

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road
Fairfield, Connecticut 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



Date: April 14, 2022
Sermon: "Maundy Thursday '22:
Stations of the Cross"
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

Preparation Litany:

Alida: The table is set. The food is prepared. The people are arriving.

Congregation: It seems quiet. Somber. Eerie. People are on edge.

Alida: The bread is there. The wine has been opened. We will remember.

Congregation: We remember Passover. We remember the slavery of the Jews in Egypt long ago. We remember the Passover from death to life, from oppression to freedom.

Alida: We will remember the cost of freedom. Freedom is never free. Some resist it. Some sacrifice for it. All want it. God brings freedom to us and through us.

Congregation: So here we are. The table is set. The food is prepared. The people are arriving. The bread is there. The wine has been opened. We will remember.

Sermon

"Maundy Thursday '22:
Stations of the Cross"

David Johnson Rowe

Somewhere along the line, most of us got familiar with the last hours of Jesus's life: Movies. Broadway shows. Medieval art. Great museums. They all told the story of Good Friday, the last hours of Jesus's life.

Movies like "Ben Hur," "King of Kings," "The Greatest Story Ever Told," Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ." On Broadway, "Jesus Christ, Superstar" . . . "Godspell."

Many of us went through Sunday School, Confirmation, Catechism, CCD: hours, months, years of religious instruction, ultimately walking us through the last hours of Jesus's life. Sometimes they used filmstrips. Remember those? Like still-life slides connected together to tell the story. And flannelgraph? Like paper dolls, cut-out Bible figures that you placed on flannel, moving them around to tell the story.

And, of course, the old standby: dress up. Go up to the Church attic, get out all those robes and sandals, shepherd sticks and swords, helmets and shields, dress up your Sunday School class to tell the story.

Highbrow or lowbrow . . . high tech or low tech. Broadway musical or Sunday School pageant. Rembrandt, or my favorites, El Greco and Fra Angelico, or a homemade flannel graph. It's all art. And Christianity has been using art to tell the story forever. *Forever.*

Go up to the Yale Art Museum. Enter. Turn right. Go into the exquisite, newly renovated wing, take your first left, go into the second room, and look at the wall. It's art. Painted on a wall. From the year 300. In a church. Paintings of Bible stories. Some early Christianity preacher or Sunday School teacher painting on the wall to help people see and remember the story.

If you've been to Paris, you may remember St. Chappelle, King Louis' elaborate chapel built to house some of the thorns from the Crown of Thorns used to torture Jesus. But what's amazing are those gigantic, intricate stained-glass windows showing 1,113 Biblical scenes coupled with countless, literally countless wood and stone carvings, inside and outside, taken altogether, telling, seemingly, the whole story. I mean the whole Bible! Here's your whole religion itemized and highlighted, breathtaking, mind-boggling.

And again, if you've traveled the "Old World," the Christian world of old Europe, and you've gone to those glorious ancient cathedrals, Notre Dame, Toledo and Leon in Spain, St. Mary's in Kraków, any of them in Vienna, any of them in Prague, all our favorites in Florence, what do you see? Art, telling the story.

The guidebooks and tour guides tell you the reason. Long ago, people couldn't read. So art was used to tell the story. Those ancient clergy figured out what modern educators have been telling us: we remember 10 percent of what we hear, 20 percent of what we read, 80 percent of what we see. *We remember 80 percent of what we see.*

So if you're a preacher in some old cathedral, preaching on some Bible story like the "Parable of the Prodigal Son," and you can tell the congregation, "Look at

the painting on the wall . . . or the stained-glass window up high . . . and see the story come alive in living color," that story is going to get remembered.

Holy Week is truly an amazing story. From Palm Sunday's parade to Easter's Resurrection, sandwiched around Maundy Thursday's drama and Good Friday's horror, you have so much of human experience lived out in eight days: Joy. Celebration. Disappointment. Disagreement. Suspicion. Betrayal. Exhaustion. Overload. Injustice. Abuse. Violence. Murder. Mockery. Cruelty. Arrogance. Brokenness. Intrigue. Mystery. Generosity. Miracle. Wonder. Death. Life. Disbelief. Doubt. Despair. Love. Faith. Forgiveness. Hope.

All played out in and around the streets of Jerusalem 2,000 years ago. All played out in our little Church from last Sunday to next Sunday, including tonight and tomorrow.

And the Good Friday part played out in and around the streets of South Boston, in the 14 paintings that literally fill our Church tonight. The "Stations of the Cross" are something you see in most every Catholic Church lining the walls, and sometimes in an Episcopal Church. Congregationalists don't have them, which is why it's so much fun for us to have them!

Remember, Congregationalists not only broke away from Catholicism, they also broke away from Protestants. They didn't want to have anything to do with anybody. That's why we have these old New England Churches like ours, little white wooden boxes as simple as you can get. So, no "Stations of the Cross" for us!

And yet, Jesus did take that long, lonely walk from Pontius Pilot's Palace to the gruesome Calvary Hill called "Golgotha," which means "the skull." And on that walk things did happen. There were stops, incidents, "stations" along the way.

According to tradition, there are 14 such "stations," nine of which are straight from the Bible. Here are the 14:

Jesus is condemned to death
He's forced to carry the cross.
He falls down.
He meets his mother, Mary.
Another man, Simon, is forced to help Jesus carry the cross.
A woman named Veronica wipes Jesus's face with a cloth.
He falls again.
Women in the crowd weep over Jesus.
He falls again.

At Golgotha the soldiers take away his clothes, they nail him to the Cross.
Jesus dies.
He's taken down.
And Station #14, he's buried in a borrowed tomb.

That's Good Friday.
Scripturally, factually, logically, and artistically.
And for us tonight, literally in living color.
Profound.
Stark.
Provocative.
Faithful.
Emotional.

And especially powerful in this white wooden box. We've been getting responses all week, but this one says it all, from a visitor this week:

"I was privileged and awed to view the paintings. The juxtaposition of the paintings in the peaceful sanctuary was jarring. We exist in peace surrounded by the horror of inhumanity. How we individually react is important. Am I a leader or a follower? It was a privilege to see the Church setting and the paintings."

That's precisely our hope for this week. Palm Sunday's fun and Easter's joy are real. The "Hosannas" and the Resurrection, the palm branches and the lilies, the parade and the empty tomb. We believe it. We preach it and teach it. We celebrate it to the max.

But Maundy Thursday and Good Friday are also real. The dark side and the evil side. The broken hearts and broken faith. The betrayal and denial. The agony and the sacrifice. All real.

What we have here is one humble artist's attempt to say of Jesus's last hours, "Here it is. Look at it. Think about it. Feel it. Don't look away."

Beside each painting is Charles Miller's reflection on what he was thinking. He doesn't present himself as a theologian; he's a human and an artist, and he's wanting us to feel the story, to put ourselves in it.

That's why the paintings are set in South Boston in early 1980s. You see City Police and Fire and Ambulance, TV reporters, against a backdrop of brick buildings. He liked the brick, Miller said, because Jesus was a carpenter. He worked with his hands. Jesus would have liked to see things that are handmade, roughhewn, real. Miller wanted to "get away from classic church stuff, where

everything is nice and beautiful." His own childhood church, he said, was quite nice, "They'd scare the hell out of you in the nicest way possible."

But Good Friday wasn't slick, wasn't nice. He realized early in the process he was going to have to kill, on canvas, the very man he was creating on canvas. Miller wanted us "to go to each painting to relive the whole physical part, the agony" To feel it.

In fact, there are communities across America that have a Good Friday "Stations of the Cross Walk" each year. They choose 14 places around the neighborhood, places of sorrow, of injustice, of pain, of betrayal; storefronts and street corners and parks, places of acts of violence—in order to feel the reality of Jesus's Good Friday in our time.

Miller writes: *"The paintings are all active. Everything in them is cooking all at once. These paintings are screaming, every inch is twisted and filled with action because that's the way it is in the streets, in the city, in the world. It's jammed, it's gritty, it's screaming all the time."*

"I realized I had to go through the whole thing and not blink or flinch. I had to think about what would your mother or my mother feel like, seeing him in this situation. Reduce it to real flesh and blood, human emotion"

Does it work? Do these paintings work? That's up to you. Contemporary art isn't some people's cup of tea. Religious art isn't some people's cup of tea. Art isn't everyone's cup of tea.

But here's what the artist said himself, having poured heart and soul and faith and life experience and his own perspective, having poured all that onto 14 canvases displaying the last hours of a single good man. Miller wrote, "I could feel the paintings. Even though they were my paintings, I could feel them."

Truth is, that's why every year we have Maundy Thursday and Good Friday services. These services are not everyone's cup of tea. The topics, the themes, the events are upsetting, more than upsetting.

Each year we try to help those who come to feel it. Our choir, our soloists, Michael's selections; we've used French films, classic art shown on the side wall, this "one long Communion table" idea, tomorrow's candlelight "Tenebrae" service with everyone leaving the sanctuary in darkness and silence.

And Mr. Miller's "Stations of the Cross." All done to be able to say what he said: "I can feel it."