March 25, Passion Sunday B (Mark 14:1-15:47; Psalm 31:9-16)

# In the hours before the Passion, the Jesus who was hidden becomes revealed.

by Benjamin J. Dueholm in the February 28, 2018 issue

*Read the author's column on the Liturgy of the Palms.*

For there is nothing that is hidden except that it might be made manifest, nor that has become concealed except that it might come out into plain sight," Jesus says in David Bentley Hart's new translation of the New Testament. Parables have a hidden meaning now but will later be made plain. Disciples are few, and their message of messianic hope and salvation reaches only those close at hand; later it will be seen and heard everywhere. And by the same token, failures and crimes that are covered up now will, in time, be revealed.

If we didn't hear Jesus say this, we could still know it from a thousand movie and book plots where a careful plan goes awry. And we could know it from every scandal that starts with a few pinholes of daylight and every public cover-up that slowly then quickly unravels. Things come out. They want to come out.

The Passion narrative is, like all of Mark's Gospel, stretched between the poles of hiddenness and openness, between the intimacy of a small group and the exposure of the crowd. Crowds have been following Jesus since Capernaum. Crowds are "astounded" and "amazed" at him, they come out "from every quarter," they listen "with delight" to his jousts with the scribes and follow him even when he tries to get away.

In these last chapters, however, we finally hear an extended episode of Jesus away from the crowds. He is in a home at table, where he is anointed—as he says, for his burial. He eats the Passover with his friends. He prays in Gethsemane and admonishes his friends. In small pericopes, the closeness of these vignettes is not especially striking. But in the context of a whole story that thrums with the interaction between the Messiah and the crowds, and with his own fitful attempts to

separate himself from them, they are poignant and unexpected. The passage later identified as the institution of the Lord's Supper contains no command to the disciples to repeat the offering of bread and wine, among themselves or with anyone else. It is instead an emotionally charged moment shared among friends, pointing to "that day" when Jesus will drink the fruit of the vine again in the kingdom of God.

In these relatively hushed and private moments, the profundity of the actions and words preserved in them comes forward. Jesus tells a dinner gathering that the woman who lavishly anoints him (here unnamed) "has done what she could." And he elaborates this modest, almost shrug-like phrase by saying that her deed will be a memorial wherever the good news is proclaimed. So with Jesus' private prediction that Peter will deny him, and its excruciating fulfillment in the courtyard of the high priest, before the servant and the bystanders. Nothing is concealed except that it might come out into plain sight. In Hart's translation, Peter "cowled himself," covering his face, to hide his weeping.

When the world comes after Jesus again, it is not with yearning or hunger or acclamation, as in Galilee, but with betrayal. And the intimate group scatters. "Those who see me in the street flee," says the psalm for the day. The reversal of Palm/Passion Sunday is not, at least in Mark's story, the crowd swinging from cheers to calls for crucifixion. It's a small group around Jesus becoming suddenly exposed—one of their own number providing the necessary intelligence—and scattered.

In this way the Jesus who was hidden becomes revealed. An armed crowd comes to find him. He appears before the chief priest, and then Pilate, and finally dressed for mockery and crucifixion before "the whole cohort." Suffering and rejection were always implicit in his words and in the way he followed John the Baptist. He foretold this explicitly only to those closest to him. So when it comes, even without the melodramatic elaboration that artists and writers would give these passages, it comes as a shock. Even his disciples flee (in one case, entirely naked). Who, being present for those events, would wish to have lingered to hear Jesus' last cry of desolation? One marvels at the perseverance of the women who do and who watch as the stone is rolled over the mouth of the tomb.

It's a hard revelation. It lacks the satisfactions of the plot where the criminal scheme unravels or the wicked are exposed to daylight. As R. S. Thomas, the Welsh priest and poet, wrote: "I will come to you in the simplest / things, in the body /of a man

hung on a tall / tree you have converted to / timber and you shall not know me.” Mark’s story is more radically unresolved than the Johannine passion we typically hear on Friday (“It is finished”). Jesus is swiftly and unceremoniously dispatched.

But outside the narrative’s frame, we can already sense its potential for completion, or at least continuation. The women at the cross and the tomb will be the living link between that terrifying revelation and everything that follows. The passerby pressed into carrying Jesus’ cross is said to be the father of Alexander and Rufus. Mark must have expected his audience to know these two men, otherwise unmentioned. Someone wanders at random into the story and yet leaves this posterity, famous enough in the little world of Mark’s church to need no explanation. There is a new intimacy in that community beyond the edge of the text, a community that has begun to see itself plainly. So it happens that the worst moment in the life of the young messianic movement contained the seeds of its remarkable continuation, and still greater manifestation to come.