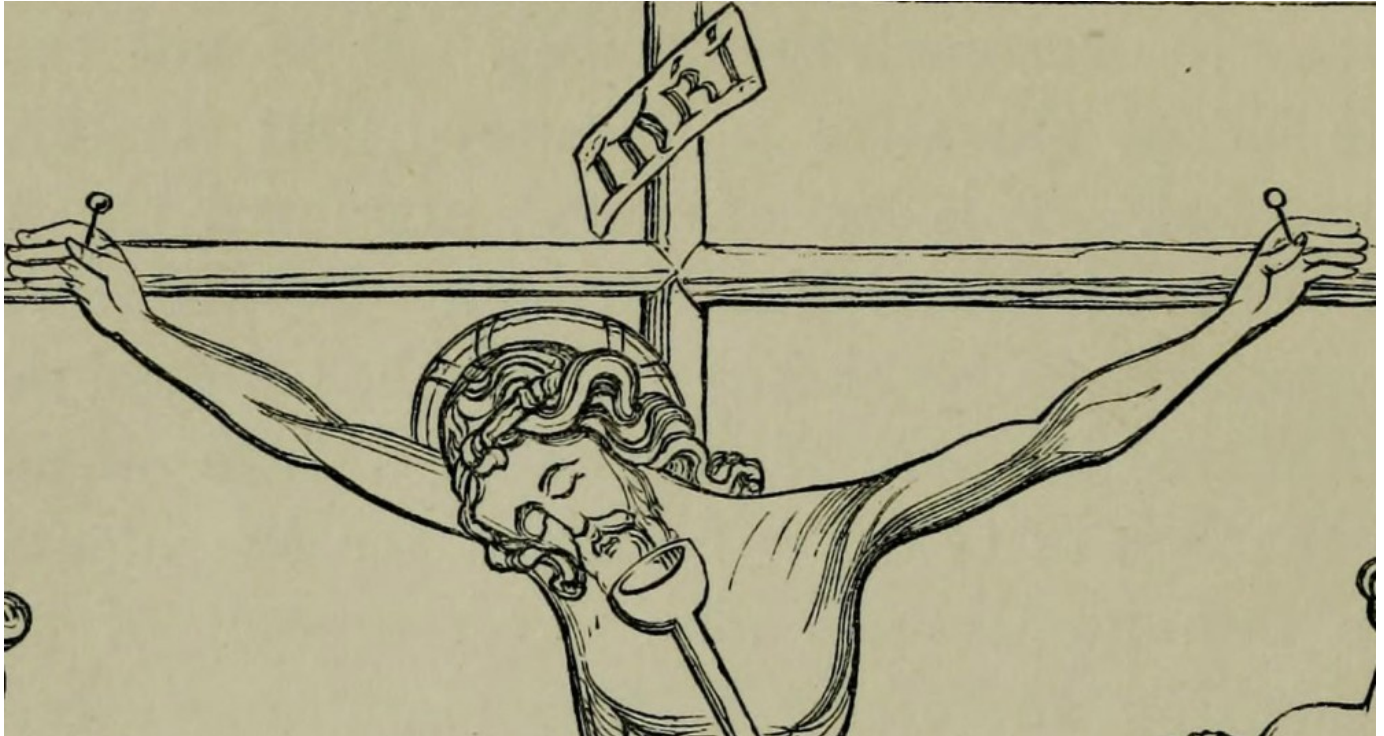


Living water isn't just a metaphor

## On the cross, Jesus needed actual water. No one gave him any.

by [Fleming Rutledge](#) in the [January 30, 2019](#) issue



Woodcut from [The history of Our Lord as exemplified in works of art](#), 1872

The esteemed short-story writer Joy Williams wrote a book of short—and I mean really short—stories called [Ninety-Nine Stories of God](#). The one called “Wet” is my favorite:

The Lord was drinking some water out of a glass. There was nothing wrong with the glass, but the water tasted terrible.

This was in a white building on a vast wasteland. The engineers within wore white uniforms and bootees on their shoes and gloves on their hands. The water had traveled many hundreds of miles through wide pipes

to be there.

What have you done to my water? the Lord asked. My living water . . .

Oh, they said, we thought that was just a metaphor.

In order to grasp the point here, it helps to recall a story from the fourth chapter of John's Gospel. Jesus is on one of his long journeys, on foot, and he comes to a town in Samaria—a territory despised by his own people, the Jews. In the heat of the day, he comes upon the well in the center of town. There he sees an outcast Samaritan woman drawing water from the well. (We know that she's an outcast because the respectable women would come to the well in the cool of the evening.) She is doubly despised: for being a Samaritan, and for having had a series of husbands. Jesus asks her to draw water for him to drink, and she does. Then he says to her that he has "a spring of living water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:14). She misunderstands, asking him to give her that living water so that she won't have to make the trip to the well every day.

I don't want to spoil Williams's little gem of a story by overanalyzing it. But notice the twist in that marvelous last sentence. "Oh . . . we thought that was just a metaphor." What a breathtaking disclosure of the way a metaphor works!

A metaphor is a small word-picture that can carry vast meanings within it. When Jesus tells the woman that he can give her "living water," he's clearly speaking metaphorically. But she misses the point—she thinks he's talking about literal water from a well. The engineers in their sterile uniforms in their dystopian laboratory miss the point, too, only they have it backward. They don't think Jesus' water applies to real drinking water. "Just a metaphor."

This is the height of irony, and the irony in Williams's little tale leads us further into the way biblical language works. The scientists in their labs have heard the story of the Samaritan woman, and they have airily dismissed it. We can imagine that there are unimaginable numbers of people dead somewhere. The idea seems to be that some kind of environmental disaster has occurred, and the engineers have water piped in from great distances, apparently not caring about the human significance of this. We might think of the city government officials in Flint, Michigan, who ignored the evidence that people with little political voice or agency were being poisoned by the local water. Perhaps some of those officials were churchgoers who never thought to wonder if there might be some analogy between Jesus' living water and literal

drinking water.

If Jesus had drunk the water in Flint, he too would have been poisoned.

Early in the Gospel of John, the story of the Samaritan woman reveals a double layer of meaning that reappears at the climax of the story on Good Friday. When the afternoon drew on, the fourth evangelist tells us, the religious authorities went to Pilate, the Roman governor, and asked that the crucified men have their legs broken so they would die faster. This was because they didn't want to leave Jesus' body on the cross on the Sabbath. As the Torah says, a body left hanging on a tree is cursed by God (Deut. 21:23). Did you get that? Cursed by God. St. Paul fastened onto that idea in his letter to the Galatians (3:13). So the religious men got permission, and the Roman soldiers came to break the legs of the men on the crosses so they would die faster.

Jesus, however, had already died, so they did not break his legs ("not a bone of him shall be broken"—John is quoting Ps. 34:20). Instead, one soldier thrust a spear into his side ("they shall look on him whom they have pierced"—John quotes Zech. 12:10), and out of the wound flowed blood and water (John 19:34). From earliest times, Christian interpreters have understood this as the sacrificial blood of the communion cup and the water as the living symbol of baptism. Thus in this one brief detail in the story, we see the death of Jesus as the origin and source of the river of life given to the church in its sacraments. Early in John's narrative, the Lord says to the Samaritan woman that he gives a "spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:14), but we don't understand this metaphor until his hour comes—his hour of being lifted up on the cross—so that the water from his side becomes what commentator Rudolf Schnackenburg has called "a stream of blessing and salvation."

There are layers of meaning here, all pointing to one truth. No human can live more than two or three days without anything to drink. That's the factual reality. So we're not just talking about metaphorical water here. The Samaritan in John's story, enslaved by her circumstances and her isolation, is dependent upon coming to the well for water. When Jesus meets her, we are told, he is weary from his long walk in the heat of the sun. The Lord has taken full human nature upon himself and experiences weakness just like us. Thirst is perhaps the ultimate human weakness; we can do without food for a while, but not water.

I can't say that I have ever experienced extreme thirst, but I've heard that it is uniquely terrible. The gift of a cup of water in Mark's Gospel is held up as the epitome of response to human need: "For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ, will by no means lose his reward" (Mark 9:41). Yet when Jesus was nailed to the cross, no one gave him so much as a single sip of water: "After this, Jesus knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the scripture might be fulfilled, saith, I thirst. Now there was set a vessel full of vinegar: and they filled a sponge with vinegar, and put it upon hyssop, and put it to his mouth" (John 19:28-29).

I wonder what brings people off the streets of the city and into sanctuaries in the middle of the day on Good Friday. I wonder if there are some who do not really understand what the church is doing: taking off an hour, or three hours, to worship a man who died most horribly, more horribly than most of us dare to imagine, and not only to die horribly but to die in shame, forsaken, derided, outcast, unable to lift a finger to help himself. What is he doing there?

What brings people off the streets to worship a man who died horribly?

There are always many more people at church on Easter Sunday than there are on Good Friday. But on Good Friday we find ourselves at the very heart and center of our Christian faith. Who is this man who is tormented, not only by extreme pain and utter degradation, but also by the most elemental form of bodily desperation—to die of thirst like a nameless migrant expiring alone in the desert along the border? In this death that he freely chooses, Jesus comes alongside the least and the lost of humanity. Even the most basic, most elemental human comfort is denied him.

I beg you to think about this. There are three men on crosses that day. All of them are in prolonged agony. All of them are suffering extreme thirst. Why should the historian bother to record the fact that Jesus said he was thirsty? According to the scriptures, he was fully human in the most fundamental sense. If, in his incarnate life, Jesus had drunk the water in Flint, Michigan, he also would have been poisoned just like us. He was completely vulnerable on the cross. He needed real water, not metaphorical water, and no one gave him any. Williams, with her remarkable imagination, permits us to see the intricate connection between *actual water*—pure mountain streams, great lakes and seas, vast oceans, all of it created by God, all of it endangered by the carelessness and greed of humankind—and the *living water* of eternal life in Jesus Christ.

The water from Jesus' side, together with the life-giving blood of the Lamb, is the metaphor for the eternal life that God gives to our human race, our race that seems more than ever to be bent on destroying itself and its beautiful planet. The interplay here between symbolism and factual reality is endlessly rich. Human beings cannot live without water. In the age to come, in the city of God that will come down from heaven, there is a river of unquenchable love, bought for us by the agony and thirst of the only begotten Son of God. Come to his water. Come to his cross. Come to his blood, shed for you . . . and find for yourselves the gift of the love that will never fail.

*This article is adapted from Fleming Rutledge's book [Three Hours: Sermons for Good Friday](#) (just published by Eerdmans), which consists of the seven sermons Rutledge delivered on March 30, 2018, at St. Thomas Church Fifth Avenue, in New York City. A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Thirsting with Jesus."*