

April 15, Good Friday (John 18:1-19:42)

Diving into the disciples' grief invites us to be honest about our own.

by [Michael Fick](#) in the [April 6, 2022](#) issue

"I can't believe this is happening." This phrase, or one like it, often accompanies people when the reality of someone else's imminent or recent death is at hand. It seems to be a feeling that isn't dependent on the health or age of the person who is dying. We can know something is likely, even inevitable, but that doesn't mean we're ready. How could we be? The death of another brings with it the complex work of defining our relationship to that person. We experience a potent mix of love, regret, sadness, hope, and even relief. And the grieving process is neither quick nor predictable, personally or communally.

Good Friday is one of the few days in the lectionary where the Gospel text is the same every year: John 18 and 19. It's a long and detailed lection, one that has inspired all manner of artistic interpretations. Music has been composed to communicate it, dramas written to carry its deepest truths, and liturgies created to bring worshipers into the narrative that defines us as Christians. It is a text that in many ways reads us as much as we read it.

And yet, a wise mentor once reminded me: we're not re-crucifying Jesus on Good Friday. We know that Christ is risen, that the cycles of death and resurrection in our lives are not confined to three days each year. The Christian experience of death and resurrection is continuous. Every death that we experience returns us to the foot of the cross where Jesus experienced a profound sense of being forsaken. And from near or far, disciples are whispering or wailing: How can this be happening?

Jesus faces his death in a manner that can help us express our own experience of death and resurrection in the world. Though he has told his friends in more and less explicit ways that this hour is coming, like so many of us, their love for their friend makes it difficult to believe or accept. So when the soldiers arrive and the final moments of Jesus' life among them are upon them, the disciples react in ways that

so often accompany grief.

Reading this text yet again, I was surprised to recognize that I had never fully considered that it is profoundly, though not exclusively, about grief. Perhaps the pandemic ministry years have caught up with me, with many deaths and resurrections, large and small, that we've all been experiencing in our personal and communal lives.

Accompanying us this Good Friday are the people we've lost to death itself, in some cases unable to touch and be near them, wondering if they felt forsaken. But it's the other deaths, too. The canceled plans, missed holidays with friends and family, strained or absent relationships, changed dynamics with those close to us due to discord, accelerated decline in churches and other institutions we love—all these deaths, too, come alongside this remembrance of Christ's suffering and the grief of those who love him. They can't believe this is happening, and neither can we.

Like us, the disciples communicate their grief in a variety of ways. One fears sharing Jesus' fate and moves toward power and out of harm's way. Another lashes out in anger and even violence in defense of Jesus, willing to do anything to prevent his death. Some are just doing their jobs, trying not to think too hard about the implications. One closest to Jesus denies him in grief and shame, being unable to bear what's about to happen.

A religious leader passes the hard choices up the chain of command. A government official yields to angry masses. A mother and a companion stay the course, keeping their grief close without looking away. Unexpected friends step in to bury Jesus after all is finished, busying themselves through their own feelings.

In all of it, deep grief informs people's responses to Jesus' death. And surrounding us in our assemblies are similar responses to our collective grief. Anger, fear, denial, disappointment, loneliness—all will be with us in our gatherings to hear again the story of Jesus' last moments.

Given all this, I might be tempted to skip Good Friday this year and head directly for the warmth and celebration of Easter. But I know I can't skip grief. Resurrection follows a real experience of death.

Diving into the disciples' grief invites us to be honest about our own. There is good news in this Gospel reading and this holy day: that the very heart of God has known

grief like our own and lives through being forsaken. We know, even on a day like this, that Christ does not abandon disciples in their inability to believe what's happening. They are not left scattered, angry, frightened, or numb. Disciples are gathered again and again around the word and fellowship to be loved, forgiven, and empowered to live with and through their grief. This is the grace of Good Friday, that Christ trusts in God's power and love even when we struggle to do so.

When the tomb is nearby, it is Jesus who awaits us to call us forth, through the grief of the cross into resurrection life.