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Date: April 14, 2017
Sermon Title: Good Friday: The Cross
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On your pew is a copy of my book of poetry, *Fieldstones of Faith*. Grab a copy and turn to page 45, to a poem called "The Cross."

The whole poetry project began ages ago when I decided to write a poem on the 100 most important verses in the Bible. Which I gradually expanded from "most important" verses to people, to events, to things. It took eight years and two books, and I've still done only about 80. But it is in this book I knew I wanted a section for Lent, so there are poems in their about Ash Wednesday, Palm Sunday, all the way to Easter.

These poems all came about in much the same way. I decide on a Bible verse or story. I study it for months, even years; I visit museums and look at the paintings based on the stories. All the great classic painters did Biblical paintings. Check them out the next time you're at a museum. I stand in front of those paintings, looking hard, letting the Bible story come to life right before me.

My favorite Holy Week scene—and poem—is from Good Friday. I'm not using that poem tonight, but I still like it. It's called "Ecce Homo." In Latin, "Behold the Man." It captures that moment when Pontius Pilate presents Jesus to the crowd. For hours, leading us up to that moment, Jesus has been tormented, tortured, mocked, scourged, interrogated; and (Pilate probably thinks) humiliated, broken, defeated. We'll see.

But on Good Friday, Pilate presents Jesus like a trophy, like those old hunters who would shoot a buffalo and then call for a photo, jauntily standing over their prize! Pointing at Jesus, Pilate declares: "Ecce Homo: Behold the Man," with a gloating sneer, as if to say, "Here's your hero! What a loser! What do you think of him now?"

That's always the question, isn't it? What do we think of him now? Especially at his low point. It's easy to love Jesus on Easter. Or after he does some great miracle or amazing teaching; after he's healed the lepers or fed the hungry or

told off the bad guys or stood up for the little guy. Then it's easy to cheer him on, praise him, high-five him, worship him.

But what about on Good Friday, when he stands there in tatters, battered, bruised, silent? "Ecce Homo," what do you think of him now? From that moment, Jesus heads to the cross, walking what is called the "Via Dolorosa," "the Way of Sorrow." Many Churches honor that Via Dolorosa with the "Stations of the Cross." Stations of the Cross, those places where Jesus suffered, stopped, stumbled on the way to the cross, an excruciating journey of evil.

I hope you used our "Lenten Devotional." Wonderfully done, very inspiring, this year's theme was "The Way," the idea being that we are all on the way, on the path, somewhere, toward something; and there are various ways to get there, some better than others, some paths worth taking, some not; some tougher than others, like it or not. "The way of sorrow," or sadness, that's a path we've all been on at some point along life's journey.

When we start our Confirmation class each September, we have all of the eighth-graders draw their own life's timeline from birth to now, when they're mostly about 13. You probably think life is pretty good for a 13-year-old, but even at that age, they have spent some time on their own "Via Dolorosa," facing some sorrow, some loss, some hurt along the way. In those moments, their own "Stations of the Cross," make it on to their timeline. Their first broken bone. Their first time a pet died. The death of a grandparent, a neighbor, a favorite uncle. The time they moved or lost a big game or lost a tooth. In their young lives, those are sorrows.

We know the Via Dolorosa, don't we? All those stops along life's journey that make us take a deep breath, make us stop, take stock. Matters of health and work and relationships; hurts among family, friends, our nation; society's ills, our own ills, the world that makes us sick. Jesus's Via Dolorosa took him from bad to worse, to the cross, the penultimate story of our Christian faith.

Penultimate. Alida always reminds me that "penultimate" means "next to last." It's not the final story, it's not the end story, it's the *penultimate* story. It's the story before the end, before the ultimate. *Easter* is the *ultimate* story. The cross is the *penultimate*. The one before that should get passed over by the one after . . . But it doesn't. Because the cross is such a powerful image. It begins as a terrifying, brutal method of execution. Torture and death linked together. Crucifixion was ugly and awful in public. It was meant to make a statement, a powerful government statement to scare people. "Watch out! *This* could happen to you," or "*this* will happen to you." Through the centuries of great art, crucifixion scenes were very popular and very graphic.

Over time, Churches like ours softened the cross. It's pretty, it's made of gold, and Jesus isn't even on it. It's an empty cross, and we have a good reason behind it. We tell people our emphasis is on the empty cross *and* the empty tomb, on Resurrection, not Crucifixion. It's still a statement, a good one. And nowadays, the cross is popular as jewelry: necklaces, bracelets, rings, and as tattoos. And I'm not complaining. I like it. I'm thinking of getting one myself (a necklace, not a tattoo). Something simple. I wear a lot of open-collar shirts during the week. I thought I might like to have a little cross around my neck. It still makes a statement.

What statement? The cross is a paradox. It's an ugly implement of execution. It's the electric chair of ancient times. Imagine having an electric chair on the altar or wearing a tiny electric chair around your neck. Yet we have taken that great evil and transformed it into something beautiful, something precious, something loving.

We try to capture this paradox tonight. Kate began up in the balcony, playing that old haunting song, "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?" One verse is even harder. "Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?" And it repeats each question over and over again, insistently, almost pointing a finger at us, "Were *you* there?"

But we followed that up with an almost jaunty old Gospel song,

*At the Cross! At the Cross!
Where I first saw the light,
And the burden of my heart rolled away,
It was there by faith I received my sight,
And now I am happy all the day!*

"And now I am happy all the day!" That's some transition, isn't it? But that is the transition of faith. That is what we believe. That is what we proclaim. Something happened "at the cross," even though we weren't "there," but as we look at the cross today, we are able to be "happy all the day."

So, go to my poem on page 45. We're going to read it together. The first time I used the poem was at a synagogue. Fairfield Clergy used to have an interfaith Bible study. Various clergy would come together and offer thoughts on different parts of faith. One year I was one of the speakers at a synagogue, and as part of my presentation, I read this poem. During the question-and-answer period, an older Jewish man stood up, cleared his throat, and thanked me for that. He said, "This is the first time I understood why Christians could love the cross. For 2,000 years, the cross is been used against the Jews. We were accused of killing Jesus. Good Fridays were used to stir up anti-Semitism against the Jews.

The cross was a symbol of Christian hatred and persecution. For the first time I am able to see why Christians love the cross."

I hope that didn't sound as if I'm boasting, but I am grateful that that man could see what I was trying to do with the poem. I was trying to make it personal. I was trying to clean away the hurt of history, the way it has been abused as a weapon of offense. And I do that by putting you and me right at the heart of the cross. There is an uncomfortable truth to Good Friday. We don't like to hear it or be reminded of it. But the central teaching of the Christian faith is that Jesus died on the cross for me and for you.

We can tie ourselves up in knots on the theology of the cross, on "atonement" and "sin" and "expiation" and "sacrifice." But with Easter on the horizon, only 36 hours away, with Christ's victory over death, we can look at the cross personally and feel the power of God's love for me and for you. Let's read it together

The Cross

The Cross.
The loss.
The cost.
The gain for me
the win
sin-free,
somehow.

The miracle
the victory
the irony
all done for me
amazing grace,
somehow.

The life
the death
the love
the gift for me
too good to be
true.
Somehow.

Yet, the blood
the hurt
the cause
too close for me
too hard to see
somehow.

Yes, the tree
the curséd wood
shaped to a "T"
pounded by nails, by me,
twisted by pain's travail,
no pain, no gain for me
how quickly I see
the "T" becomes an "I."

I, the cause and effect,
I, the good thief and the bad,
I the Pilate, I the priest.
I the leper, I the least,
I, St. Peter, I, St. John.
I was there, I was gone
I, the mother
I, the crowd,
one hoping for salvation
one cursing out loud.
I, the centurion,
believing at last
I, me, looking at the tree,
bended knee,
aghast.