
It's Good Friday. I Believe in Death.

A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
Good Friday

Thank you! Thank you, you faithful ones. Thanks to you who gather here on Good Friday, you who observe the fullness of Holy Week.

You already know that almost every religious holiday in western culture has been kidnapped, usurped, even exploited, by popular sales. It seems that almost every religious holiday has become an occasion to sell something. To buy something.

We chuckle and accept that reality when it is Christmas time. After all, we all love to give gifts at Christmas! (Well, we don't all love to give gifts. But we all love to receive gifts.) And then, Easter gifts begin to appear. Well and good! Easter is good, and gifts are good. And giving is good.

And we all like to think we are buying things on sale! At a discount. When we read the advertisements, the merchandisers actually tell us how much we are saving! New Years' Day Sale, Valentines' Day sale, Presidents' Day sale, Easter sale, May Day sale. Oh my, the list goes on and on.

And, in the truly good spirit of God's presence in many spiritual institutions, we have wonderful Passover gifts, and Muslim end-of-Ramadan gifts. We have Spring season gifts, and Spring equinox gifts!

But, I am glad that we do not yet have Good Friday gifts. Holy Week, which began this past Palm Sunday, includes the passion, the story of Jesus' passion and death. This is not Easter Week. This is Holy Week. Holy Week includes Maundy Thursday, last night, when Jesus was betrayed. Holy Week includes today, Good Friday, which, ultimately, is an acknowledgement of death. I believe in death.

I realize that the common statement we Christians pray, over and over again, is something like, "I believe in resurrection." And, I realize that we Christians have all sorts of ways of saying we believe in resurrection. Those variations are okay with me. Indeed, I believe that our healthy body needs various ways of believing in resurrection.

But on Good Friday, we separate ourselves from the wonderful spring festivals that appear in most every culture around the world. We gather for something called "Good Friday." On Good Friday, we proclaim belief in something different from resurrection.

On Good Friday, I believe in death. Which is to say: Death happens. It is real. Few of us welcome death. We live our lives trying to outrun it, outthink it, out-hope it. We spend our lives trying to avoid death. And that is healthy. Strive to live!

But it is not good to spend our lives ignoring the reality of death. Every Good Friday time of year, I remember the brilliant and dense book by Ernst Becker, titled *The Denial of Death*, in which Becker describes how humanity copes with the fear of death by turning to heroes and immortality projects. One of the interesting observations of Becker is that good old fashioned Christianity, the classical Christian tradition, is one of humanity's most effective ways of dealing with death.

Of course, I appreciate that observation. I am a Christian who believes in death. I would even say that the awareness, the acknowledgement, of death is good for life. It is okay to believe in death. Death happens. Death happens, even to Jesus, the Christ, who is the savior of the world.

Yet, there is another sense in which I do not believe in death. For instance, I do not put my hope in death. I do not put my love in death. When I say I believe in God, I mean that I put my hope in God, I put my faith in God, I put my love in God. I do not believe in death that way. I do not put my hope in death, or my faith in death, or my love in death. I simply believe that death exists. And that is an important start in believing in the eternal God.

In Christ, our God does not pretend that death does not exist. But our God, whose love is deep and broad and high, is stronger even than death. We observe Good Friday in the church in order to give witness to that deeper love of God, the God who loves us even in the reality of death. No sales items or happy cards or popular gimmicks can comprehend that depth.

Yes, Good Friday is tough. It is about betrayal and suffering, and convoluted political twisting, and convoluted human behavior. In the midst of all that, in the midst of betrayal and suffering, God chooses to love. In the midst of death itself, God loves us. And we somehow say that we love God. When death happens, God loves. And when death happens, we love.

It is about love. We come together on Good Friday to love. To love God and to love each other. Christians look for a way to love, even in death. Love God on Good Friday. Love God in the midst of death. Let God love us in the midst of death. That deep love is the love that changes the world.

AMEN.

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