

April 3, 2015, Good Friday: Isaiah 52:13-53:12; John 18:1-19:42

by [David Keck](#) in the [March 18, 2015](#) issue

Several years ago, I wandered through the cathedral in Manila. Making my way down to the crypt, I passed a life-sized crucifix. This painted wooden image from perhaps the 18th or 19th century presents Jesus sagging limply from the cross. His head hangs down, and he looks to be very near the end. You can see how he would be thirsty. Beholding the man of sorrows from Isaiah 53, a person might even be moved to say, “It is finished.”

Everywhere on the wood, the paint is old and cracked—everywhere except the knees. There is no longer any paint there. At first glance, this seemed like just an oddity—perhaps the statue was damaged in storage. I moved on to look at the crypt itself and learn about the people buried there. I was a tourist, and tourists learn about famous people.

Later, making my way back upstairs, I saw a simply dressed Filipina woman approach the crucifix and tenderly, reverently put her hand on Jesus’ knee. She bowed her head and stood there for many moments. Then she left.

I have no idea what she prayed for. Life can be very difficult for many people in the Philippines, particularly women. At first, I felt like a tourist or even a voyeur. But then I was drawn into the mystery of her particular sorrows. Over the years, many, many people have touched this crucifix and found in their dying Lord someone who understood their suffering, someone they could pray to. The paint was gone because people had come and reached out in sorrow, love, and hope. The cross changes us—but sometimes, people can change a cross.

Growing up, I remember being told over and over again that we Protestants had crosses instead of crucifixes because we know that Jesus was raised from the dead, that the symbol of death no longer has any power over him or us. He is in heaven, no longer bound by the constraints of the flesh or the fixative power of nails.

But an empty cross tells only part of the story, and it is the other part that is so important for so many people. This crucifix tells that story—the story of Good Friday.

The lengthy Gospel reading from John takes us from the arrest to the tomb. These two chapters include betrayal, abandonment, interrogations, political indecision, vehement anger, simple brutality, and orchestrated violence. There is a range of humanity on display: Jew and Roman, slave and free, male and female, named and unnamed, famous and infamous, dedicated witnesses and cowards.

These chapters are also horrifyingly ironic—can we even count all the ironies? Here's one: entering a Roman headquarters brings defilement, but handing the Word of God over to death does not. The text is filled with people who are certain of themselves, or who put on a show of being certain. We see the irony of their words and actions, and we are compelled to ask how our own lives may not be what we think.

Such a text calls for a lifetime's commentary but also for simple, reverent silence. I think of the silence of the beloved disciple and Mary, who say nothing but who come to understand deeply. I think of the unadorned stillness of that Filipina woman.

Fortunately, many Good Friday services offer sacred silence along with the text. We attend these services not as tourists at a cathedral or as Christmas and Easter Christians. We come as those who know that part of the answer to Pilate's question, "What is truth?" is that we are all Peter, deniers of our Lord. We all belong among those who shout out, "Crucify him!"—a line some liturgies assign to the congregation. We are sinners, and we know it, and we come with sorrow for our sin, knowing that neither the Jews nor the Romans are to blame.

Yet we also come in hope and expectation—hope not only for the forgiveness of our sins, but also for our own sorrows.

Aristotle, discussing the kinds of tragedies that "work," writes that we sometimes go to the theater to see terrible things happen to a noble but flawed man, but we would never go to see terrible things happen to a good man through no fault of his own. That simply does not make for a good show; it offends our sense of justice.

And yet here we gather, hearing about awful things happening to a perfectly good man. Like the Filipina woman, we ache for his sorrows and we turn to him to make sense of our own. In this unwatchable story, important scriptures are fulfilled and ancient passages are given new meaning. Can it be that our sorrows are likewise part of something meaningful?

We trust that somehow, things might make sense, indeed will make sense—perhaps even that the ironies of this text are God’s unsettling of an unsettled world in order to resettle it, to remake it. God makes all things new, even us. These hopes remain beyond words; we dare not speak them to one another. Instead we silently listen, ponder, and hope. We tenderly put our hand on Jesus’ knee.