

**The Reverend T. Stewart Lucas
St. Margaret's Church
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There couldn't a more powerful story if the Hollywood writers had tried. The story of love and hate, power and influence, the battle between right and wrong. It's full of tragedy, conspiracy, courage, betrayal, loyalty, awe, the supernatural, and even the mundane. I can see myself taking a part in this drama too, can't you? I've imagined myself as the donkey, carrying Jesus along in the magnificent parade. Or maybe you were one of the disciples who were given the lowly task of finding that donkey not knowing what in the world Jesus was going to do next. I've been a faithful disciple, following Jesus to the garden and back in his shadow every step of the way. Of course I've also been one who has been too weary to keep awake even for an hour. Perhaps you've denied him at least three times if not more in public and in private. And then there is Pilate. How many times have you stated your opinion about an issue, been vetoed by the crowd and then washed your hands of the issue all together?

It seems like a great way to enter into this Passion Drama we have just heard. It's a tactic my preaching professor taught me and even the suggestion of a bishop I admire. Which character are you? Are you one who just wants to be here for the parade? Or are you willing to journey all the way to the cross with Jesus?

It is a hard heart-wrenching day to be in church. In a matter of minutes we go from singing 'Hosanna' to shouting 'Crucify him!' But I wonder if our pageantry and our participation as characters is also a pastoral way of avoid the Passion all together. Perhaps we have used this tactic to avoid the power and distract us from the pain, the challenge and the reality of the cross. Perhaps we take on any role to keep from dealing with that most difficult question. "Why?"

This year we use the gospel of Mark. It is perhaps the earliest version we have of the Passion. Jesus goes to the garden of Gethsemane and once again shows us just how human he really is. He gets agitated and worried and even scared, fearful of the death that he soon faces. He did what any of us would do in a trying time; he resorted to prayer, seeking God's help and protection. And he reached out to his friends, eager for some support in the darkest moment of his life.

And yet what do his followers do? They fall asleep and shortly thereafter they flee. Jesus is abandoned when he needed help the most. But he rises and moves forward. Even though he doesn't get the answer he wanted from God, he understands the answer to be that he must face the hour that is at hand.

And if losing his disciples not enough, Mark went on to say that it gets even worse. There was this other guy following him around. He was the young guy who left everything behind to follow this new radical preacher. He had always wanted to be in the inner circle, one of the twelve. He pitched in to help wherever he could, picking up the leftover bread after that miracle on the mountainside. He had helped those guys lower the man through the roof to be healed by Jesus. He hid behind the column in the temple when Jesus drove out the money changers rooting for Jesus all the way. He took part in the parade as Jesus came in to Jerusalem, but nobody knew who he was.

And he was the one sitting under the olive tree watching Jesus pray from a distance. He was the last one there when the disciples ran from the crowd who showed up with their weapons. He was planning to be the one who saved the day who would come in between Jesus and his enemies. He had been waiting his whole life for this moment to take a stand and risk his life. But even after all of that, he too fled and

even leaving behind his clothes to find safety. Interesting, isn't it, that the disciples that Jesus called left their nets and their families and indeed everything to follow him. But this young man, the last disciple left, who wanted so badly to follow Jesus, ultimately leaves everything behind to get away from him.

We identify don't we? And so does Jesus. Is he disappointed? I imagine so. But is he surprised? Not at all. Jesus knows this life is hard and he knows even more so how difficult it is to face the cross. And he knows that we will go to any extreme to avoid the pain and the challenge and that question. "Why?"

But in Mark's Gospel, the cross is the goal as much as the resurrection. In anxious and trying times there is nothing that we face that Jesus doesn't know fully right down to our death. All of our worry and care and fear was faced by Jesus on the cross and is incarnate before God as redeemed and resurrected, given new meaning and new life.

I came to understand that notion more fully many years ago at the National Cathedral. The glory and the splendor of its architecture have helped bring joy and comfort to me over the last fifteen years. If you go there and look up, over the current altar area, you will see what I am talking about. Churches were originally built in the shape of a cross, as is ours, kind of. And at the intersection of the vertical and horizontal aisles there was often a screen. This screen originally separated the people from the altar...the common every day person from the holy. On top of the screen at the National Cathedral sits a magnificent crucifix with the women on either side.

And one day I was in there and I realized, you know, in order to go from the everyday place where we are to the altar, to a place of holiness and grace, you have to go through the pain and suffering of this life. In order to understand the joy and liberation of the resurrection, we have to experience the suffering. We experience the pain of the cross of Christ in order to get to the celebration and understand why it is this way.

My friends, this is the Holy Week that makes us Christians. This is the week we wait for all year long. This is the Passion, the wondrous story that gives meaning to our lives. This acknowledgement of Jesus' life, death and resurrection or his triumph, suffering and final triumph is the focus of our faith. Without this difficult journey, we would not be able to celebrate the whole year long. Christ Jesus came into the world to serve and save sinners. Therefore we all observe this week and its somber events, in order to know the true power of the amazing love of God.

So become the character you need to be in order to experience the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ. Be a bystander, be a soldier. Be Pilate's wife or even put yourself in Jesus' sandals. But however you choose to be present with our Lord, do not forget to look at the cross. Because the cross is the answer. Why? Because he loved us so much.

The cross of Christ does not promise us that we will understand every 'why' of this life or that we will ever understand the mystery of his death, resurrection and ascension. Perhaps we will never comprehend the evil and sorrow in this world of ours. But the cross does promise love – the love of an understanding God. The cross is the sign - the covenant - that God stands in solidarity with us no matter the pain we may endure. God will be with us, because God loves us, and God will never abandon us, even to the grave.