

This past January, I had the opportunity to spend two extraordinary weeks at St. George's College in Jerusalem. From there we traced the steps of Jesus' life and ministry from Bethlehem to Nazareth, and then in and around the Sea of Galilee at Capernaum and the Mount of the Beatitudes. *And then we went up to Jerusalem.* We went by way of the Judean Desert and the Mount of the Transfiguration, until we came to Bethany and Bethphage, and then to the Mount of Olives. From there to one of the churches that claims to be the site of the Upper Room and from there to Gethsemane, until eventually at 5 o'clock on the morning, we walked The Way of the Cross, *the Via Dolorosa*, in the rain. It was an amazing experience.

And so is this. I know that Holden is a long way from Jerusalem. But still, there is something holy about the walking we do here today that makes us more aware of the presence of Christ, who is not confined to first-century Palestine nor to Israel in the twenty-first; not even on this day when we remember his death. As you all remember, Christ has promised to be present wherever two or three are gathered together in His name; we are here together on this glorious day, gathered in His name, and surely he is in our midst even on the day when we remember his death.

Lord George McLeod has spoken about "recovering the claim that Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles." Since he was, as McLeod goes on to say...

...crucified between two thieves

...on the town garbage heap

...at a crossroad of politics so cosmopolitan that they had to write his title in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek

...at a place where cynics talk smut and thieves curse and soldiers gamble...

...because that is where he died and that is what he was about, that is where Christ's men and women ought to be, and that is what church people ought to be about.

Keep that in mind today as we take to the streets and "go public" with our faith. One of the things I've noticed happens when we do this is that the labels drop away. Nobody can tell as we walked here today on Main Street who are the Roman Catholics and who are the Protestants. Unlike perhaps in our respective congregations, it isn't obvious if you look around you who are the progressives and who are the evangelicals; who likes ordered liturgy and incense and who prefers to keep it loose with plenty of room for the Holy Spirit. Today, at least, together in the streets of Holden, we are simply disciples of Jesus Christ. We are a people who have been called to take up our cross and follow him. We are a people "on the Way." Whatever else may happen or not happen for us today—whether we are inspired by the music or preaching, whether we see an old friend or make a new one—that fact has the potential to be life-changing.

This three-hour journey to remember Christ's death reminds us that denominational labels—even when our denomination is "non-denominational!—that these labels are adjectives and not nouns. I'm not a Christian Episcopalian, but an Episcopal Christian. Denominational adjectives describe, at best, the particular way that we are nurtured in the faith and growing into the full stature of Christ and that matters the same way that gender and ethnicity and culture matter. But more than at any other time of the year, today we are visible manifestation of Christ's one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. Look around and remember that and give thanks and give thanks too that this bears witness to the community of Holden more about who we are than our words.

We are members of each other, members of Christ's Body—a Body with many gifts. Those gifts have been entrusted to us by Christ so that we might be salt and light and yeast in these streets of Holden and in our homes, schools, and workplaces as well as in our congregations. And of course not just here but in Haiti and El Salvador, in Tanzania and Liberia as well. And in Jerusalem too, for contrary to popular opinion, there are Christians there; I even know some of them!

One of the churches that I visited while in Jerusalem was a church called St. Peter in Gallicantu. It's built on the site that is believed to have been the home of the high priest, Caiphus. There you can see some first-century steps that Jesus may have walked down toward Golgatha, and underground crypts where Jesus may have been imprisoned. With four gospel accounts and disparities around some of the details it's hard to prove as historical fact much of what we learn by faith on this day. But I'll tell you this: standing above those steps at the church of St. Peter in Gallicantu is still a pretty awesome experience. A Byzantine shrine dedicated to Peter was erected on that site in the middle of the fifth century; like so many of those Byzantine sites it was destroyed by Muslim invaders and then eventually rebuilt by the Crusaders, when it was given the name it continues to have today.

Galli-cantu means “the cock crowed” in Latin. And in case you don't speak Latin, there is this great big golden rooster on top of the church.

I was even more amazed to stumble in there to learn that it is run by the Assumptionists, the very same order that run Assumption College in Worcester. It is indeed a small world! Outside of the church there is a statue of Peter being accused, by the fire, of knowing the man. As we heard a few moments ago, his accent, his demeanor, and the look in his eyes all give him away. Even so, he denies it: “I don't know the man.” This from the macho fisherman who said he would *never* deny Jesus. This from *petros*—the rock upon which the Church will be built. “I don't know what you are talking about.” And then the cock crows, and this grown man cries. *Cock-a-doodle-doo*.

Some of you have perhaps been to St. Peter's in Rome. Now there is a monument to a great saint, the premier disciple, the one who after Pentecost found his voice and his courage again, the great preacher we see in the Acts of the Apostles, the first pope. St. Peter's in Rome is a testimony, I think, to Peter's successes and they were many. But St. Peter's in Gallicantu—the place where the cock crowed—is a testimony to Peter's failings on that Friday which must have been so humiliating for him. He's supposed to be the leader, and then the cock crows and he feels like a coward and a fool. *Cock-a-doodle-doo*.

One of the things I am grateful for in my ministry are the clergy you see before you today from St. Mary's and Immanuel and Holden Chapel and Fellowship Church and First Baptist and First Congregational and Chaffins. We meet once a month to share a meal together: to laugh, to pray, and to talk about all of you. Fr. Andy and Pastor Dan and I came within a few months of each other; this Holy Week is lucky number thirteen for all three of us. Tom has been here basically his whole life. I call all of them friends.

Occasionally—I hope this isn't revealing too much today—occasionally one of our congregations faces some struggles and challenges and even some conflicts. I know that is hard to imagine, because we like to think of Christians as always just holding hands and singing *Kum*

Bah Yah and that there is never any pain or struggle and the budget is always balanced and all is good, all the time. But on occasion, over the past decade or so when things have been sometimes challenging at St. Francis, the people before you today are the ones I have been able to turn to for wise counsel. And I hope that on occasion I have been able to return the favor.

But even in our little group, that clerical curse still sometimes rears its head. Ministry can be hard, but we say “everything is fine.” People are choosing hockey over church, but we say “attendance is up.” It’s not a lie, exactly; maybe sometimes a bit a reminder that “denial isn’t just a river in Egypt.” But it’s what we learn because we clergy are first and foremost human and like all of us are deeply embedded in a culture that worships success and does not tolerate failure.

But we know better than that, don’t we? At least on this day—*especially* on this day—we are reminded that it is really our *successes*, as pastors and as congregations, that can be dangerous. Our successes make us think we are “something else”—that we have it all together, that our charisma and charm and good looks make it all work. And then the cock crows and the curtain is pulled back and in such moments we are with Peter in Gallicantu, and like him we don’t feel very much like a rock. This is, of course, not a temptation that only clergy face; it’s in the town water here, isn’t it? Failure is not an option in the suburbs.

And, still, Jesus keeps walking toward Golgatha. What does it mean that on this Friday, with all the other places we could choose to be, we are taking up that cross and walking through the streets of Holden together? It seems to me that Golgatha—Calvary if you prefer—is the place where all our hurts and failings and disappointments culminate. And part of what we may yet discover there is that it is our failures that define us far more than our successes as Christian disciples. There is a prayer that comes out of my tradition, found in the *Book of Common Prayer*, that thanks God for the whole creation, the beauty of the world, the wonder of life, the mystery of love, for family and friends and for accomplishments which satisfy and delight us. And then, out of nowhere, this haunting line:

We thank you also for those disappointments and failures that lead us to acknowledge our dependence on you alone. (BCP 836)

I wonder if it isn’t our failures that do keep us grounded in Christ, and totally reliant on God’s amazing grace and mercy rather than our own “boot straps” and pride. Whatever else Peter must have felt when that rooster went “cock-a-doodle-doo,” I think it’s pretty safe to say it wasn’t pride.

Now we are New Englanders after all, so I don’t expect any of us to start coming to clergy gatherings or to church wearing our failures on our sleeves. Guess what I did to screw up this week, Marty? It was a real whopper! But as followers of Jesus, and as people a lot like Peter, I wonder what it would be like for us to at least make a start by not trying to run and hide from our failings. *Cock-a-doodle-doo*. For it is in those very moments that we begin to grasp what it is that makes this Friday so very good.

One of the commentators that I read in preparing for this sermon said that Peter’s lie, ironically, conveys a literal truth: “I do not know the man.” In that moment, that is quite true: he doesn’t

know Christ. He doesn't know the mercy and love and grace and power of God that can do infinitely more than he can ask or imagine, because in his fear, he finds himself all alone. I think of St. Paul's words to the church in Philippi: "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection." (Philippians 3:10, *NIV*) That is what we all want or we wouldn't be here today. But sometimes we do not know the man either.

Ingrid Michaelson is a young singer whose music I have been enjoying recently. I want to share the words of her latest song with you. (Don't worry, I won't sing it! If I did I'd risk having a church named after me: St. Richard's Remember-That-Good-Friday-When-He-Tried-To-Sing!) It's not a Good Friday tune anyway; much too chipper and happy. But I find it compelling and I think it may actually have something to do with Peter.

We have fallen down again tonight
In this world it's hard to get it right
Trying to make your heart fit like a glove
What it needs is love, love, love

Everybody, everybody wants to love
Everybody, everybody wants be to loved
Oh oh oh; Oh oh oh
Everybody, everybody wants to love
Everybody, everybody wants be to loved
Oh oh oh; Oh oh oh

Happy is the heart that still feels pain
Darkness drains and light will come again
Swing open your chest and let it in
Just let the love, love, love begin...

In this world it's hard to get it right, Ingrid sings. Yes indeed. And the cock crows and I imagine that Peter feels that he has been exposed as a fraud and that his life is over. He failed; the rock turned out to be nothing but sand. The great paradox, though, is that he is still loved in that very moment as much as ever.

Happy is the heart that feels pain. This holy season of Lent has reminded us once again that hearts of stone are no good to us or to God. It's easy to see how hearts can calcify; it can feel like a matter of self-preservation. Hearts of flesh can be broken; hearts of flesh can feel pain. But Michaelson sings that as a kind of beatitude: *Happy is the heart that still feels pain*. Which reminds me a lot of another beatitude, spoken on a mountaintop overlooking the Sea of Galilee: *blessed are those who mourn*. Why is that? *Because broken, contrite hearts can be used by God for good*.

To see and confront the pain of this world and of our own lives, to see our failings and disappointments and instead of despair, to feel love, love, love—well I think that goes to the very heart of what this day is all about. This isn't Bad Friday after all, and while there will be even more good news to come on Sunday morning we don't have to wait that long for good news.

This Friday is, after all, still called good and I think the reason for that is that the healing, transformative, reconciling love of God in Jesus Christ is revealed on the cross, not just at the empty tomb.

Happy is the heart that still feels pain
Darkness drains and light will come again
Swing open your chest and let it in
Just let the love, love, love begin...

The song can be found here:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TIFCfkyuQM0&feature=player_embedded