walk is my personal reminder of the Cross.

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, weeks before he was elected pope following the death of Pope John Paul II, referenced this when he said that Jesus not only taught us how to pray the Stations of the Cross, but also their meaning. "The Way of the Cross is the path of losing ourselves," he said, "the path of true love." Suffering expresses love's total self-emptying required of the disciple. "For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it" (Lk 9:24).

There are two particular days in the calendar that make me smile when Good Friday falls on those days: April 1st and April 15th. When Good Friday falls on April 1st, we are reminded that Christ made a fool of sin and death and calls us to become "fools for Christ," as St. Paul says. When Good Friday falls on April 15th, Income Tax day, like today, you and I are reminded of the Supreme Price Jesus Christ paid for us, for our sins, for our sickness and death. Talk about getting back a great refund!

We adore You, O Christ, and we bless You, because by Your Holy Cross, You have redeemed the world. AMEN!

[Readings VIGIL: Gn 1:1-2:2; Ex 14:15-15:1, Is 54:5-14; Rom 6:3-1; Lk: 24:1-12; EASTER SUNDAY: [Acts 10:34a, 37-43; Psalm 118; Col 3:1-48; John 20:1-9]

What do we do with *nothing*? This may seem like a meaningless question at first. Nothing is a vacuum, an absence, a void. You can't do anything with nothing. If you've got nothing in your pocket, for example -- or nothing in your heart, your home, or your life -- that kind of emptiness is a real poverty. On that original Easter morning, the sight of the empty tomb must have seemed like that, at first glance. A great void, a terrible absence, an aching poverty of presence, power, and hope.

If being with Jesus was the experience of absolute fullness, then the empty tomb was a chasm as wide and lonely as Hell itself. Jesus had brought all the realities of Heaven into every moment, the power and wisdom and glory of God into the present hour. He called that experience of totality "the Kingdom," a place where healing is possible, forgiveness is real, and faith is the only sensible response. Imagine having walked with Jesus, seen His authority, heard His teaching, been touched by His healing hands. And then imagine what it was like to lose all of that, to peer into a small dark hole from which even the shrouded body of the One who was your leader seemed to have vanished.

What can you do with nothing? Some will always find this condition grounds for despair. But even this choice betrays the truth of the matter: Nothing is, in its essence, fertile ground. Nothing is the place where something begins. In fact, if we take Genesis seriously, nothing is the condition from which everything that exists sprang into being. The spirit of God breathes over the void, and light illuminates the darkness, and life itself yawns, stretches, and moves.

We find ourselves in the same situation as Peter's audience at the home of Cornelius: We know all about what happened that Easter morning -- or at least, we know what others have said about it. We know, from the privileged distance of 20 centuries, why that tomb is empty on this fateful morning. But like that early, eager household of Gentiles, we may still find ourselves in a holding pattern, not really sure what this emptiness means -- what it means for us, that is.

OK, so Jesus is risen, alleluia; card-carrying Christians by and large don't dispute this aspect of the story.

But many of us still share the incomprehension of Mary, Peter, and the beloved disciple who come to the tomb, poke their heads in, see nothing, and don't know what to make of it. We know what has happened, what faithful people down through the centuries say has happened. We recite the consequence of this event in every creed: the holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. But seldom do we translate that great absence on Easter morning into something more.

What if we went for something more immediate and obvious? Easter transforms nothing into everything. In this sense, it's a genesis event, as open to possibility as the first creation was. Easter translates emptiness into fullness, death into unending life, and despair into boundless hope.

Consider all the secret places where emptiness dwells in the human heart: in lonely marriages, in singleness, in widowhood; in unemployment or soul-deadening labor or unrealized dreams; in the lives of the poor who do not have what they need and the rich who are choking on excess; in families that are broken and alienated from one another; in the lives of those who are never touched and never hear a kind word spoken to them; in hospitals and nursing homes and forgotten apartments where depression exercises its bitter rule; in the private souls of those who struggle with their sexual identity; in the world of a neglected child or a single parent; in those trapped by the shame of alcoholism, drug addiction or chained to pornography.

This, too, is the empty tomb into which each of us must sooner or later peer and enter. We have to speak our most personal questions into this space and hear them echo back to us. What we understand in the presence of nothingness, along the borders and limitations of our humanity, has a lot to do with what we understand about Easter Sunday morning, when we stand with the disciples in the mouth of nothing and have to determine what we really believe.

Here's the thing: Today it doesn't matter what Mary saw, what Peter thought, what the other disciple understood on Easter morning. It doesn't matter

that they were able to say, with absolute conviction, "We have seen the Lord!" What matters *on this particular Easter Sunday* is the testimony that you and I are able to give. We cannot simply repeat the witness of others. We must testify to what WE have seen and experienced ourselves. This means WE have to go down to the empty places in our lives and seek and find the Risen Lord there.

Because if we don't find Him there, we won't find Him anywhere. And if we haven't encountered Him yet personally, then in all seriousness, sisters and brothers, we should make the search for that encounter the central goal of our lives, starting today. No aspect of our lives is more important than our personal experience of the Risen Lord. We have to walk with Jesus, hear His teaching, feel the healing and embrace of His forgiveness in the darkest aspect of our lives where nothing seems to live.

Get to Confession. Pray at least three times a day. Seek out those people who enjoy a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and ask them how they did it. Listen to the stories of older believers about how they came to know Jesus Christ and His Church. Read God's Holy Word and let it touch your heart. Truly believe that when we come up to Holy Communion that we truly received the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ Himself. He is here not only when we remember what He did 2000 years ago, but that He is here NOW!

We'll know Jesus when faith becomes the only sensible response to what we have seen and our hands have touched. When Easter morning lives in us, we can gaze fearlessly into the places in this world that seem to be inhabited by nothing. We will perceive the spirit of God already breathing on that void, and we will be filled with hope. ALLELUIA! And AMEN!

[Readings: Acts 2:42-47; 5:12-16; Ps. 118; 1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31]

Last Sunday we celebrated the Lord's Resurrection; today we witness the spiritual resurrection of His disciples. It has already been a week since the disciples had seen the Risen Lord, but in spite of this, they remained fearful, cringing behind "closed doors" (Jn 20:26). What does Jesus do in the face of this fearful lack of belief?

He returns and, standing in the same place, "in the midst" of the disciples, He repeats His greeting: "Peace be with you!" (Jn 20:19, 26). He starts all over. The resurrection of His disciples begins here, from this faithful and patient mercy, from the discovery that God never tires of reaching out to lift us up when we fall. He wants us to see Him, not as a taskmaster with whom we have to settle accounts, but as our Father who always raises us up. In life, we go forward tentatively, uncertainly, like a toddler who takes a few steps and falls; a few steps more and falls again, yet each time his father puts him back on his feet. The hand that always puts us back on our feet is mercy: God knows that without mercy we will remain flat on the ground, that in order to keep walking, we need to be put back on our feet.

You may object: "But I keep falling!" The Lord knows this and He is always ready to raise you up. He does not want us to keep thinking about our failings; rather, He wants us to look to Him. For when we fall, He sees children needing to be put back on their feet; in our failings, He sees children in need of His merciful love. Today, on this Sunday that Saint John Paul II dedicated to Divine Mercy twenty-two years ago, we confidently welcome this message. Jesus said to Saint Faustina: "I am love and mercy itself; there is no human misery that could measure up to my mercy."

At one time, Faustina, with satisfaction, told Jesus that she had offered Him all of her life and all that she had. But Jesus' answer stuns her: "You have not offered me the thing that is truly yours." What had that holy nun kept for herself? Jesus says to her with kindness: "My daughter, give me your failings" (10 October 1937). We too can ask ourselves: "Have I given my failings to the Lord? Have I let Him see me fall so that He can raise me up?" Or is there something I still keep inside me? A sin, a regret from the past, a wound that I have inside, a grudge against someone, an idea about a particular person... The Lord waits for us to offer Him our failings so that He can help us experience his mercy.

We too, like Thomas, with our fears and our doubts, have experienced our frailty. We need the Lord, who sees beyond that frailty an irrepressible beauty. With Him we rediscover how precious we are even in our vulnerability. We discover that we are like beautiful crystals, fragile and at the same time precious. And if, like crystal, we are transparent before Him, His light – the light of mercy – will shine in us and through us into the world.

In 1991 in the Archdiocese of New York, Cardinal John O'Connor founded a new order of women religious called the Sisters of Life. In 2018, one of the Sisters of Life wrote a prayer, The Litany of Trust. I invite you to pray it with me:

The Litany of Trust

From the belief that I have to earn Your love, **Deliver me, Jesus.**

From the fear that I am unlovable, **Deliver me, Jesus.**

From the false security that I have what it takes, **Deliver me, Jesus.**

From the fear that trusting You will leave me more destitute, **Deliver me, Jesus.**

From all suspicion of Your words and promises, **Deliver me, Jesus.**

From the rebellion against childlike dependency on You, **Deliver me, Jesus.**

From refusals and reluctances in accepting Your will, **Deliver me, Jesus.**

From anxiety about the future, **Deliver me, Jesus.**

From resentment or excessive preoccupation with the past, **Deliver me, Jesus.**

From restless self-seeking in the present moment, **Deliver me, Jesus.**

From disbelief in Your love and presence, **Deliver me, Jesus.**

From the fear of being asked to give more than I have, **Deliver me, Jesus.**

From the belief that my life has no meaning or worth, **Deliver me, Jesus.**

From the fear of what love demands, **Deliver me, Jesus.**

From discouragement, **Deliver me, Jesus.**

That You are continually holding me, sustaining me, loving me,

Jesus, I trust in you.

That Your love goes deeper than my sins and failings, and transforms me,

Jesus, I trust in you.

That not knowing what tomorrow brings is an invitation to lean on You,

Jesus, I trust in you.

That you are with me in my suffering,

Jesus, I trust in you.

That my suffering, united to Your own, will bear fruit in this life and the next,

Jesus, I trust in you.

That You will not leave me orphan, that You are present in Your Church,

Jesus, I trust in you.

That Your plan is better than anything else,

Jesus, I trust in you.

That You always hear me and in Your goodness always respond to me,

Jesus, I trust in you.

That You give me the grace to accept forgiveness and to forgive others,

Jesus, I trust in you.

That You give me all the strength I need for what is asked,

Jesus, I trust in you.

That my life is a gift, **Jesus, I trust in you.**

That You will teach me to trust You, **Jesus, I trust in you.**

That You are my Lord and my God, **Jesus, I trust in you.**

That I am Your beloved one, **Jesus, I trust in you. AMEN!**

[Provided by the Sisters of Life]