

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road
Fairfield, Connecticut 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



Date: March 25, 2016
Sermon Title: Good Friday Tenebrae Service
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

Good Friday begins late Thursday night. Dinner was late in olden times. Jesus was only 33, so no "early-bird special." So, a long, late-night dinner, then a long walk to the Garden of Gethsemane, then a long time of prayer. Then Judas betrays Jesus with a kiss, a fight breaks out, then they per-p-walk" Jesus back into Jerusalem.

Thus, Good Friday begins. By the time it's over, Jesus has been dragged around the city from one end to the other, uptown, downtown, across town. The High Priest's house, the Temple, Pontius Pilate's palace, King Herod's palace, back to Pilate's place. Then the long slow walk to Golgotha, Calvary, the Cross. The Via Dolorosa, a tourist spot now. The Via Dolorosa, the "Way of Sorrow," they call it, probably a popular place for selfies today.

Then, the Cross. All that day there were questions. I count 23 of them, some of them pretty obvious, some sarcastic, some genuinely inquisitive, some arrogant. Questions are supposed to make you think, right? Ponder, come up with an answer? So, let's ponder three of them tonight.

When Jesus got arrested, they dragged him off to the High Priest. After all, it was the religious leaders of his day who were most irritated at Jesus—protective of their own turf, protective of their own truth. This Jesus was questioning everything. Jesus was questioning their authority, their traditions, their way of life. People in authority don't like to be questioned. He had to be stopped, quieted. So they paid Judas to finger Jesus, they grabbed him in the dead of night, and the long night started.

That leads to Question No 1. Peter, he hadn't quite lost his backbone yet, so Peter followed Jesus at a safe distance . . . he thought. While Jesus was being interrogated, with "enhanced interrogation," Peter watched until a young woman spotted him, and she demanded, "Are you not one of his disciples?" Like many questions, it's almost a statement. She had him pegged. "Are you not one of his disciples?" In other words, "You're one of them, right?" spitting out "them" like an insult. She even mocked his accent.

And isn't that the ultimate question for us? Would anybody watching us know that we are "one of his disciples"? Is there anything in our language, our lifestyle, our choices, our behavior that would make anyone think, "Hey, aren't you one of his disciples?"

There was a popular saying some years ago; it went like this: "If Christianity was illegal and you got arrested, would they have enough evidence to convict you?" *If Christianity was illegal and you got arrested, would they have enough evidence to convict you?*

Think about your daily life. With your family. Out in public. At work. In private conversation. Indeed, inside your own head. How about the next time you're in a conversation about politics or the presidential campaign? Or the next time you're caught in traffic . . . or in conflict with a neighbor . . . or your dinner at a restaurant isn't just right . . . or someone treats you rudely, unfairly? Will anybody be able to tell that you "are one of his disciples"?

Sadly, Peter said, "No." He denied even knowing Jesus, three times. Then he ran away.

I've always liked this Irish blessing. I see it in many homes. It says, "Christ is the unseen guest at every meal, the silent listener to every conversation." Imagine if we lived like that! Imagine if even in the simplest parts of our daily life, we could cause people to ask, "Aren't you one of his disciples?"

All right. On to the next question. During Jesus's trial, he gets into a little philosophical debate with Pontius Pilate. Getting fed up with Jesus, Pilate asks, "What *is* truth? What *is truth*? Sort of the heart of every philosophy 101 course in every college in America: "What is truth?" Which leads to lots of subtexts: Is there a difference between truth and fact, truth and opinion? What about conflicting truths? Must truth be verifiable, or is truth true whether we can verify it or not? Is truth based on faith less true?

Yale's famous motto is a great one: "Lux et Veritas." Light and Truth, two good things to go together. Jesus said, in somewhat the same vein, "I am the *way*, the *truth*, and the *life*." You see how slippery truth is; no wonder Pilate was quizzical. "What is truth?" Or maybe he was being sarcastic. Maybe he wasn't interested in truth! He had power, he had control, he was used to getting what he wanted. He was of the persuasion "Might is Right." And when you have the might, truth is whatever you say it is.

Chances are he was jaded by the political realities of his day. Truth wasn't a highly valued commodity. The man with the loudest voice, the biggest stick, the toughest bodyguard—that's who decided truth. So I don't know how interested Pilate was in some philosophical dialogue with a bloodied,

battered Jesus, bound in chains and headed for the graveyard of bones on Golgotha. Jesus was a nobody, a loser, a dead man walking. Why waste breath on him? So Jesus is dismissed with a cynical throwaway line, "What is Truth?"

But you're here tonight! You may have been here a few days ago, Palm Sunday; you'll probably be here for Easter. You may have been here last night, Maundy Thursday, and you're here tonight. You are interested in knowing, pondering; you're interested in truth, but you're willing to pursue it wherever it leads. It leads you here. Good Friday.

A good man was killed 2,000 years ago. An innocent man, Pontius Pilate said so. No matter. He was in the way. He was troublesome. He made people think. He was an upsetter, a destabilizer. He loved questions. He questioned everything. He questioned priorities, traditions, leaders. He questioned that which bedevils us, that which tempts us, that which owns us. And he dared everyone to know truth, look it right in the eye, and claim it.

Jesus was an early proponent of the scientific method. "Ask," he says, "seek," he says. "I tell you," he says, "love your neighbor," "love your enemies," "go the extra mile." "Blessed are the peacemakers." "Let your 'yes' be 'yes' and your 'no' be 'no.'" Go ahead, Jesus says, test it, don't accept it as truth just because I said it. Test it. Try it. Do it. Over and over and over again, like a good scientist, like a good researcher. Then come to a decision. Does Jesus have a line on truth, or not? Or do you have a better one?

Our last question may be the toughest. There's no easy way to say this: Jesus's Good Friday was brutal, evil, painful, beyond compare. When Dr. George Longstreth was a member of our church, he gave me a medical journal that described Jesus's crucifixion in medical terms, the way a medical examiner, a crime scene expert, a homicide detective would describe it. It was awful. And in the middle of it, Jesus cries out to God, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" *Why hast thou forsaken me?* An old-fashioned way of saying, "Where the heck are you, God? How could you do this to me? How could you let this happen? What kind of God are you?" There are two theories about what Jesus meant. One is, he was quoting Psalm 21, which actually ends well, and so, in pain, literally out of breath, Jesus turns his hearers to Psalm 21, a hint, a reminder that he knows this will end well. Maybe. Could be.

Or maybe this was Jesus's Hell. That's the classic Christian interpretation of the Cross. Jesus goes to Hell to pay for the sins of the world. The Apostles' Creed even declares, "He descended into Hell." Without getting too

technical, Hell can be a place of torment, or the abyss, or the place of the dead, or the end, the loss of all meaning and life and love.

Philosophically, figuratively or literally, Hell is the lowest you can go. And Jesus was there. For us. This is the moment Jesus looks every single human being in the eye and says, "I know what you've gone through." "I know what it's like when you've been exhausted, betrayed, hurt, tested, pushed to the limit. I know your worst, your lowest, your hell. Been there. Done that. Now, see you on Sunday."