

Preaching Holy Week in the middle of a pandemic—again

Usually it takes courage to preach Good Friday. This year, it will take courage to proclaim “He is risen!” on Easter morning.

a conversation between [Richard Lischer](#) and [William H. Willimon](#)

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Lischer: Will, the number of American deaths from COVID-19 has surpassed the number of Americans killed in World War II, the country is still living with the violent fallout of Trump, and, by the way, it’s almost Holy Week.

Willimon: In your piece in the Century in December you said that Advent was a “sigh,” thus capturing our collective mood, Rick (“A season of sighs,” Dec. 16). Advent and Christmas were sort of joyful, magical; Holy Week is not. If Advent is a sigh, maybe Holy Week is a cry.

What a violent week we call holy! Gritty, realistic stories of betrayal, arrest, perjury, torture, mobs, death, and burial. (We wouldn't know anything about all that, would we, Holy Week 2021?) Some years we preachers must labor to make connections between the gospel and our lives. This Holy Week, the world does all that for us.

Lischer: I still think of Holy Week as a refuge of sorts. When I was the pastor of a church, we canceled every meeting and set aside church business in Holy Week so that we could find time to be together—a blessing we took for granted—and concentrate on this one story. During Holy Week, church is a family telling its stories. After 50-plus years of marriage, I catch myself telling stories about my wife's relatives whom I never met! I realize the notion of "our story" can become a cliché. But when we are gathered, when we are taking turns reading the Passion narrative dramatically, it really is our story. When the community's leader says, "Our Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread," suddenly we are there.

Willimon: Faced with a story so demanding, the church has got to stop what it's doing and listen, allowing this story to have its say. A story so true, so real—no way that we could have made it up on our own or it could have arisen from our wishful thinking. Most preachers are careful not to tell the same story twice; this one we repeat every year. The Passion re-creates us as a people of the cross. Without this story, I fear that my church would morph into just a club of like-minded, congenial folks with progressive political aspirations. Holy Week keeps us from making the church anything we like.

Lischer: Remember the old Saturday afternoon serials at the movies, when you would have to wait until next week to find out the hero's fate? Sermons were once like that. I read the other day that church people are considered "regular" in worship if they attend at least once a month. They're not there to experience any continuity in thought or story from one sermon to the next. So each sermon becomes an isolated event, with some preachers striving for a home run every Sunday. Enough of such insecurity! Holy Week puts the continuing narrative back into preaching.

Willimon: On Good Friday the preacher can say, "So, the kids grabbed palm branches and we all shouted 'Hosanna!' Then we stood by and watched Jesus' best friends betray him and scurry into the night, witnessed a consortium of religious and governmental officials whip up the people as the military tortured the Son of God to death. We rendered our verdict on Jesus: 'Crucify him!' Now, what will God's verdict be on us?" After 50 Holy Weeks as a preacher, I'm still amazed and intimidated by

so true a story. My ministry shall end before I've exhausted its meaning.

"The pandemic might force us to go deeper, to tell the truth despite our desire to please."

Lischer: Yes. Its power emerges at its lowest point, which is for me the burial of Jesus. We would turn away, but the scripture forces us to witness his burial. We confess, "Crucified, dead, and buried." That last word, "buried," falls like thud in the pit of the stomach.

Paul Tillich has a great sermon in *The Shaking of the Foundations*, "Born in the Grave," that addresses the necessity of seeing Christ buried. He recounts a story a witness told at the Nuremberg trials. Hiding in a Jewish cemetery in Poland, a woman gives birth in a grave. She is assisted by an old man dressed in a shroud. When the newborn utters its first cry, the old man holds the child and looks up to heaven: "Great God, hast Thou finally sent the Messiah to us? For who else than the Messiah Himself can be born in a grave?" Who indeed?

Willimon: One positive contribution of the pandemic might be to force us to go deeper, to tell the truth in spite of our pastoral desire to please. "I actually preached a sermon last January," a preacher told me, "on 'Three Principles of a Joy-Filled Marriage.' This damn pandemic has made much of my preaching sound silly."

I remember Elizabeth Achtemeier opening a Maundy Thursday sermon with, "Tonight, friends, Matthew forces us to do a dangerous dive into the deep end of the pool," followed on Good Friday by, "Where is Jesus on this dark night? Dead in the dark tomb. Where are we disciples? Cowering in the darkness. . . . When the lights go out, guess where you would be?" I asked a student who stumbled out of the totally darkened chapel that night how he had liked her sermons that week. He muttered, "Kicking butt for Jesus!"

Lischer: That's why Holy Week doesn't need extraneous illustrations. The violence, racism, and suffering of this age preexist, as it were, in the drama of the Passion. The prisoner Jesus standing before Pontius Pilate is the story of God and Caesar. Just tell it, don't sell it. If the narrative itself doesn't reach us at the core, nothing else will. We have rendered the gospel into something personal, private, and touchy-feely. Holy Week is public—entry to the capital city, a public execution, an earthquake. Personal, yes, but also communal, political, even cosmic. As Paul tried to explain the crucifixion to Agrippa (was it?), he said, "O king, this thing was not

done in a corner.”

Willimon: I remember a sermon of yours on that text from Acts! This is the week we are coaxed out of whatever corners in which we have confined the Christian faith and are compelled to walk behind Jesus as he goes head to head with the powers. These narratives are stories about who God is and what God’s up to, not moralistic exhortations for what we ought to think, do, or feel.

Lischer: Bonhoeffer said a sermon is Christ walking among his people. Sounds simple, doesn’t it.

Willimon: Warning: Christ is walking to a place none of us wants to go!

Lischer: I like your recognition that this week we are not center stage. The Passion narrative treats us as stunned observers. On Palm/Passion Sunday, we watch the spectacle unfold as Jesus enters the capital to die. Later, we will stand at the place of the skull and watch the execution take place—and then return to our homes. There’s no room on Good Friday for homilies encouraging us to do better, try harder, or feel more deeply. If we sing at all on Good Friday, it will be “In the Cross of Christ I Glory.”

Willimon: “We’re all in this together,” a widespread lie during the pandemic, becomes the gospel truth during Holy Week. Holy Week is a mirror held up to us, showing us who we really are so that we might look through this window and see who God is. I actually began a Good Friday meditation by quoting from a poem by Carl Sandburg: “Let’s be honest now / For a couple of minutes / Even though we’re in Chicago.” Then I said, “You asked for the Bible to be relevant to your lives? Listen up!”

“Truth takes a beating in John’s Gospel, as it does in our day. We preach to people worn to the nub by all the lying.”

Lischer: On Good Friday, many of us follow the tradition of preaching on the words from the cross. But there’s no need to conflate or harmonize the evangelists. It’s not necessary to sync Jesus’ shout of triumph in the Gospel of John with his cry of forsakenness in the Gospel of Matthew. Just let the text speak. Was he really forsaken? It’s not an academic question. When so many are dying alone these days and we find ourselves bereft of comfort, this cry is for us. And we need to remember that his cry—our cry—was not addressed to the darkness, but to “my God.”

Willimon: I agree. Our challenge is to let each Gospel speak. I really like the way the different Gospels, with their different takes on the Passion, give us the opportunity to speak in different voices. I also like the way the Gospel accounts rescue us from our preoccupations of the present moment and force us to talk about matters that make many congregations uncomfortable.

Lischer: Whatever their differences, each of the Gospel narratives calls for a liturgical or sacramental response. In the early church Good Friday, Saturday, and Easter formed a unitive, redemptive event. For us Lutherans, it comes together in one symbolic reenactment: baptism. Paul asks, Don't you know you are baptized into the Lord's death?—not exactly our culture's view of baptism, by the way! Is there any better or more powerful time to baptize a person than in the dark of the Easter Vigil or the dawn of Easter morning?

Willimon: No better time. Among us non-Lutheran, Low Church types, it's always a challenge to keep crucifixion and resurrection together. I warned my people: miss one of the services—particularly Thursday running up to Sunday—and you risk a fatal truncation of the gospel.

Lischer: The danger in the sparsely attended Good Friday services and the standing-room-only crowds on Easter is that on Sunday someone might ask, "Risen from what?"

Willimon: How true. But there's also the danger that without the scandal of Easter, the rest of Holy Week becomes just another lamentable tragedy. For the last six months I think some of us Christians have overdone lament, indulging ourselves in the sentimental notion that if we feel really, really bad about the tragedies among us, we've actually done something. Easter preaching is an assertion about God doing for our world what we cannot do ourselves—a challenge for us privileged and powerful to hear.

Some years it's hard to preach Good Friday. This year it may take more guts to stand (virtually) before a congregation and shout, "He is risen," compelling them to respond, whether they feel like it or not, "Risen indeed!"

Lischer: I'm struck by how in the Gospel of John everyone talks about the "truth." John the Baptist is a witness to the truth. Jesus claims it for his own person. Even Pilate gets in on the act. And in the same narrative we have denials, perjury, and every conceivable violation of truth telling. Perhaps the biggest lie belongs to Peter,

who in an earlier chapter promises to lay down his life for Jesus!

Truth takes a beating in the Gospel of John, just as it does in the alternate truths and conspiracy theories of our day. We preach to people who are worn to the nub by all the lying. Holy Week is when we caregivers can reclaim our vocation as truth tellers. Just tell the truth. I have always loved the late Robert Jenson's answer to the question, "Who is God?": "God is whoever raised Jesus from the dead, having before raised Israel from Egypt."

Willimon: Though I lean on Anglicans for a word for Advent and Christmas, I count on you Lutherans to do cross and resurrection!

Lischer: Isn't it curious that we've hardly mentioned the pandemic—maybe we are weary with talking about it. This will be our second Easter in its shadow. Once again, everything we do together in Holy Week is missing or sharply curtailed: we will not kneel shoulder to shoulder to receive bread and wine; we will not wash our neighbor's feet; the cross will not be presented in solemn procession; we will not gather in the wee hours to await the resurrection.

How can we virtually reproduce the "night" that swallows up Judas? In my boyhood church, we took turns reading the Passion narrative in the darkness. Somber. Quiet. Then at the words, "He breathed his last," someone would slam a Bible shut. Bang! That doesn't work well on Zoom.

Willimon: While we'll create alternatives to these dramatic rituals, I worry that this year may feel like Holy Saturday—mournful, silent waiting—even when we get to the empty tomb on Sunday. It's tempting to allow the pandemic story to steal our sermons, to say, "Although we've got a new president, a promising vaccine, our evil and our infidelity still reign, what's to be done about it?" William Sloane Coffin once said to me, "Anybody can preach Good Friday. Hell, read the newspaper! It takes a gospel preacher to clench the fist and shout, 'Hey, world, he's risen whether you want him or not!'"

Lischer: I agree with Coffin's sentiment, though one doesn't preach the resurrection with a clenched fist! The risen Christ comes to us incognito. It's a peculiar thing, but after his resurrection Christ was hard to recognize, even to those who had loved him. It's the preacher's job to help believers and doubters—which pretty much includes all of us—to see him for who he truly is.

Willimon: As Jenson once noted, it's risen Christ *appearances*, not risen Christ sightings. Christ's resurrected presence is pure gift. We can't come to the risen Christ; he comes to us. And, surprise, he does. Mary Magdalene thought he was a gardener. His disciples, cowering in isolation between locked doors—there's a pandemic connection—thought he was a ghost.

Lischer: Today, Christ may appear as the doctor or nurse bending over a stricken patient; a first responder; a dedicated teacher with 20 masked third-graders; a chaplain with her prayerbook, alone at a crematorium. Incognito. It would be just like him.

Willimon: Just like him. So maybe our job—after a week of Holy Week truth telling and confronting the crucified, betrayed body of Jesus—is to stand up, point to the risen Christ bodily present among us, and joyfully preach, “There he is. He’s back!”

Lischer: Yes. Go ahead: we may grieve our way through this week, but on Thursday we celebrate the inauguration of the Eucharist with thanksgiving. On Easter Sunday we proclaim God’s victory over disease and death. God has chosen sides: life—even in a pandemic, especially in a pandemic.

Willimon: God shall get what God wants. God isn’t stumped. I know dozens of congregations that need to hear that amid so many of the disappointments and defeats of the past year. God give us the guts to obey the orders of Mark’s “young man in white” at the tomb! “Go, tell!”

Lischer: Will, do you know the poem by John Updike, “Seven Stanzas at Easter”?

Willimon: Love it. Used it once, or maybe more.

Lischer: “Make no mistake: if He rose at all / it was as His body; . . . It was not as the flowers, / Each soft Spring recurrent.” The poem warns us not to “mock God with metaphor”; instead, “Let us walk through the door” boldly.

My hope for every Holy Week, especially this one, is that together we will all walk through the door.

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