

This Holy Week, let's stop pretending

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It has become something of a cliché to say that faith is not just intellectual but embodied, not just words and ideas but experience and practice. At no time of the year is this clearer than Holy Week. We wave palm branches. We wash one another's feet. We stay up to keep vigil. We act out the passion and kiss the cross.

These practices are a great liturgical gift. They help us not only proclaim the stories of Holy Week but also enter them. They remind us that these are stories that involve us.

Yet these practices are not without their dangers. Living through Holy Week can feel like a game of pretend—because we already know how the story ends. We might feel like Good Friday loses some of its meaning if we are already thinking about Easter. And so we end up trying to embody the stories as if we didn't know, as if we could get closer to the cross if we could step into the disciples' sandals.

To learn to live in Holy Week, perhaps we should turn our attention to the Gospel of Mark. We don't hear much from Mark during Holy Week and Easter, partly because of the book's characteristically terse ending. There are no dramatic revelations around the table, no skeptical disciples coming to faith, and no grand commissions to baptize. Yet Rudolph Bultmann makes the startling claim that Mark actually does include a resurrection appearance: the Transfiguration. He just puts the resurrection appearance before the crucifixion.

Even if one disagrees with Bultmann's form criticism, the claim that Mark took a resurrection appearance and put it before the crucifixion should shake up the ways we think about Holy Week. It points to something Mark recognizes, but many of us seem to have forgotten. We know that the risen Christ is the crucified Christ, his wounds clearly visible. But what Mark sees is that the crucified Christ is also the risen Christ—that the cross is actually the tree of life. Mark understands that the two events need each other to make sense.

Just as the resurrection is impossible without the cross, the cross has no meaning without the resurrection. The story of a Jewish man being crucified is not good news, let alone exceptional for the time. The cross needs to be seen through the resurrection. There is no way for us to ignore Easter Sunday and think only of Good Friday.

To put it another way, Mark asks us not to pretend.

This year, many white Christians like me have had to learn not to pretend. We have had to stop pretending that this country's long history with racism ended in the 1960s, or that Islamophobia is a fringe movement, or that anti-Semitism was just a problem our grandparents dealt with. We have had to stop pretending that the arc of history bends always, inevitably toward justice.

Not pretending also means being honest about what is happening inside our churches. When Dylann Roof, a member of an ELCA congregation, murdered nine people at a historically black church last year, there were no talking heads asking moderate Christians to condemn the shooting, no protestors denouncing Christianity as anti-American. Not pretending means more than speaking out against the unfair treatment of others. It means holding ourselves to account, even when no one else will. It means not just speaking out against injustice in the world but also being honest about the racism and xenophobia in our own congregations. It means acknowledging that the brokenness of the world includes the church.

Perhaps this Holy Week we should take a cue from Mark and stop pretending. Mark invites us to see the cross, and the world, more fully. The narrative of Holy Week is not a story to be lived through chronologically. It is not an unfolding drama full of cliffhangers or a 2,000-year-old script that needs to be reenacted. Holy Week does not ask us to pretend that we can get back to the cross.

Holy Week tells us something else. It assures us that it is the living Christ who suffers with us. It shows us how the arc of history bends under the weight of the Spirit. It tells us that we are never closer to the cross than when we are gathered around the table.