



"Six Days Later"

Scripture – Mark 8:31-9:8

Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson

Sunday, February 28, 2021

Then [Jesus] began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected ... [and] killed, and after three days rise again.

This is not news to us. Every year we begin our Lenten journey knowing exactly where the road will lead. We know the Way of the Cross begins in the desert, where Jesus spent 40 days being tempted by Satan ... and that it winds its way beside the Sea and up the mountain before bringing us to Jerusalem, where Jesus rides into the city as crowds wave branches high. The road takes us to the Upper Room, to the Garden of Gethsemane, to the Courtyard of The High Priest. And, then, it leads out of town, to Golgotha, where criminals are crucified. But, thanks be to God, the Way of the Cross doesn't end there. It ends at a tomb — an empty tomb, where the stone has been rolled away. We know all this. We have the benefit of a roadmap; it marks the beginning and the end and every stop along the way. So as we embark on our Lenten journey, we walk in hope. We walk in hope, because the promise of resurrection lifts and sustains us as we look ahead to that old, rugged cross.

This was not the case for the first disciples. For Peter and James and John. For the others — both named and unnamed — who followed Jesus. They didn't have a roadmap to reference. They had only the teachings of the man standing before them. And his teachings didn't exactly jive with their expectations. You see, they expected a Messiah. They expected the Anointed One, sent by God to deliver Israel from the clutches of Rome, to restore their homeland, to lift them to the pinnacle of greatness they had known with King David. The disciples expected victory. Honor. Glory.

But, now, Jesus is telling them to expect the opposite. He's talking about suffering and rejection and death. He's talking about a cross. The disciples may not understand the full import of Jesus' words, but they do understand this: there is no end more painful, more shameful than death on a Roman cross. It's a gruesome fate reserved for rabble-rousers and dissidents, pirates and thieves. *Not* for God's Messiah. As far as Peter is concerned, it *cannot* be the fate destined for God's Messiah. So Peter rebukes him. *Do not say such things, Lord! This cannot be true!* But it is true. And, to make matters worse, it's only the beginning of the truth. The whole truth is that Jesus will suffer and die *and* that those who wish to be his disciples must take up the cross and follow him. They must commit to his mission of healing and wholeness. They must alleviate suffering, even when their tactics anger religious leaders or catch the ever-watchful eye of Roman soldiers; they must welcome the outcast, even when it means risking rejection themselves. In short, the disciples must commit to a way of life that is so threatening to the death-dealing powers of this world, that it can only lead to one place: to Golgotha, to the cross.

It is a lot to take in — that this road will lead to suffering and death ... not because suffering and death are *necessary*, but because they are inevitable. In a deeply illogical world, the cross is the only logical end to a life of radical love. Yes, it is a lot for the disciples to take in. And the Gospel of Mark leaves it to us to imagine how they carry this burden.

The next event Mark reports happens six days later. Six days! It's an eternity in Mark's Gospel, when so much happens "immediately." *The Spirit immediately drove [Jesus] out into the wilderness (1:12). Immediately [Jesus] made his disciples get into the boat (6:45).* Most of the time, we can barely keep pace with the Gospel writer. But, for six days, Mark falls silent. And we are left to imagine how the disciples process the words Jesus spoke about the fate that would befall him.

I imagine that Peter becomes withdrawn. He's stunned that Jesus rebuked him so harshly; he's fearful of what is to come; he's wondering if he's cut out for this work. So, in very *un-Peter-like* fashion, he begins to hang back. He lets the other disciples answer Jesus' questions; he lags behind as others jump to the ready. Before long James and John join Peter at the edges of the crowd. The three huddle together — their heads bowed, their voices lowered, their faces drawn. I imagine that Peter and James and John succumb to despair. They become so focused on the shameful finality of the cross that they find no hope for the future ... If they even picked up on the hope of resurrection in the first place. Given the weightiness of Jesus' declaration, they may have missed the promise that came with it: *The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected ... [and] killed, and after three days rise again.* I imagine that Peter and James and John need some assurance that the way of the cross is not simply a way of suffering and death, but a journey that leads to healing, to wholeness, to life. Maybe this is why Jesus takes Peter and James and John up that mountain.

Six days later, Mark tells us, Jesus takes these three — only these three — to the mountaintop. And, there, Jesus is transfigured. His clothes become dazzling white and Moses and Elijah appear beside him. It is a transcendent scene — a scene of such glory, that no one could deny the identity of Jesus. No doubt, this is what the disciples expect of a Messiah ... a figure adorned in splendor, clothed in light, imbued with the power and blessing of God Most High. Peter wants to stay put. *Rabbi, he says, it is good for us to be here. Let us make dwellings for you and Elijah and Moses.* Maybe Peter wants to protect Jesus; maybe he wants to protect himself. Perhaps he wants to dwell in the glory of this moment, to cling to the image of the Messiah he has held in his mind's eye. But this is not to be. God thunders from heaven: *This is my son; listen to him!* And, then, suddenly, the four of them are alone. All is as it was before. Jesus and the disciples head down the mountain. They join the others. They continue their journey toward the cross.

But I expect the three disciples do not go away unchanged. In taking them to the mountain, Jesus has given Peter and James and John a gift; he has given them a glimpse of glory, a foretaste of what will come after the pain and shame of the cross. This mountaintop experience is an assurance that the road ahead is not simply about suffering and death; it is about healing and wholeness and hope. And, maybe, just maybe, this assurance is enough to sustain these disciples as they continue their journey with Jesus. Down the mountain, on through Galilee and beyond the Jordan, until they see Jerusalem on the horizon. In the days ahead, Peter and James and John will live into the tension that is at the heart of this story — the tension between despair and hope, between sorrow and joy, between death and life. It's a tension we know well, even though we have the roadmap. Perhaps, it's a tension we know well *because* we have the roadmap. We know where the Way of the Cross leads; we have made this journey before. And, so, even when we find ourselves face-to-face with the suffering of this world, even when we are drowning in despair or consumed by sorrow, we know there is reason for hope. In our time and place, it is rarely our faith that *causes* suffering. More often, it is our faith that gives us strength to *confront* suffering, to *endure* suffering.

But, still — even with the gift of faith — there are times our hearts can't quite hope in the promise of resurrection. Like Peter and James and John, we need some assurance that suffering and death do not have the last word. We need someone to take us by the hand and lead us up the mountain, to remind us that the road we follow is one of healing, of wholeness, of hope. Every once in a while, we are gifted a true mountaintop experience. You know what I'm talking about — those rare, holy moments when we come face-to-face with the glory of God and find ourselves lost in wonder, love, and praise. These encounters happen. But, for most of us, they are *not* the ones that sustain us on our journeys. More often it's the everyday experiences ... an assurance of hope that comes in an unexpected kindness, a glimpse of God's glory shining through a story shared. Sometimes the moments that sustain us feel more like lifelines than mountaintop experiences — when the phone call comes at just the right time, when the casserole appears at your door when you can't manage to put food on the table. Depending on where we are on the journey, it may be that unexpected turn that leads us away from despair, and sets our feet on the path toward hope.

Congresswoman Madeline Dean and her son, Harry, recently wrote a book titled *Under Our Roof: A Son's Battle with Recovery, a Mother's Battle for Her Son*. It is a collaborative memoir about Harry's decade-long struggle with addiction, and his family's struggle to support him on the road to recovery. They reflect upon a turning point in Harry's journey; it was the day Madeline Dean and her husband confronted their son about his addiction and asked him to get the help he needed. When Harry said "yes" to treatment, the family decided to check him into the Caron Treatment Center right away. As the three of them scurried about the house, collecting everything Harry would need, Madeline realized she wouldn't be able to talk with her son for quite some time. So she grabbed a card and scribbled him a note:

My dear Harry,

It seems so strange to be driving to Caron on the heels of the terrible storm Sandy, but the day seems bright to me. This should be a very good day for you. This is a very good day for you. You have asked for help — the help you need to be healthy, happy, well. I love you. I'm proud of you. As worried as Daddy and I have been, I have such optimism and confidence in you. You are an amazing young man of many gifts — you are smart, handsome, kind, loving, funny. Addiction has tried to bury your gifts. Don't let that happen. Reclaim them all for yourself. ... I love you more than you know. Daddy too.

~ Mommy

[P.S.] Remember to pray often ... nothing is impossible with the Lord.

During an interview this week, Harry reflected upon that letter, upon that moment: "It still to this day amazes me ... She said, 'I'm proud of you.' And I could not comprehend that at the time because of the shame that I felt, because of the sadness and brokenness I had been living for so long. I couldn't see the pride, I couldn't see the optimism ... In hindsight that was one of the most impactful days of my life."¹

There are moments on our own journeys when we are drowning in despair, when we cannot see beyond pain or suffering or death, when we cannot lay claim to the promise of resurrection for ourselves. That's when we rely on circles of support, on the family of faith, on fellow pilgrims on the journey to be Christ for us — to take us by

¹ "'Under Our Roof: Rep. Madeleine Dean and son Harry Cunnane on addiction and recovery,'" *Radio Times* (February 23, 2021), <https://why.org>.

the hand and lead us up the mountain. To remind us that there is reason for hope, that the journey of faith leads to healing, to wholeness, to the fullness of life. And, in these moments — however ordinary or extraordinary they might be — we glimpse the glory and grace of God. So, this Lent, as we face that old rugged cross, as we look beyond to the empty tomb, may we walk with confidence, trusting that the journey leads us toward hope and finds its completion in resurrection.

Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Creator of all that is, during this Lenten season, we focus our thoughts on how we are spending our days, knowing that this is how we are spending our lives. We contemplate our relationship with you and realize we have work to do. How might we draw closer to you? How might we be awake to the opportunities that appear and invite us – and at the same time – be alert to the temptations that plot and scheme to lure us off course? We discover clues when we follow the way of Jesus.

We listen to leaders in the fields of politics, business, religion, education, and more. May we ever be mindful that we human beings are fallible and we are easily tempted to compromise our principles. May we resolve to test the words of others against the words of Jesus who is our preeminent guide.

He is the one who can open our eyes to the truth.

He is the one to shine light into our darkness.

He is the one to instill true joy in our soul.

Loving God, we struggle to grasp what Jesus intends when he beckons us to deny ourselves. Surely, he does not mean that we should allow ourselves to be trampled by the unjust or abused by the vindictive. He would not desire for us to surrender to bigots or permit others to diminish the image of God within us. Reveal to us what it means in our lives today to deny ourselves and to take up our cross and follow him.

Might it mean

to care for someone who needs healing,

to spend extra hours with a child who needs support,

to extend grace to a loved one who yearns for our forgiveness,

to listen to a friend who needs to pour out her burdens,

to empathize with one who grieves the loss of a companion,

to link our energy with those seeking justice for people who are oppressed,

to contribute to ministries that feed people in our community.

Everlasting God, may we move forward with the basic principles of Christ – which are mercy and justice – to meet our neighbor, to wrestle with the issues of our day, and to uphold divine virtues so that we may partner with you in spreading your realm in our world.

Now, we join our voices as one and pray the prayer Jesus taught us to pray, saying:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.