

Good Friday
COVID-19 2020 (via Zoom)
April 10, 2020
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI

In 1873 nuns from the Sisterhood of St. Mary went to Memphis, Tennessee, at the request of the Episcopal Bishop Charles T. Quintard, to establish a school for girls adjacent to the Cathedral of St. Mary. Not long after they arrived, the sisters were confronted by an epidemic of yellow fever and began to care for the sick. Yellow fever came roaring back in 1878. The sisters stayed in Memphis to continue to minister to the sick while others fled the city. Sister Constance and six other sisters, and a number of Memphis clergy ministered to the victims of the deadly disease. More than 5,000 people died, including Sister Constance on Sept. 9, 1878, Sister Thecla on Sept. 12, Sister Ruth on Sept. 17, and Sister Francis on Oct. 4. The high altar at the Cathedral of St. Mary in Memphis is a memorial to the four martyred sisters, and the sisters are commemorated each year on September 9. (Info from *Holy Women, Holy Men*)

I've had these nuns on my mind these last few weeks. I think about their dedication to the sick and the poor. I think about the way in which they risked their lives in the service of their God. And I can't help but think about the parallels between their story and the stories being told in hospitals all over this city, state, country, and world. People are sick. People will die. And there will be others who find themselves called to help the most vulnerable at the risk of their own lives.

Death is often an abstraction for me. I'm in relatively good health. I live in a relatively safe home. I am right in the exact center of my middle age. I have health insurance. I can live in a comfortable avoidance of the topic.

But death is on my mind more right now. And maybe it is on yours as well. Every newspaper website has some kind of death tracker on it—a macabre reminder that we are living through the middle of a global pandemic. As the numbers increase, I wonder: when will it be someone I know. My family? My neighbor? My church? Good Friday is a liturgical opportunity each year to be closer to the reality of death. But this year, I'm not sure we need it as much as at other times. It seems to me that, like Sister Constance tending the sick in Memphis in the 1800s, death is closer to us right now than it has been for a long time.

At Christmas, we often talk about the miracle of the Incarnation: this idea that God has come to spend time in the flesh. We wax poetic about the different ways in which God becomes fully human. Jesus loves. Jesus laughs. Jesus gets angry. Maybe Jesus falls in love, I don't know. The scriptures are pretty brief about all that. We also say that Jesus dies. Though we are quick to skip to the good stuff—the Easter morning sunrise stuff.

What would it be like if we spend some time with the idea that our savior Jesus became intimately acquainted with death? The Gospel story is often framed in a way that shows Jesus as

the innocent that was murdered by a corrupt state and a corrupt religious establishment. And while this is true, today I am wondering more about the man who simply knows he is going to die soon. The man who is faced with pain, with separation, and with coming helplessness and eventual oblivion. How many people in our world right now are able to relate to that story. There are bodies in makeshift refrigeration semi trucks outside hospitals in New York. People in this world are coming close to death in a way that most of us have not experienced.

Here's the thing: God has. Everywhere that someone is crying right now in this world, scared of death and worried about forces out of their control: God is there. On every stretcher, connected to every ventilator, next to every mother who cannot feed her child because of a global recession, Christ is right there crucified. God knows the pain of death. God knows the harsh realities of a life that is too short. Christ walks alongside sisters who minister to the sick in Memphis and respiratory therapists who minister to the sick today. God knows a lot about death.

It might be that we forget. It might be that we need the reminder that this life is finite, is sacred. We might need a reminder that it can be cruel and it can be harsh. We need the reminder of the cross.

At my last parish, on Good Friday, we could bring out a large cross during the Good Friday service with lots of cushions in front of it for kneeling—a bit like we do at St. Mark's. And I remember sitting there wondering who would come up to kiss the cross and then to kneel at it, laying her sins at the foot of its unyielding wood. I remember being really surprised when a well dressed financial consultant, with her pearls and pencil skirt, walked up and dropped to her knees, eyes beginning to tear up. I was amazed at the power of the cross to connect her to the difficult feelings in this life—the fear, the pain, the dread of mortality. And in that moment, I knew that God was right there with her kneeling because God knows that cross. God knows that death.

We will have plenty of time on Easter to talk about the ways in which God redeems death. But for today, I want to offer to you the idea that God knows death—whether it looks like a nun walking through an emergency sick ward, whether it looks like a messiah being killed by a cruel state, or whether it looks like a tearful woman, wrestling with sin and death while on her knees in a moment of profound communion with God. Death is woven into every part of this life, and moments like we're living through now make that more clear than ever. And even so, God is in the midst of all of it, walking, loving, and understanding right alongside us. Amen.