

Blogging toward Good Friday: Collective trauma

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I've only seen three dead bodies in my life. The first was when I was 12 years old and my grandfather died at age 69. It was the first time I ever saw my father cry. At the funeral home, my sister was brave enough to reach out and touch my grandfather's hand as it rested on his torso. Back in our seats, I asked her what his skin felt like. "Plastic," she said.

The second was 16 years later while I was in seminary. It was my first week as a student chaplain in a retirement community. Ruth was 97, and she loved to bowl. She died of a stroke, just two hours after I visited her. She sat in the same easy chair, with her head tilted to the side—as if she were merely taking a nap and all I had to do was touch her shoulder to wake her up. But she wouldn't.

The third was a man I didn't know. He was homeless. I was rushing to catch the train to the north side of Chicago. I came down to the platform and saw the paramedics surrounding him, their presence probably the only reason I noticed him. His skin was gray and lifeless. They had exhausted all their options and were beginning to unzip a body bag to place him on a gurney. As I stepped onto the train, the paramedics began to sort through the man's belongings to find some identification. It seemed routine for them; to me it was surreal.

On Good Friday, we find ourselves in a surreal state with death. We arrive at the cross, the instrument with which Jesus is executed. For the state it is a fairly routine trial, conviction, and execution—yet for the disciples it is traumatic. One minute they are traveling with Jesus, spreading the word about new life and God's presence in the world. The next they are burying their dear friend.

How did this happen so fast? I can imagine them asking themselves. Was there something we could have done to stop this? Could this happen to me?

If Jesus is killed in order to break up a growing collective movement, it's a strategy based in the power of such an event to enforce collective trauma. In John, there are numerous reactions to the situation, out of grief, fear, or complicity in sin. Judas betrays. Peter denies. Pilate defers. The crowd complies. Everyone is isolated. Trauma has taken over.

In some ways, it's a traumatic story to read, too. We ask similar questions to those of the disciples. We hope that there is some way this doesn't have to happen. We shield our eyes until Easter comes.

While we have the foreknowledge of the resurrection, Good Friday invites us to tend to our pain. We know this collective trauma well in our own time; some know it more directly than others. Our 24-hour news cycle plays out our symptoms for the world to see: war zones at home and abroad, time-warped divisions of race and class, environmental resources hoarded through force. If people are being killed in order to break up a collective movement, this succeeds by way of enforcing collective trauma.

In John's gospel, the burial of Jesus is the passion narrative's most tender and healing moment. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus come to tend and embalm Jesus' broken body. They come together even in their own brokenness to begin the healing. Even in the time between death and resurrection, collective trauma becomes collective healing.

My hope this Good Friday is that we can use this surreal in-between time to be attentive to trauma. To tend to the places where we have been harmed and where we have harmed others because of fear, grief, and complicity in sin. To touch these places in ourselves and others with the hope that healing is possible.