

# Hanging upon the Words of the Crucified

Holy Week and Easter at Christ Church  
Windsor, Nova Scotia



Rogier van der Weyden c. 1510

Fr. David Curry  
April 2023

"All the people hung upon his words"

It is the challenge of Holy Week and of our lives in faith. We are to hang upon the words of the one who hangs upon the cross for the salvation of the world. The Passion of Christ is all our interest. The Passion of Christ crucified is the fullest attestation of the Incarnation. He suffers for us in what he has from us in body and soul. Redemption is not a flight from the world or the body as if it were evil. It is the redemption of the world and of our fallen humanity.

We confront ourselves in all of the contradictions that belong to sin and evil. Palm Sunday marks the beginning of one long liturgy that culminates in the Resurrection. It marks the beginning of the intensity of the Passion through the reading of all four accounts of the Passion. We are meant to hang upon every word; in short, to listen attentively and to find ourselves in the madness of crowds. Like the exodus journey of the ancient Hebrews, we are meant to learn from the greater exodus of the Son to the Father. The Passion teaches us "two vast, spacious things," as the poet George Herbert puts it, namely, sin and love. Both go together. The paradox of the Passion is the paradox of the Christian faith. It is only through sin that we know love. "God commendeth his love towards us, in that, while we were sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5.8). Only so can we learn what it means to be human, to know even as we are known in the all-embracing love of God for us. But only if we hang upon the words of Christ who hangs upon the cross in love for us and for our redemption.

Palm Sunday highlights the deep meaning of the Passion by revealing to us the contradictions of our humanity. We who cry out "Hosanna to the Son of David" in exaltation and praise then turn about and cry "crucify." "Let him be crucified! Let him be crucified." We are in this story. It is a powerful and necessary indictment of our humanity, of each of us in the folly of ourselves. For in one way or another we all have an incomplete and false understanding of ourselves whether in overstating our faults or our virtues. On the one hand, we are too much with ourselves, and on the other hand, quite mistaken about ourselves. We see but "in a glass darkly."

To be aware of this is the beginning of our learning. It is, to put it another way, to know that we do not know, even about ourselves. But that is a beginning. That is to know something which impells the greater journey of learning through the greater wilderness of Christ's Passion. The greater wilderness is the wilderness of human sin in all of its wildness and violence, its confusion and disarray. Holy Week confronts us with the fullest and most compelling picture of our disorder and disarray. For only so can we learn the greater good of God's love for us.

The American philosopher of the psychology of religion, William James, calls attention to the "twice-born," those who are, in some sense, born again. What he means is the awakening to a larger understanding of reality rather than remaining either in a naive optimism about life or in a fatalistic pessimism. The latter, a dominant feature of maritime culture, now extends to a collective and global sense of hopelessness about all of the forms of human life and culture. Those who are twice-born, he suggests, hold onto the essential "goodness of being in the very teeth of suffering and evil".<sup>1</sup> Holy Week names that sense of suffering and evil as sin. We are meant to see ourselves in the madness of crowds at the center of which is Christ as victim and priest.

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and its Critics*, Norton Co. New York, 1991, p. 291.

Nothing is more counter-culture. Nothing highlights more tellingly the truth of the Christian Faith as completely counter to our contemporary dystopias. The philosopher and sociologist, René Girard, long before the current confusions and assertions of intersectional identitarian politics, noted that the biggest problem for our world was not globalization but the ideology of victimization, seeing ourselves as victims of one thing or another. The paradox of Holy Week is simply this: we are not the victims but the victimizers. Christ is the victim who willingly embraces all of the sins of the world. In so doing, the radical nature of love is revealed to us. Upon him is visited all of our follies and sins made visible in his body on the cross. Even the Resurrection cannot hide the marks of the Passion. They become the signs and tokens of divine love made visible in the body of Christ, the crucified and risen Lord.

We have returned to 'big church' today in time for Holy Week and Easter. The very architecture of the church building teaches us about sin and love. For we pass under the rood screen to the altar. Rood is an old English word for the cross. We only come to the banquet of heavenly love through the cross and passion of Christ. This is what the building and our liturgy makes explicit. It is what we learn in the journey of faith, signed with the sign of the Cross in our baptisms, absolved and blessed with the sign of the Cross, and partakers of Christ's sacrifice on the Cross in the sacrament of the altar.

The "two vast, spacious things", which "behoves" us, meaning that it is incumbent upon us "to measure", meaning to learn, are "sinne and love." But how? Holy Week shows us.

Who would know Sinne, let him repair  
Unto Mount Olivet; there shall he see  
A man so wrung with pains, that all his hair,  
His skinne, his graments bloudie be.  
Sinne is that presse and vice, which forceth pain  
To hunt his cruell food through ev'ry vein.

Mount Olivet marks the start of Christ's preparation for his Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem but it is also the place of the garden of Gethsemane, the place of Christ's agony of soul that anticipates the agony of the Cross. Far greater than all the various forms of human knowing, Herbert suggests, is learning about sin and love. Thus sin but so too love.

Who knows not Love, let him assay  
And taste that juice, which on the crosse a pike  
Did set again abroach; then let him say  
If ever he did taste the like.  
Love is that liquor sweet and most divine,  
Which my God feels as bloud; but I, as wine.

Herbert's poem, *The Agonie*, unites our atonement in the Passion of Christ and the Eucharist, emphasizing the dialectic of sin and love which belongs to the Christian pilgrimage. Without the one we cannot learn the other. Only by hanging on the words of Christ in the pageant of the Passion do we learn the way of love. It can only be through sacrifice and service, the sacrifice and service of Christ. The Passion reveals the love of God which redeems our wounded and broken humanity. This is our good and our joy.

Hanging on the words of Christ will be our challenge this week. The text belongs to the second lesson at Evensong for today, read along with the first lesson from Isaiah, the fourth suffering servant song (Is. 52.13-53 end), which has shaped both the Jewish and the Christian imaginary. The context is precisely our sin and evil and the goodness of God in Christ. "He was teaching daily in the temple," Luke tells us. Teaching is often dangerous. "The chief priests and the scribes and the principal men of the people sought to destroy him; but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people hung upon his words" (Luke 19. 47-48). Only by hanging upon his words can we learn what God wants us to learn. Such is the deep wonder of the Passion.

"All the people hung upon his words"

Fr. David Curry  
Palm Sunday, 2023

“All the people hung upon his words”

The readings at Morning and Evening Prayer on Monday in Holy Week complement in wonderful ways the Eucharistic readings. We hang upon the words of Hosea, the great love-prophet of the Hebrew Scriptures. He bids us tonight to “take with you words and return to the Lord,” having reminded us this morning of God’s words to us in our disobedience and folly.

I am the Lord your God  
From the land of Egypt;  
You know no God but me,  
And beside me there is no saviour.  
It was I who knew you in the  
Wilderness,  
In the land of drought.

But in our prosperity, he says, we forget God. It is from Hosea that we have the lines from 1 Corinthians 15 used in the Burial Office about “Death being swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?” But God does not forget us. In the awareness of our sins we learn the love of God. “Whoever is wise, let him understand these things; whoever is discerning, let him know them.” These passages contribute to the beginning of Christ’s farewell discourse in John’s Gospel (ch. 14) which is really about preparing the disciples for his passion & death, his resurrection and ascension; in short, the radical meaning of Christ’s going to the Father and about our learning the love of each for the other. The Passion teaches us the radical meaning of Christ as “the way, the truth and the life” through our being gathered into his love for the Father. That is the underlying principle of the Passion.

These office readings inform our understanding of “the beginning of the Passion according to St. Mark” framed by the broken alabaster box of ointment of spikenard poured out upon Christ’s head - a sign of love in repentance - and by the tears of Peter at his betrayal of Christ. The focus is on Christ in our midst bearing the faults and follies of our betrayals whether explicitly like Judas and Peter or through our weakness in not being able to watch even one hour with him in Gethsemane. The alabaster box that is broken open prepares us for the breaking of his heart and body on the Cross. This beginning of the Passion convicts us of the limitations and the outright betrayals of our love of God and one another but only to move us to contrition and tears of sorrow. “Whoever is wise, let him understand these things.”

“All the people hung upon his words”

Fr. David Curry  
Monday in Holy Week  
April 3rd, 2023

“All the people hung upon his words”

What words? The Nicene Creed says that “he suffered and was buried, And the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures.” By Scriptures, the Creed does not mean the Christian Scriptures of the New Testament but the Hebrew Scriptures, what Christians have come to call the Old Testament. Luke’s text however is about the words of Christ. Holy Week sets before us the Passion of Christ in all of its intensity and complexity. Yet the writings of the Hebrew Scriptures help us greatly in grasping the radical nature of his Passion, Death and Resurrection. They provide the ground for the credal witness to Christ crucified.

Thus on Tuesday in Holy Week at Matins we read the first servant song of Isaiah, a passage which is understood in reference to Christ in the Christian understanding and to Israel in the Jewish understanding. Christ unites both, we might say. He accomplishes or fulfills what belongs to the vocation of Israel as “a covenant to the people, a light to the nations,” even as Simeon identifies the child Christ in exactly the same language based upon exactly the same passage. And the redemptive nature of Christ’s work is also signaled here: opening the eyes of the blind, bringing out the prisoners from the dungeon and from the prison those who sit in darkness. These are the pilgrimage themes of illumination and purgation, of liberation from the prison of ourselves.

The reading from Wisdom tonight complements the first servant song from Isaiah and highlights the theme of Christ as the victim, the righteous one whose very being excites the wrath and envy of those who seek his destruction. For wherever the good is sought there too is the devil hard at work but always as a negative force, always as negating the goodness of being but as such reasoning blindly and foolishly. These texts throw light on the continuation of Jesus’s farewell discourse in the 15th chapter of John’s Gospel.

Even more they complement and deepen our understanding of the continuation of the Passion according to St. Mark which is a pretty full picture of human evil and the miscarriage of justice, of human cruelty and abuse and mockery which culminates in the crucifixion and the word, the one word of the crucified in both Matthew and Mark. “My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me.” We are meant to hang on that word of the one who hangs on the Cross and feels to the fullest possible extent the reality of sin and evil, feeling it more that we can imagine because of his greater goodness. We are meant to feel his sense of utter abandonment and alienation which is nothing less than what we have visited upon him in our abandonment and alienation from God.

What, then, is the good for us in the face of this awful spectacle of suffering and evil, of sin par excellence in several different registers? Simply this. The one word that comes out of the Centurion in seeing the crucified Christ. We are to hang upon the words of Christ that we might be able to say with the Centurion that “truly this man was the Son of God.” That is to profess what we proclaim in the Creed about the crucified Christ who “suffered and was buried, and the third day rose again from the dead.” But only if we hang upon his word of desolation and know ourselves as its cause and truth.

“All the people hung on his words”

Fr. David Curry  
Tuesday in Holy Week, 2023

“All the people hung upon his words”

What words? Whose words? Those questions take on a certain poignancy of meaning in the service of *Tenebrae*. The Latin for darkness or shadows the ancient services of *Tenebrae* were anticipatory of the three great holy days, the *Triduum Sacrum*, of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday. The service of Mattins was sung solemnly the evening before each of those days. This reminds us that Holy Week is not simply a linear sequence of events but a cluster or crowd of events that belong to the credal understanding of Christ's Passion, Death and Resurrection, events that are all interrelated doctrinally and which inform each other. The Passion, Death and Resurrection of Christ cannot be understood independently and in separation from each other.

*Tenebrae* in the modern practice anticipates the Mattins of Maundy Thursday but includes a number of psalms and canticles that point us to the Resurrection. It is essentially a psalm office. The Psalter is the Hymn and Prayer Book of the Jews and of Christians. Thus many of the words we are meant to hang upon in an attentive and serious way are the words of the psalms. That is intriguing and poignant because the psalms present us with a number of different voices: the voices of our humanity in its distresses and fears, its disorder and violence; the voice of God in judgment and compassion; and the voice of Christ both as suffering victim in his humanity and as seeking our good. The psalter, as Calvin observes, presents us with an anatomy of the soul. We are meant to learn things about ourselves in relation to the truth of God. We are, yet again, learning the great lessons of sin and love in their interrelation.

Thus *Tenebrae* draws us dramatically into the Passion through the power of the psalms and the canticles, scripture songs which comment on the things of the Passion and human redemption. We are meant to find ourselves, our own souls, in these psalm prayers and hymns at the same time as we are meant to find ourselves in the deep embrace of God's love for us and for our good.

The psalms of *Tenebrae* complement the first Mattins lesson for Maundy Thursday from *The Lamentations of Jeremiah* understood as the voice of Christ addressing us from the Cross revealing to us our rejections of God's Word and truth made visible in the crucified. Thus it is Christ speaking directly to us about our evil and our indifference. “Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow which was brought upon me, which the Lord inflicted on the day of his fierce anger.” Powerful words and images that reveal Christ as bearing our sins in his own body, words that convict us.

The second Mattins lesson is the high priestly prayer of Jesus, as it is sometimes called, from *John 17*. It signals beautifully and powerfully the idea of the atonement, our being at one with God and with one another in the unity and distinction of the Son and the Father in the bond of the Holy Spirit. This is the doctrine which belongs to our life in Christ, to our incorporation into Christ, to our co-inherence in God and with God. It highlights the theme of the interrelation of glory and suffering. It speaks of the idea of the fulfillment of the Scriptures, meaning the Hebrew Scriptures, and as well the exact words of Christ who is the Word and Son of the Father. “I have given them,” he says, “thy word,” the word of the Father which he is. He gathers us into his love for the Father.

O righteous Father, the world has not known thee, but I have known thee; and these know that thou hast sent me. I made known to them thy name, and I will make it known, that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them.

This is what we are meant to learn from Holy Week; to be convicted of sin and to be convinced of love. Our *Tenebrae* service ends with *The Beginning of the Passion according to St. Luke* which offers a very intense and interior understanding of Christ both in terms of what is said at the Last Supper and in the garden of Gethsemane. Luke's painterly and poetic touch encourages us to feel Christ's agony in the garden as the prelude to his agony on the Cross. "And being in agony, he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground." It is a powerful image that prepares us for the intensity of the Passion where literally water and blood will pour forth from the wounded side of Christ.

We are meant, however, to be convicted like Peter not just by what we see but by how Christ looks at us. The beginning of the Passion in Luke's account includes the story of Peter's betrayal of Christ. Luke introduces a unique and powerful image. "The Lord turned," he says, "and looked upon Peter." In hanging upon Luke's word here we feel something of what Peter felt in remembering the word of the Lord, that "before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice. And Peter went out, and wept bitterly." If we hang upon his words in holy remembrance we too shall weep bitterly now in sorrow and then in joy. But only if our hearts are moved by the look of Christ. His look is not condemnation but love and mercy. It anticipates Christ's first word from the Cross which Luke gives us in the continuation of the Passion. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Ultimately, *Tenebrae* anticipates the *Triduum Sacrum* to bring us to Christ hanging on the Cross. Surely it is our task to hang upon the words which reveal us to ourselves and show God's greater love in Christ's sacrifice for us. By hanging on his words, may his words and love dwell more deeply in us.

"All the people hung upon his words"

Fr. David Curry  
*Tenebrae*, 2023

“All the people hung upon his words”

Luke gives us three of the seven last words from the Cross. In some sense they shape the drama of salvation with a certain kind of intensity and poignancy. They are words which reveal us to ourselves as sinners at the same time as they reveal the deep love of God. That dialectic of sin and love is the drama of Maundy Thursday, the beginning of the *Triduum Sacrum*.

We are meant to hang upon the words of Christ in the intimacy of the Last Supper as we heard last night at *Tenebrae*. One of the important features of Maundy Thursday is that it connects powerfully and essentially the Passion and the Eucharist, the celebration of the Christian Passover, if you will. In both we confront the spectacle of our betrayals of ourselves and God. As Christopher Lasch puts it, “the spiritual discipline against self-righteousness is the very essence of religion.” Nothing could be more self-critical than Holy Week. “The nature of religion,” he notes, is “to console, but, first of all, to challenge and confront.” We have forgotten this in what has become for our culture and our churches ‘the triumph of the therapeutic’ and now ‘the tyranny of the therapeutic’, as if our self-esteem were the highest good.

Holy Week and Maundy Thursday challenges that sense of the self in a way that is profoundly counter-culture. It is not about ourselves as the victims but as the victimizers because of sin and evil. We confront our betrayals of Christ and thus of ourselves in the scene at the Last Supper which Maundy Thursday reminds us about by way of the epistle reading from 1st Corinthians (as well as the Evensong second lesson from John 13). It is the betrayal of the fellowship of friends. We cannot celebrate the Eucharist without recalling our betrayals of that fellowship. “In the same night that he was betrayed,” the eucharistic prayer says; that same night is *this night*. Every Eucharist places us in the upper room where Christ carries himself in his hands and gives himself to us who are his betrayers.

This kind of self-criticism belongs to the good of the Passion. It is through confronting the limitations of our humanity in all the forms of our fallenness and sin that we learn the greater love of God for our humanity. It is all about confronting ourselves and being challenged by the words of Christ. That and that alone is our comfort. Our good intentions are not enough whether it is in the garden of Gethsemane or in the high priest’s house of the temple precincts. We may want to watch with him in companionship but are too weak. We may want to bear witness to him but betray him like Peter. We confront ourselves in these scenes in the hopes that the look of Christ upon us as upon Peter may move us to contrition and sorrow.

The continuation of the Passion according to St. Luke is not a pretty picture. It reveals the all too common acquiescence of authority to the power of emotions in the figure of Pilate, a miscarriage of justice par excellence, since, as he says, both he and Herod “have found nothing worthy of death hath been done by him.” We fear the power of the mob seemingly unaware of our own acquiescence to the mob in ourselves. Simon, a Cyrenian, is compelled as Matthew and Mark put it, forced as Luke suggests, to carry Jesus’ cross to Calvary. It is not about our willingness to bear the Cross and yet bearing the Cross becomes the essence of our Christian vocation. It means that we are meant to share in Christ’s passion, to suffer with him who suffers for us.

What makes this possible is not anything in ourselves for that would be the folly of self-righteousness. What makes this possible are the words upon which we are meant to hang on this very night, the words which Luke gives us in his account of the Passion. They are the words of the most compelling yet gentle rebuke, the words of our redemption. With Luke’s three

words of Christ from the Cross we are gathered dramatically and intimately into the endless life of God. His words begin and end with an address to the Father.

“Father, forgive them for they know not what they do” is the first word. The whole spectacle of betrayals is about a kind of ignorance. Sin is disobedience, yes, but it is also our ignorance in denying what we have been given to know, a betrayal of ourselves as made in God’s image as rational and spiritual creatures. God seeks our good and we negate it in all of the forms of sin which Holy Week reveals to us.

Yet this day is called Maundy Thursday. Maundy is the englishing of *mandatum* meaning commandment. “A new commandment, I give unto you, that you love one another”, Jesus says. How exactly is it new? Because in Christ the love of God and the love of one another is perfectly united. His loving service and sacrifice which counters the culture of death and domination. Only in confronting the limitations of our fallen humanity can we begin to learn the radical love of Christ who calls us to service and sacrifice not on the basis of any principle of self-sufficiency or self-righteousness in ourselves but through his grace at work in us.

The second word is also from Luke. “Today,” Jesus says to the penitent thief who has asked Jesus to remember him, “thou shalt be with me in paradise.” Paradise here is not a return to the garden in the manner of Joni Mitchell’s Woodstock because we *can’t* get back to the garden. This is the greater paradise of human redemption, not an earthly paradise but the paradise of God’s presence in our lives, he in us and we in him. Remember me, the thief says. We seek God’s mindfulness of us through our being mindful and attentive to his words. Hanging on his words is about that kind of attention and mindfulness. It is also about self-criticism, an awareness of our sins. The penitent thief doesn’t presume any innocence or righteousness or privilege on his part. He simply seeks the mercy of God in Christ and his grace.

Maundy Thursday presents a complex cluster of liturgies from the washing of the feet of the disciples to the agony in Gethsemane. They all relate to the forms of service and sacrifice through our prayers and praises. At the heart of it is the connection between the Passion and the Eucharist understood as our being gathered into the love of God. “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.” It is the last word of Christ from the Cross. In every way, we are gathered into God’s love for our wounded and broken humanity. We are challenged by the words of Christ and so confront ourselves.

“All the people hung upon his words”

Fr. David Curry,  
Maundy Thursday, 2023

“All the people hung upon his words”

Never more so and never with more intensity of attention than on Good Friday. We hang upon the words of the crucified whom we behold pierced and dying on the Cross. We look and listen. There is literally nothing else for us to do and yet it is the defining challenge for us.

*Guarda e ascolta*, Dante the poet has Mathilda, the handmaid to Beatrice, say to him in the earthly paradise of the *Purgatorio*, itself one of the greatest images of the spiritual pilgrimage in which we are made “pure and prepared to leap up to the skies,” to the Paradise of God, the celestial paradise. “Look and listen,” she bids the pilgrim Dante. Look and listen to what? To the symbolic pageant of Word and Sacrament. At its center is a gryphon, a mythical creature at once wholly eagle and wholly lion, thus symbolic of the union of the divine and human natures in Christ, true God and true man.

Good Friday brings us to the Cross. In Dante’s great vision all the books of the Hebrew Scriptures and all the books of the Christian New Testament converge and unite in Christ. All the words of the scriptures are the words of Christ and all those words converge in the figure of the crucified. We look upon him and listen to him who looks upon us and speaks to us. Sin and love meet in the crucified. Look and listen.

Our holy week pageant brings us to the Passion according to St. John and so to the completion and contemplation of the seven last words of Christ. Matthew and Mark have given us the one word of dereliction and desolation, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”, the word which derives from Psalm 22. Luke as we saw on Maundy Thursday gives us three words from the Cross; the first, second and seventh word. John gives us the third, fifth and sixth words of Christ. In the seven last words of Christ there is a kind of gathering up of the fullness of revelation, a concentration of Word and Sacrament.

Looking upon the crucified means listening to the words of the crucified. We are, as Lancelot Andrewes suggests, meant to look upon the pierced Christ whom we have pierced in our sins and follies and be pierced in our hearts and souls; in short, to be moved to contrition for our sins by the spectacle of love. The Good Friday devotions on the crucified Christ has been a part of our looking and listening, an essential feature of the life of the Church from the earliest times. “My Eros is Crucified,” as Ignatius of Antioch put it, to take but one example along with a host of Patristic, Medieval and Reformed homilies on the Passion of Christ, all following the idea as Paul states, that “we preach Christ crucified.”

In some places, and this has been a large part of my own experience, that meant a three hour service structured around the preaching on the seven last words of Christ, a serious and significant devotional practice which seems to have fallen into abeyance. The history of that practice is intriguing and surprising. It was actually developed by a Peruvian Jesuit priest in the late seventeenth century and in Peru following a series of earthquakes, especially in Lima.

Fr. Alonso Messio Bedoya, who had learned some of the languages of the indigenous peoples of Peru, devised a series of meditations which made their way back to Europe and entered into the devotional practices of a number of different Christian churches. In the late 18th century, Franz Joseph Haydn composed his famous *Seven Last Words of our Saviour on the Cross* which was first performed in 1787 in Cadiz, Spain. It is, I suppose, an historical, geographical and cultural expression of the theological idea of a kind of circling around and into the mystery of the Passion. Beginning in the Americas, traveling to Europe and then back again to the

Americas, on the one hand, and belonging to the interaction between European and indigenous cultures and different forms of Christianity, both protestant and catholic, on the other hand.

Everything converges on the Cross. The words which John's Passion records compel our attention. We are meant to hang upon them attentively. The third word of the Cross is the first word that John provides. Christ's words on the Cross begin and end with Luke's first and last word; they are an explicit address to the Father. So, too, with the fourth word, the cry of dereliction, though it is expressly "My God, my God" and not to the Father by name. Within that structure of beginning and ending with the address to the Father are the other words of Christ on the cross. In the second word, Christ addresses the penitent thief, "Today, thou shalt be with me in paradise."

The third word is an address to Mary and to John. Jesus on the Cross sees "his mother and the other disciple standing by, whom he loved". He says, "Woman, behold thy son", meaning John, and to John he says, "Behold thy mother." It is particularly poignant and a significant image of the Church. Christ commands us to the care of one another as the members of his body. The sacrificial love of Christ indwells us in our care and compassion for one another, a kind of co-inherence. We can only live for and in one another through Christ's love for us and in us.

See how he loves us, we might say, in pondering this word of Christ while he hangs upon the Cross. "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us" and as we have seen, especially from John's Gospel, we are commanded to love one another. Here it is commanded from the Cross!

The fifth word which is the second word of Christ in John's account expresses something of the intensity of the Passion as it pertains directly to Christ's own person. "I thirst," he says, only to be given a sponge with vinegar and hyssop. I am not sure that hyssop, an herb from the mint family associated with herbal medicine, would override the vinegar. Hardly refreshing. Christ's word, "I thirst," is at once about an intense physical distress and intensely spiritual. He thirsts in his essential being for our salvation in his love for the Father. And his thirst recalls us to the true desire or thirst in our souls for the things of God without which we are but dry and empty beings. "My soul is athirst for God even for the living God," as Psalm 42.2 reminds us. His word conveys that sense of longing for what we seek but do not have. He feels in the agony of the crucifixion our lack and emptiness, our sense of separation and alienation expressed in his body. Such is the human condition.

The sixth word in the tradition of the seven last words is John's third word of Christ. "It is finished," he says, "and he bowed his head, and gave up his spirit." All that belongs to redemption is accomplished. It is atonement, the very doctrine explained in the epistle reading from Hebrews. Here is the sacrifice which overcomes sin and death. He who knew no sin became sin for us and thus perfects the law by doing what we might seek to do but cannot because of our sins, namely, the will of God. Here is the one pure true and only sacrifice for sins for ever, the one single offering which belongs to human perfection in union with God. It compels us to the love of one another through our looking and listening upon the words of love in the crucified Christ.

"It is finished." Why, then, is this not the last word of Christ in the tradition of the seven last words? Because what it means in its fullness is the gathering of all things into the hands of the Father. This is the radical meaning of Christ as the Word and Son of the Father, the radical meaning of the Word which was "in the beginning" and which "was with God" and is God.

The whole life of Christ, the whole being of the eternal Son is towards the Father, in the motions of their mutually indwelling love. What is finished is the overcoming of sin and death.

Christ's death is the death of death and as such reveals the logic of the Resurrection. The Passion is not just one episode, one moment in the life of Christ, something to get through and beyond. The Resurrection is *in* the Passion and the Passion is *in* the Resurrection. Hanging upon the words of Christ in all of their fullness and in all of the intensity of the Passion is the overcoming of all that belongs to the culture of nihilism, the culture of death and division. In the very face of suffering and sin, we look and listen to the crucified whose words are life and light. Here is love, the radical love of God.

"It is finished," Jesus says, as he "gave up his spirit." But are we? It seems not. For the Passion account of John ends with Christ being pierced in his side by one of the soldiers. Our sins are really a constant piercing of the body of Christ and, yet, as John tells us, "forthwith came there out blood and water" from his side. John ends his account of the Passion by telling us that "these things were done that the Scripture should be fulfilled." The Fathers of the Church saw in that image the sacraments of eternal life that belong to the overcoming of sin and death. Once again, we contemplate the unity of Word and Sacrament in the Passion of Christ and the co-inherence of all the doctrinal moments in the life of Christ. To look and listen is all our good on this day.

"All the people hung upon his words"

Fr. David Curry  
Solemn Liturgy of Good Friday, 2023

“All the people hung upon his words”

Christ no longer hangs upon the Cross. It might seem then that we no longer hang upon his words. He is dead and buried.

Holy Saturday is the day of the greatest peace and the deepest silence. It recalls the Jewish Sabbath, to God’s “resting” on the seventh day after the labours of creation. On Holy Saturday, Christ rests in the tomb. Everything is at peace since all that stands between God and man has been overcome on the Cross. We have heard Jesus’ last words from John, “it is finished,” and from Luke, “Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit.” There is, it seems, only peace and silence. It reminds us of paradise. And yet, Holy Saturday is more than paradise and more than the Sabbath rest of God.

The Scripture readings speak of an activity that underlies all of the peace and silence of this day. We gather at the tomb of Jesus in the aftermath of the cruel events of the Passion and yet the Scripture readings speak of something else. “He went and preached unto the spirits in prison,” Peter tells us in a passage that echoes the first lesson at Matins from Zechariah. “Because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your captives free from the waterless pit,” an image of Sheol or Hades, of Hell.

The psalms, too, speak of Hell. “Thou wilt not leave my soul to hell;/neither wilt thou suffer thy holy one to see corruption” (Ps. 16.11). “Thou, Lord, hast brought up my soul from hell:/ thou hast kept my life from them that go down to the pit” (Ps. 30.3). There is the sense that something is happening despite the quiet and the silence of this day. What is it? It is the Descent into Hell, as the Creed puts it. What does it mean?

Holy Saturday shows us something of the greater meaning of Christ’s crucifixion. It shows us the fullest possible extent of God’s will to be reconciled with the whole of sinful creation. And while all seems quiet and in silence, Christ descends into Hell to preach unto the spirits in prison. The redemption of our humanity means the gathering up of the spirits of all who have gone before us but again only by hanging upon his words. Our humanity finds its redemption only in hanging upon the words of Christ.

God’s Sabbath rest is about God’s delight in his creation. The Sabbath rest of Holy Saturday is the gathering of the whole of sinful creation to the living word of Christ so that we can take delight in God. Such is the radical meaning of the reconciling love of God for us, the love that returns us to “the bishop and shepherd of our souls,” as 1 Peter tells us. It recalls the story of Noah, itself an Old Testament image of God restoring by the flood and Noah and the Ark the mess that human sin creates. Peter sees this as a figure of baptism which restores us in our minds to God.

We wait at the tomb given for the body of Christ by Joseph of Arimathea. His action is an act of love and love is already active in ways beyond our imagining. Christ lies in the tomb but the tomb can never fully contain him. He cannot be spirited away by human cunning and deceit. He is always and totally defined by doing his Father’s will. God seeks the reconciliation of the whole of our sinful creation. In every way, we are gathered to God by hanging upon his words.

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Holy Saturday, Matins & Ante-Communion 2023

## Easter Vigil

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This is the night of watching and waiting upon the truth and power of God’s love, a love which is greater than the darkness of human sin and death. We watch and wait, once again, by hanging upon the words of Scripture. We watch and wait in expectancy for God’s great creative action, the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The point is very simple. Christ dies but love lives and triumphs over death. All of the Scripture readings at the Vigil underscore this essential insight and truth. We are reminded that the goodness of God is and must always be greater than every form of evil. The Resurrection is Creation renewed by being recalled to the truth of God in love and forgiveness.

The divine desire to be reconciled with his sinful creation means the redemption of all sinners. It requires that we hang upon his words, listening to the great Paschal Praeconium, the Easter Proclamation, listening to the Prophecies of Scripture that speak of God’s triumph over sin and evil, and then renewing our baptismal vows by which God has reconciled himself to each of us in his love for us. Then there is the simple joy of rejoicing in Christ’s redemption of our humanity with *Lauds*, the praises of Easter morning, the resurrection alive in us.

How? By hanging upon the words of Scripture that testify to the Resurrection. Dr. Johnson once said that the prospect of hanging wonderfully concentrates the mind. Well, our hanging upon his words concentrates our minds even more wonderfully upon the reality of divine love. It makes us alive, restored and renewed in love. Such is the wonder and the power of the Vigil. Our hanging upon his words opens us out to the Risen Christ.

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The Resurrection is not the ending of the story as is commonly said. It is not a happy-clappy ending to an otherwise sordid tale of unspeakable cruelty and ugliness. It is the radical beginning of our life with God in and through and not in flight from the realities of sin and evil, of suffering and death. The Passion is impossible and meaningless without Christ's Resurrection. Both are interrelated and intertwined; each is impossible without the other. There is joy in our sorrows and sorrow in our joys. Each reveals the essential and radical life of God and our participation in it.

Easter Day proclaims the Resurrection, to be sure, yet at the same time the Gospel shows us the forms of our unknowing and uncertainty, our confusion and perplexity. Mary Magdalene, coming early in the morning before sunrise “when it was yet dark,” finds the stone taken away from the tomb. What she says to Simon Peter and to John is that “they”, whoever “they” might be, “have taken away the Lord out of the sepulchre, and we know not where they have laid him.” John is countering already the conspiracy theory objection that the Resurrection was really a deceptive ploy, a kind of mind trick. Peter and John then run to confirm Mary's witness to the empty tomb.

John runs faster than Peter and gets there first but only looks in, “seeing the linen cloths lying.” Peter follows John and goes in directly “seeing the linen cloths” in one place and the burial shroud for his head “in a place by itself.” The details are intriguingly precise. No body, just the evidence of the burying cloths and the empty tomb. Only then does John enter. We are told that “he saw and believed.” But believed what exactly? “For,” as John puts it in his Gospel, speaking it seems about himself as well as Peter and the other disciples, “as yet they knew not the Scripture, that he must rise again from the dead.”

In this sense the Resurrection, like the Passion, is more than merely an episode in the life of Christ. It belongs to the radical idea of God's engagement with our humanity which does not reduce God simply to us and for us which runs the risk of making God nothing more than the projection of human desires, a metaphor for human interests and concerns, as it were. In so doing, we negate the reality of God in himself and deny the very reality of our life in Christ. This is the point which Paul makes in Colossians about “seek[ing] those things which are above” where Christ is. “When Christ, who is your life, shall be made manifest, then shall you also be made manifest with him in glory.”

All of the moments in the life of Christ make manifest what is in him but not yet fully realized in us. That is why the pattern and vocation of Christian life is always about death and resurrection, the constant dying to sin and living to God. It is the constant struggle and challenge of our lives made possible in us only by the grace of Christ through our hanging upon his words..

Thus the Resurrection does not eclipse the Passion but shows us its reality in a new light. Here we see the beginnings of the awakening of the disciples to the idea of Christ's Resurrection. “For as yet they knew not the Scriptures,” John says. This is the basis for what we proclaim in the Nicene Creed that the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Christ is “according to the Scriptures.” By Scriptures what is meant are the writings of the Hebrew Scriptures, not the New Testament, something which John and Luke themselves both emphasize. Here we are being shown the beginning of the dawning awareness and understanding of the Resurrection in the disciples and thus the Church. It has everything to do with God and God's engagement with

us opening us out to the radical truth of our humanity as found in God's life, not God as found in our lives. Ultimately, Christ himself will be the great teacher of the Resurrection but we will only learn by hanging upon his words as he opens to us the understanding of the Scriptures. Such is the pageant of Eastertide. God is essential life and thus greater than suffering and evil. The 'death of death' in Christ crucified witnesses to the Resurrection.

The Easter Day anthems proclaim the Resurrection and powerfully so but most wonderfully for all of us this morning here at Christ Church is the proclamation of the Resurrection in the baptism of *Isabelle Rose Morash*. Baptism is radical new life, a kind of rebirth, our being born into the things of God. Being born anew means being born upward into the things of God. Once again this is counter to the idea of God being something simply for us, a kind of commodity used for our interests.

Isabelle's baptism proclaims the reality of the Passion in the vows of the renunciation of "the devil and all his works, the vain pomp and glory of the world with all covetous desires of the same, and the sinful desires of the flesh," essentially expressing what Paul is saying in the Epistle. In short, the vows of renunciation are an explicit rejection of the things which stand between us and God who is the source and end of our life. This is exactly what Holy Week in the Passion of Christ sets before us. We can only name and face such things in the implicit knowledge of their being overcome by Christ in his sacrifice.

We hang upon his words of life and salvation, words that are captured in the Creeds. This is to say 'yes' to God and to want God's grace to be the force for the good that moves in us. The radical teaching of the Passion and Easter is that we have no life apart from God. "You have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God." That life is the new life, the rebirth which belongs to our baptisms. Isabelle's baptism proclaims to all of us what belongs to our life in Christ, just as at the Easter Vigil we renew our baptismal vows. It is all about hanging upon the life-giving words of Christ and letting those words move in us. By water and the spirit, by Word and Sacrament, Isabelle is born again and made a child of God. It marks the beginning of her life in Christ.

This past week we have gone through the rigour and intensity of the Passion. For many, many years, Isabelle's great grandfather, Bev, was with me every morning and every evening throughout the whole of Holy Week and Easter. He literally hung on every word of the Passion. It moved him greatly. It was his last wish before his death last December that Isabelle be baptized, a holy wish, a proper Christian wish born out of the understanding that our life is found in God.

"Never that which is shall die." It is a fragment from a lost play by Euripides. It complements what belongs to the ancient truth and insight that shapes Baptism and our lives in faith. "Love is stronger than death," as the Song of Songs puts it. We are more though not less than our bodies, more though not less than the circumstances of our lives, more though not less than even the consequences of our actions. Baptism, after all, is about the washing away of original sin and actual sins that have been committed.

This reminds us of the nature and power of the forgiveness of sins, itself a kind of rebirth. In every way, if we are "risen in Christ," then we must "seek those things which are above," the things which are everlasting. Such is the meaning of our hanging upon the words of Christ, the crucified and risen Lord, who dies that his life might live in us. Even death has changed and has become a gateway to eternal life. We are, as the Easter Even Collect puts it, "baptized into

the death of Christ” so that continually dying to ourselves and to sin and living to God, we may pass “through the grave and gate of death” to our joyful Resurrection.

Only in dying to ourselves and living to God, may we also learn to live for and in one another. Such is the meaning of the body of Christ. Baptism marks Isabelle’s incorporation into the Church as the body of Christ. She is born anew and signed with the Cross, marked as the child of God. Passion and Resurrection, but only by hanging upon the words of Christ.

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Easter Day, 2023

Baptism of Isabelle Rose Morash