

April 3, Good Friday (John 18:1–19:42)

Jesus is crucified while the world goes on as usual.

by [Benjamin J. Dueholm](#) in the [April 2026](#) issue

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The story is told of Oscar Wilde that at his university Greek examination, he was given the 19th chapter of John's Gospel to translate extemporaneously. He made his translation quickly and fluently. When told he could stop, he demurred and quipped, "I want to find out how it ends."

Everything that happens in the two chapters of this Passion narrative has long been iconic. Even as background knowledge of scriptural events and idioms ebbs away in American culture, many of the scenes here have remained familiar. Jesus is arrested in the garden, at the cost of Malchus's ear. Jesus is arraigned before the high priest. Peter denies knowing Jesus before the cock crows. Pilate asks Jesus, "What is truth?" Jesus is flogged, stripped, and mockingly dressed in a purple robe and a crown of thorns. Jesus is crucified between two other victims. Jesus dies with the words, "It is finished." His side is pierced. He is taken down and buried in an unused tomb.

Each incident is the subject of countless paintings, carved altarpieces, poems, dramas, theological expositions, and meditations. And each is placed, so to say, in the foreground. I have long been haunted by Caravaggio's *The Denial of St. Peter*, which shows the apostle with his accusers in extreme close-up, his hands ironically turned inward against himself and his face furrowed and turned slightly aside with dissembling. It's as if nothing else in the whole wide world is happening.

That is one aspect of the story, particularly as John writes it. The arrest, trial, and crucifixion of Jesus are acts of high cosmic drama, pulling everyone around them and even the natural world into their narrative. For John, human beings are like graphite shavings arrayed in a pattern by the presence of Jesus' magnetism.

It is harder to capture the other side of the story, which is how mundane it is. While John shows the city's leaders scheming against Jesus, the scheme plays out chaotically. We see how things might have gone differently. The soldiers may have thought that their own ears were too important to risk just to capture a Galilean holy man. Pilate might have made a different choice. Perhaps if Jesus had deigned to give his question about truth a fascinating enough answer, Pilate might have thought it wise to spare him. Zealous wonder-workers from the country could have been in fashion. Like all horror stories, it's not far from comedy.

Early in the passage, John recalls that Caiaphas, the chief priest for the year, had said it was better for one person to die for the people. This is the classic example of John's taste for dramatic irony: Caiaphas wants to prevent the city from suffering a Roman crackdown on seditious activity and thinks it wise to offer Jesus up to avoid unnecessary death, but in so doing he fulfills the larger purpose of God to use Jesus' death to bring about life and salvation for all of humanity.

But I find myself stuck on the mundanity of Caiaphas. He does what leaders do, after all. They calculate better and worse so that they might avoid the worse. They accept reality and its inevitable suffering and injustice and opt for harm reduction. He's thinking about tomorrow, about the budget, about his dinner. The fate of one rabble-rousing preacher is not the only thing going on. He knows how the story ends but wants to think beyond it.

More than any other part of the lectionary, the Holy Week services invite both preacher and hearer to place themselves somewhere in the story. I've often experienced the Passion narratives, both on Good Friday and on Palm Sunday, in the form of a dramatic dialogue, with the congregation taking the parts where people are mocking Jesus or calling for his crucifixion. Here we are again, giving voice to those dreadful sadists who cry out "prophesy" or "crucify," who spit and strike and throw dice for garments. Aren't we all just the worst?

To be clear, I love and welcome this. I'm sure there are scrupulous Americans for whom this is psychologically difficult and burdensome, but I don't see our culture as suffering from an overall surfeit of responsibility for the world's evils and cruelties. To tell myself one or two days per year that I am most definitely capable of taking a heel turn in the foreground of someone else's tragedy is no more than what's necessary.

But if there is surprise in this annual commemoration, it is likelier to come from that other aspect, the mundanity. Even the cruelest soldiers were probably more bored than malicious. Even the crowds probably wanted to go home and get on with life. Even Caiaphas had bigger things to worry about. Both Caravaggio and Wilde died young and in exile. Everyone knows how the story ends.