

"THE LAST WEEK: THURSDAY--PART TWO"

Mark 14:26-52

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York Center Church of the Brethren

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We are very quickly coming to the end of Jesus's last week in Jerusalem and the final two days are the most harrowing. As I said last Sunday, Thursday was a very full day for Jesus. It takes sixty-one verses in Mark's Gospel to tell the whole story. So much is happening here that it will take us two Sundays and this Thursday at Love Feast to unpack it all.

Last Sunday we found Jesus making preparations for, and then celebrating, the Passover meal with his disciples- **all** of his disciples- even the one who will betray him; even the one who will deny him; even the ones who will flee into the night in just a few hours.

Thursday evening at supper he told them that one of them would betray him into the hands of his enemies. After they all said, "No Way!"- Jesus gave new meaning to the bread and the wine as he offered each to his inner circle and said, "*This is my body. This is my blood.*"

The tension mounts in our text for today. The meal ends. They sing a hymn. Then Jesus leads them out to the Mount of Olives where he tells them something they do not want to hear: "*You will all desert me.*" That is more than good old Peter can take and he speaks up. "*Maybe **they** will desert you, Jesus. But I won't!*"

"Oh yes you will, Peter," Jesus responds. "In fact, before the rooster crows at daybreak tomorrow you will say, not once, not twice, but three times, that you don't know me."

Peter replies with great distress, "*I will die with you before I deny you!*" And the rest all agreed.

Oh, Peter. He means well. He wants to believe that he will be the exception. He wants to be the "super" disciple, the one Jesus can always count on. Mark says he spoke, "vehemently." This is the only time that word is used in this Gospel.

Peter was supremely confident in his abilities as a disciple. Or at least, he wanted to be. Sometimes I think he spoke up to hide his own feelings of inadequacy. There **are** times when Jesus singled him out as a leader and a good example for the others. But scripture also shows us that he often misunderstood what Jesus was saying and doing.

I feel sorry for Peter, in his vehement denial, but it is good news for us. Because if even Peter couldn't get it right all the time- then maybe we aren't expected to either. Is there such a thing as a "perfect" disciple? And is that even something we should aspire to?

Brene Brown has written, *"Perfectionism is not the same thing as striving to be our best. Perfectionism is not about healthy achievement and growth; it is a shield."*

I think maybe it was a shield for Peter too, a kind of self-protection, because when he is most uncertain, he speaks the loudest. Since we know how the story goes- his protests, may sound to us, arrogant and even ridiculous.

Perhaps Peter was teetering on the edge of doubt by this point in the story. Perhaps he was afraid. Perhaps he wasn't sure how to follow Jesus in to the abyss that loomed ahead of them. Instead of voicing his fears to Jesus, though, he adopts a posture of false bravado. Maybe he even believed what he was saying. But when the truth finally reveals itself, it will break his heart.

Maybe if Peter hadn't spoken up so quickly to deny the desertion prediction, he would have heard Jesus say, *"But after I am raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee."* Right there is a word of hope- a promise of life, a promise that Jesus is not finished with them yet. I wonder if Peter and the others even heard what Jesus said, caught up as they were in defending their own honor as disciples.

This journey through Lent, is for us, a transformative journey- just as it was in real time for Jesus and his disciples. In their book, *THE LAST WEEK: THE DAY-BY-DAY ACCOUNT OF JESUS'S FINAL WEEK IN JERUSALEM*, the late Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crosson wrote: *"During that journey, in Mark's story, Jesus tried to prepare his disciples for what would happen to him when he demonstrated against Roman imperial power concerning its violence and against Jewish high-priestly authority concerning its injustice. Also, and even more importantly, Jesus attempted to prepare them for their individual and communal participation in that death and resurrection, that end-as- beginning. But, as we shall see, Peter, James, and John, then the rest of the Twelve as a group, and finally Judas, all fail tragically but not irrevocably (except for Judas) to accept their destiny alongside Jesus."* (1)

In all fairness to Peter and the others, what could possibly prepare you for what was to come? After all, even Jesus struggled with it as we see in his anguished prayer in the garden. Mark uses language to describe Jesus that we have not heard before: he was "distressed, agitated, deeply grieved." Mark even says Jesus "threw himself on the ground." This was no run-of-the-mill prayer. This was his last desperate attempt to come to terms with what was going to happen. It was a time of intense sorrow and agonizing loneliness as he sought God in the darkness.

This is one instance in scripture when we see the full humanity of Jesus. At this point in time, he does not face death with serenity and acceptance. He questions. He argues. He seeks a different way to fulfill his purpose. On Friday we will talk more about the cross and what it means for our faith, but for now, it is important for us to see Jesus's struggle.

And in the midst of that struggle, in the most painful moment of his life, where are his friends? Where are the ones he hand-picked to share the journey with him? Where are the ones who walked with him for three years, listened to him, learned from him? Where are the ones who denied that they would ever desert him? Where are they? Asleep! They are asleep!

1. Mark Davis writes, *"Instead of struggling with Jesus, the disciples sleep. Even Simon Peter is unable to stay awake, unable to watch and pray, unable to articulate a response when Jesus finds him sleeping three successive times. The disciples' slumber is part of the picture of the utter failure of the church, right in the moment of Jesus's decisive struggle. The slumber of the disciples is more failure than fatigue. It takes on pernicious meaning when we see the depth of the struggle taking place just a stone's throw away from their (slumber party). Jesus faces death. Meanwhile the church sleeps. Jesus is 'distressed and agitated.' Meanwhile the church sleeps. Jesus is horrified at the awful prospect of the cross. Meanwhile the church sleeps."* (2)

And still, we sleep. Regardless of the promises we have made to Jesus, we sleep. Jesus's brothers and sisters, people created in God's own image, are gunned down in a grocery store or targeted with a weapon of war because they are Asian American women. And the church sleeps.

Black men and women are murdered by police with few consequences. And the church sleeps.

The COVID virus strikes poorer communities and people of color in higher numbers, while vaccines are doled out as gifts to the wealthy and those in high places. And the church sleeps.

God's beloved children are denied a place in the family of faith because of skin color, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, or gender. And the church sleeps.

Our sisters and brothers are oppressed, exploited, imprisoned, trafficked, humiliated, abused. And the church sleeps. Church, we have work to do.

As if the sleeping disciples weren't bad enough- the worst is yet to come. And it comes with a kiss.

Judas.

Mark does not give us even a hint of Judas's motivation. We don't know why he went to the religious leaders and offered to betray Jesus. Other Gospel writers assign motive to Judas, but not Mark. It is a mystery. All we know is that " *he went to the chief priests and they were greatly pleased and promised to give him money.*" We don't even know how much money they gave him and we don't know what happened to him after he kissed Jesus.

Matthew's Gospel records that he gave back the thirty pieces of silver and then killed himself. Luke tells us in the book of Acts that he bought a field and then exploded and died in the middle of it. But not Mark. All Mark tells us is that Judas escorted a gang of thugs to the garden where he kissed Jesus to identify him and that is the last we hear of Judas.

When they approach Jesus, he speaks to the armed men, "*Really? You come for me in the dark of night as if I am hiding from you? I have been in the temple with you every day. You could have come for me anytime. But you choose to come in the dead of night like cowards?*"

Of course they didn't want to apprehend him in the light of day and especially in the Temple. They were sent by the religious leaders who were afraid of the crowds who adored Jesus. So they came at night, when he was alone with his disciples so the people wouldn't know about it- until it was too late.

And then, all of the disciples deserted him. **All** of them, including Peter.

Mark ends this episode with another mystery. Who is the young man who appears in only a linen cloth and then escapes, naked? No one seems to know. There has been a great deal of speculation by scholars over the centuries, but in reality, we have no idea. Apparently, this is another of Mark's mysteries that perhaps had meaning for his original audience, but not to us.

It is still Thursday night and there is more to come before Friday arrives. The disciples are gone. God is silent. Jesus stands alone with his captors. It was evening, the fifth day.

It was on the Thursday

after dinner
when they knew
that it was over.

First, He told them they would all
desert him
and run away
Peter refused to believe it
and even argued with Jesus.

Then they fell asleep while
Jesus was praying his heart out.

They couldn't believe it
when one of their own
led the army right to his side.

Judas kissed Jesus
right on the cheek
right there in the garden
and they arrested him.

The disciples thought it couldn't
get any worse.

They were wrong.

It was on the Thursday
after dinner
when they knew
that it was over.

Amen.

End Notes:

- *THE LAST WEEK: THE DAY-BY-DAY ACCOUNT OF JESUS'S FINAL WEEK IN JERUSALEM*, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crosson. Harper San Francisco. 2006. P. 91.
- *FEASTING ON THE GOSPELS: MARK, "Theological Perspective,"* D. Mark Davis. Westminster John Knox Press. 2014. P. 474.

