

April 2, Maundy Thursday (Exodus 12:1–14; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26; John 13:1-17, 31b–35)

## **Overcoming the reluctance to be served requires something that looks and feels a lot like faith.**

by [Benjamin J. Dueholm](#) in the [April 2026](#) issue  
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There is an admonition attributed, I assume spuriously, to Francis of Assisi: “Preach the gospel at all times; if necessary, use words.” It pops up all the time in the church circles in which I’ve spent my life, seeming to suggest—even command—a way out of the discomfort of verbally proclaiming anything about Jesus, especially to anyone who might not already have a formal commitment to a Christian community. The content of the good news can be conveyed through loving and generous action instead.

That a message about the work of God in the person of Jesus Christ can, in fact, be proclaimed without words would likely have come as a surprise to the apostles, who were always talking about Jesus alongside their various miracles and acts of service. Even the best good works are inherently equivocal; they may be done for any number of reasons (even selfish ones), in service of any faith or none. They may even redound primarily to the reputation and benefit of the one doing them rather than to any god on whose unspoken behalf they are done. Using words is important. More than that, it’s necessary.

Perhaps I betray my Lutheran theological roots here. Or my relative comfort in the role of speaking and my relative unease in the world of, well, doing things.

Nevertheless, Maundy Thursday confronts the preacher with passages that are all about some kind of prescribed action. The theorists of religion tell us (or at least they did back when I paid attention to them) that ritual actions tend to be older than ritual scripts. The story around the action can change, but the action itself is deeply engrained.

The Exodus narrative takes time to specify the actions of a meal to be eaten on the night of the Hebrews’ escape from Egypt and then each year after as a commemoration. This might be taken as evidence for a meal practice that was already up and running before the Pentateuch was ever written down. Paul’s letter to the Corinthians appears to be doing this in real time, as Paul explains the source of a Christian meal tradition whose meaning, according to Paul, had already become obscured. And John’s Gospel records a dramatic dialogue around the action of washing feet, which Jesus tells his disciples to repeat amongst themselves. Maundy Thursday is built around three recorded ritual actions, each with at least the rudiments of a ritual script.

The first two became deeply embedded in Judaism and Christianity, respectively. Foot washing never really caught on. The story itself suggests why that might have been. Peter is notoriously unwilling to have his feet washed, finding it to be an embarrassing, even grotesque reversal of the proper relationship of a lord and a subordinate. He doesn’t have any objection to foot washing as such, but for his teacher to do it for him rather than vice versa is an affront.

The hesitancy and discomfort I’ve observed (in myself and those whom I serve) when it comes to the once-a-year invitation to foot washing is more general: It’s about the intimacy and vulnerability of our feet. But it’s a recognizable if distant descendant of Peter’s anxiety. There are things that it is hard to let others do for us. That

difficulty is related on a deep psychological level to the fear of needing, and the perhaps greater fear of actually having, a savior. Overcoming that reluctance to be served requires something that looks and feels a lot like faith. Jesus has said over and over who he is and what he is doing for his disciples and for the whole world by this point in John's story. Now he insists on using something other than words.

In the practice that has been handed down to me, the Maundy Thursday liturgy is really all about these weight-bearing actions. Most of the time the declaration of forgiveness stops with words, but on Maundy Thursday the pardon is proclaimed along with the laying of hands on each person's head. The altar is cleaned up after each Sunday service, but on Maundy Thursday the liturgy ends with the stripping of the altar over the speaking or chanting of Psalm 22. The captivity of Jesus is starkly represented by the emptying of everything in the chancel that isn't nailed down. In between, there is the meal that Paul describes.

And there is, in many churches, the strained, awkward moment when we are invited to take off our shoes and put our feet into the hands of someone whose task, most of the time, is to tell us about Jesus. If you've ever done this, either as the one washing or especially as the one being washed, you know that there are some truths that even words can't fully convey.