
The Good Friday Resurrection Starts Inside Us (Even When We Are Imprisoned)

**A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
Good Friday – Year A**

In years past, I have preached on Good Friday in the glorious springtime, when the weather was so beautiful, in the fullness of azalea and dogwood blossoms, when people were fancy-free and on vacations, or at a beach, or at a golf tournament, or in the mountains, or simply enjoying Spring in Atlanta – when the world was alive and thriving and beautiful!

And, I remember on all those days, how hard it was to put myself into the somber mood and dark tone of Good Friday! In years past, it has been hard to talk about the suffering of Jesus when the sun outside was shining so brightly in our lives!

But this year, of course, is different.

We are living in a tremendous and overwhelming Good Friday. With the COVID-19 pandemic, our world is shut down and living in a global Good Friday. I do not need to rehearse with you the details of the daily news reports we are all hearing. We have been experiencing Holy Week, we have been experiencing Good Friday, for some time now. Good Friday is probably not so hard for us to understand, or at least to imagine.

Some of us are suffering greatly. Some of us are in pain. Some of us are dying. All of us are trapped. All of us have been in a kind of imprisonment! It's like we have been in prison. We don't know what day it is; we don't know what time it is.

And everything we do is under suspicion, too! Under suspicion by our own selves! Every time I cough, I do a calculation: "Is that a dry cough? Is another cough quickly following?" With every stray sneeze, I ask myself, "Am I sick?" I suspect myself, and I suspect everyone else, too.

I am thinking of prison on this Good Friday. It might be that Jesus, imprisoned and questioned on the Cross, has something to teach us today. But, before I get to Jesus, I have learned from so many others.

I have been learning from the words of other people who have spoken from their prisons. I remember the old Phil Ochs song ("There But For Fortune"),

*Show me a prison, show me a jail
Show me a prisoner whose face has grown pale
And I'll show you a young man
With many reasons why
There but for fortune, go you or I.*

I remember reading so long ago, the powerful prison poem, by George Gordon, Lord Byron, titled "The Prisoner of Chillon." Perhaps you remember that speaker, one Francois Bonivard, much of whose family had been killed for political reasons; in the poem, he is speaking from a dungeon prison, where he and two of his remaining brothers were chained. Here are the words of The Prisoner of Chillon:

*They chain'd us each to a column stone,
And we were three—yet, each alone;*

*We could not move a single pace,
We could not see each other's face,
But with that pale and livid light
That made us strangers in our sight:
And thus together—yet apart,
Fetter'd in hand, but join'd in heart,*

Those words remind me of today! Individuals and households stuck together in one place, sharing stories at one moment, but also being so tired and grumpy the next moment!

At the very end of Lord Byron's poem, are these interesting and provocative lines!

*My very chains and I grew friends,
So much a long communion tends
To make us what we are:—even I
Regain'd my freedom with a sigh.*

That is what imprisonment did for the Prisoner of Chillon. "A long communion," he said, "tends to make us what we are." A long communion tends to make us what we are.

Being imprisoned, of course, is not a gift most of us choose. But, it seems to me that we, on Good Friday in the year 2020, can learn from people who have been in prison. The awful solitude can actually force us to face things *within us* – not things *outside* of us, but things *within us*!

In times of crisis, like times in prison, I believe that most of us act in the same way we usually act –only *moreso!* The truth that is us, gets *amplified!* Anxious people get more anxious in prison, in crisis. Peaceful people get more peaceful! Generous people get more generous. Selfish people get more selfish.

People who are angry get more angry. People's political persuasions stay the same; they just get louder. It's weird.

Beautiful people clearly get more beautiful. Remember the beautiful young girl, Anne Frank, hiding with her huddled family from the vicious Nazis? Even in a kind of imprisonment, she wrote, "*I've found that there is always some beauty left -- in nature, sunshine, freedom, in yourself; these can all help you.*" (Anne Frank, *The Diary of a Young Girl*)

Ah! Her words, coming from the midst of sorrow and imprisonment, teach us something!

And she said this: "*In spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart. I simply can't build up my hopes on a foundation consisting of confusion, misery, and death. I see the world gradually being turned into a wilderness, I hear the ever approaching thunder, which will destroy us too, I can feel the sufferings of millions and yet, if I look up into the heavens, I think that it will all come right, that this cruelty too will end, and that peace and tranquility will return again.*" (Anne Frank, *The Diary of a Young Girl*).

Of course, contrary to what she imagined, it did not come right, for her. Anne Frank would die, before ever being free again. She never saw the literal end to the cruelty. But she did become more of who she truly was. Her hope, her optimism, her appreciation for beauty and love, teach us still today.

Remember the great South African leader, Nelson Mandela, who also wrote from prison, from a political imprisonment. He, too, became more of who he was, while in prison. He said "*I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear.*"

And he said, "*I am fundamentally an optimist. Whether that comes from nature or nurture, I cannot say. Part of being optimistic is keeping one's head pointed toward the sun, one's feet moving forward. There were many dark moments when my faith in humanity was sorely tested, but I would not and could not give myself up to despair. That way lays defeat and death.*" (Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom: Autobiography of Nelson Mandela*.) Finally, these words: "*As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison.*"

The time of communion with oneself, while in prison, has provided some good people with an opportunity to teach us good things.

But, first, we have to know truly who we are. In our time, can our season of imprisonment teach us about our internal prisons? I am talking about self-awareness and introspection, true contemplation and self-analysis. "If I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind," said Mandela, "I'd still be in prison."

How has your Lent been? Do you remember the words of the Ash Wednesday service, the invitation to a Holy Lent, the invitation to "self-examination?" It was only back on February 26. How is that going? In our Lenten imprisonment, how is that "self-examination" going? What have you discovered?

Here is what I have discovered. I have discovered, maybe, the same thing that Jesus discovered. Jesus the Christ knew, knew very fully, his inner soul, his being. Jesus was familiar with the inner turmoil and temptation of his soul; he knew that, with the help of a forty-day solitary retreat in the desert, many retreats to "place apart" throughout his ministry, places of Anapauo, refreshment, that came from within.

Well, I have discovered the same thing. I have discovered that God is *in us*. God is not only *with us*, God is *in us*. God is in the courage and stamina of medical workers and grocery store workers and delivery persons and construction workers and mothers and fathers. God is *in us!*

True contemplation reveals the same thing in each of us, individually. There is life in us, because God is *in us!* We are saved, by the Energy and Spirit of the God who is *in us!*

It was Pontius Pilate, famous for putting lots of people into prison, who asked the famous question, "What is truth?" Well, today, Good Friday, is our Christian response to that question.

The truth is that God loves us, God loves all of us, all of humanity, with a love so deep that God becomes the depth in us. In Jesus the Christ, *God moves inside us* and absorbs the suffering and pain of the whole world. The love of God is never more manifest than the love of a suffering Jesus from the cross. This, today, is when God saves us – when God becomes human in the cross.

And, it turns out, this is when the Resurrection starts, too. The Resurrection is not merely an earthquake explosion moment on Easter Sunday. The Resurrection starts when Jesus knows himself, is alert and mindful of God's spirit of love, deep within himself. It started from the inside in Jesus, on Good Friday, and it burst forth and outward on Easter morning. And that same Resurrection, that same Resurrection starts in us the same way!

Yes, the Resurrection starts from the inside. Even when that inside looks like darkness It starts with us, on Good Friday, when we face the truth of ourselves with love and grace, with the eternal love and grace of God.

When our depth and solitude enable us to know ourselves, when our solitude empowers us to be aware of truth in a new way, well, that is when new life begins to occur. We call that self-awareness: Resurrection! We call that enlightenment: New Life!

And it begins today, Good Friday, in the depth of self-knowledge and awareness.

In this season of contagion, we sure have discovered lots of things that are contagious! The coronavirus is, for sure. Yes, viruses are contagious! But so are lots of other, good, things! Peace is contagious! Anxiety is contagious, but so is Calm! Fear is contagious, but so is Love. And, finally, self-knowledge. Self-knowledge, inner awareness, knowledge of yourself, is contagious. The more we realize who we, ourselves, truly are – the more people around us will realize who they themselves truly are! Self-awareness is contagious.

Grace to you, and peace. Grace to you, and peace, and love, from the Cross today. This Friday is Good because it saves us. It gives us the inner power of new and ever-refreshing life.

God does not raise us from outside ourselves – as if we were floundering in the water, and God dives down like an eagle to retrieve us. No, God raises us from the inside! God raises us from the inside out! God raises us from inside the tomb! God frees us, by starting from inside the prison!

It's been a long Good Friday season. It might be still longer. There but for fortune go you and I. It is a season for us to be aware of who we are, on the inside. In that inner spirit, in the true awareness of our soul, we are truly aware of the ever holy God

Good Friday is the depth, the depth of that long communion, that long communion that actually tends to make us what we are, that actually shows us who God is. God is Good Friday. The Resurrection starts with Good Friday, from inside us.

AMEN.

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