

Sermon for Maundy Thursday

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Some of y'all already know this, but last week was a tough one. We woke last Thursday morning to find one of our dogs, the big loud one, Lola, we woke Thursday morning to find that she had died in her sleep. It was a terrible way to start the day. Our morning routines were completely derailed as we sat on her bed, head in my lap, as we pet her and tried to figure out what had happened. Before sundown, we dug a grave, deep enough to keep scavengers at bay, and then we covered it with stones just to make sure nothing could get to her. And the pile of stones just kept growing until we'd built a mound big enough to hint at some Anglo-Saxon hoard beneath the earth. No hoard, only Lola, a sheet she was wrapped in, and a rope toy clutched to her chest. When it happened, in one of my more lucid moments between waves of grief, I caught myself getting a little annoyed with the poor pup, wishing she could've waited until after Holy Week had passed. But I'm already beginning to feel a sense of gratitude for her timing. No, it wasn't convenient, it never is. But entering this week with the rawness of grief still bare, I've been feeling something new in this season.

In years passed, I've wondered a lot about the tenderness of the foot washing and the meal shared with friends. I've explored the triumphs and failures of Gethsemane. I've thought a lot about the desolation of tomorrow. But last week, I wondered what happened between the time I went to sleep to the time I rose, how such a loss could happen when I wasn't even watching. And that makes me wonder about tonight. After we've cleaned our feet, after we eat as a community, after the altar goes bare and the lights go out, once we're all home and quiet and the covers come up to our chins, what happens then? Before the sun rises, after the trial and before the whips, there's an entire night.

Peter's denying any association with the condemned man, but what of the others? Where's Thomas? Is Andrew watching? Is Paul delighting in the verdict? Is anyone awake, and if not, how could they sleep knowing what's coming? And I wonder, do they actually know? Do they actually know what's coming? Or do they rise in the morning only to see the last nails driven into the beams of an empty cross soon to be filled, the reality of their dear friend's coming fate only then hammered home? The truth is, I don't know. But I do know they loved him, dearly, and I imagine they spent the night asking themselves all the unfair questions we ask when tragedy strikes. Yes, he knew we loved him. Yes, we were lucky to have him, and yes, we did right by him, mostly. And no, there's nothing we could've done differently, not really, nothing that would've changed where this road led. Our night is bare while Jesus sits alone in a cell, and all we can do is hope he knows we care.

I mentioned my dog Lola earlier because, when I was asking myself all those unfair questions, I had this reminder that, while she was as stubborn as they come, she was also just a dog, a creature that relied on me and needed me to do everything from fixing her breakfast to changing her bandages. And it makes me wonder about Jesus. Sure, he absolutely has his own agency and can feed himself and make his own decisions and all that. He's not a dog. But, he lived kindly and he lived off the kindness of others, sleeping in other people's homes, eating other people's food. He was innocent as a person could be, the kind of innocent that gets overlooked as naive. He needed us to care for him. And tonight, all he'll have in that cell with him is God. No small consolation, but still, those closest to him can't get any closer than the other side of a stone wall.

Once Jesus set foot on this road on Sunday, there was no other place this week could lead, but still, I can't help but wonder. Is this the night, is this the year, that Jesus breaks free? And what, when we close our eyes and rise again, what does tomorrow bring?