

March 28, Passion Sunday B (Mark 14:1-15:47)

Did Easter even come last year? Will it ever come again?

by [Katherine Willis Pershey](#) in the [March 10, 2021](#) issue

Read Pershey's [column for the Liturgy of the Palms](#).

I don't even know what time means anymore. As I write this, the light is retreating, darkness extending tentacles deep into the day. My family lit two candles on our Advent wreath last night. I preached on the Magnificat to an empty sanctuary on Wednesday morning and then spent the afternoon rereading Mark's Passion narrative. I've read it six times since Thanksgiving, once snuggled up in my cozy armchair next to the twinkling lights of our Christmas tree.

Of course, for all the ways the pandemic has upended our sense of time, it isn't COVID that has me reading about Christ's death whilst the church purportedly prepares for his birth. It's the editorial schedule of the *Christian Century*. But the chronological confusion is all the more intense because in many ways, it feels as if Lent 2020 never ended—as if Easter never came.

Last year, I recorded my contributions to our virtual Easter worship service on Good Friday. I could barely sit upright in the aforementioned armchair for the searing pain in my sacrum; a large back brace prescribed to stabilize my volatile sacroiliac joint was just out of the frame. It's a vivid memory, one I'm unlikely to forget, but the content of my memory is all physical and spiritual agony. I had to reread my notes to recall what I said. Turns out, I spoke of how it only seemed that we were trapped in Good Friday, how the resurrection of Jesus Christ stubbornly swears otherwise.

I wonder if I would have said the same thing if I'd known what was coming, the ravages yet to unfold and the daily death records yet to be shattered. I've always assumed that there is no greater comfort than recalling the perpetual glory of the

resurrection. And my God, we need hope that death shall not utter the final word when death has muttered so many profanities lately. But, a confession: as I write this in December, I am only pretending to dwell with the nativity narrative, because this is what the Lord—or at least the liturgical calendar—requires of me. In grief and pain, I am not making my way to the manger but rather camping out at the foot of the cross, where I find myself oddly comforted by the perpetual agony of the Passion.

The Passion, after all, is always playing out somewhere. Unbearable betrayals, unjust accusations, bodies beaten and broken unto death. On account of my abundant privilege, this is something I have only ever really known as theory. Even in the midst of this terrible year, I spent many of my days lighting scented candles, walking the dog, playing euchre. An apocalypse softened by pleasantries. Still, the pandemic made suffering inescapable. I suppose there is mercy, however brutal, in the fact that I saw Jesus in the center of it all.

I first learned to behold Christ crucified in new ways from artist Maxwell Lawton. His painting *Man of Sorrows: Christ with AIDS* taught me more about incarnation than any Christmas pageant, more about crucifixion than any Stations of the Cross. Christ, enfolded into the relentless vulnerability of flesh, is immune to no virus. He dies again and again.

But if it is always Good Friday, it is also always the wee hours beforehand. It is still the middle of the night in the garden. Jesus is still throwing himself on the ground in anguished prayer, pleading to be spared. There's something even more painful about this scene than the scenes that follow, if we are to take psychological torment as seriously as physical torture.

And while this is happening, Jesus' disciples are—again, still—endlessly disappointing him. Even now they are falling asleep, though Jesus is begging them to stay awake. Mark says Jesus returns to them three times, but by now we know it is more. By now we know their failure is everlasting. Perpetual.

If this year has taught me anything, it's that isolation magnifies misery tenfold. It is the stories of poor souls suffering and dying alone that have cut our own souls to the quick. So here's my plea: if time is a tangled thing, if liturgically and metaphysically we are always bound to end up behind a grove of olives halfway between our frantic Lord and his weary disciples, let's gather our courage and attempt to step into the

narrative just as Peter, James, and John drift off.

I'm not quite sure how this works, never having successfully astral-projected myself across the room, let alone across the millennia. But I am confident we can do it. The church can keep vigil. We can bear witness. We can stubbornly refuse to let Christ suffer alone, wherever he suffers—in the garden, on the cross, in the hospital room, in the basement apartment.

We'll get tired. Maybe we can keep one another awake with snacks and stories. Isn't that what the church does best? We only have to hold out until Easter. How long, O Lord, until Easter finally comes?