

Good Friday, March 29, 2024
Mark 14-15

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Tonight we face the cross. Tonight we look death in the face as we read through the passion of our Lord according to Mark, the story of Jesus' arrest, trial, and crucifixion. But we name this day Good Friday, and we do so because we know that death will not have the final word on Jesus, and also because, joined to Jesus' death in Baptism, we are also joined to his Resurrection. That is why we can look death in the face tonight, and not only tonight. Death is having a go at our little community of faith these days. One of our number is on hospice at home right now, only months after the death of one of his sons. Others are facing difficult medical diagnoses that may be immanently fatal. Still others have recently lost members of their immediate or extended families. Death for all of us, sooner or later, becomes a stark reality that we cannot ignore, in spite of our usual efforts to hold death at arms' length, to put it out of sight and mind in our daily lives. We face death tonight fully aware that Easter is coming soon, that Jesus' death will be undone in his resurrection early on the third day, and that the life he pours out tonight he pours out for us and for our salvation. But we linger here in the presence of this death tonight regarding it not merely as an inconvenient bump in the road, but as the instrument for bringing about new, genuine, and abundant life. As I reminded us last night, the cross is the throne of Christ the King. This is the place where from which he rules because it is here that he paradoxically destroys the powers of sin, death, and evil by succumbing to them. Notice, tonight in the passion reading Jesus describing his crucifixion as being lifted up. Notice that the second time he is offered fruit of the vine in the form of sour wine, he drinks. Notice that this is because his death is the kingdom of God brought fully into being, the moment when finally we can understand what it means for him to be the Messiah, God's anointed king, and we get to hear it on the lips of the centurion, one of those who has carried out his death sentence. Now we can understand. Now the secret is out in the open and we can proclaim who he really is. More about that on Sunday morning.

There is one more thing to notice tonight that will put the passion in to context and connect us to Sunday morning. Notice at the end of part two of our Passion reading tonight that odd, cryptic verse about the young man wrapped only in a linen cloth, who at Jesus's arrest leaves behind the cloth and runs off naked. It's what young people today might call "random." It seems weird and out of place. Until you realize that in the early church, a linen cloth, with nothing on underneath, is what you wore to your baptism. And when you are baptized in the early church, you are baptized naked. And then, when you come up out of the water (because you go down into the water, because baptism is about death and resurrection) – when you come up out of the water you are clothed in a white robe. This "random" young man here is a baptismal candidate who gets naked just at the time that Jesus' death becomes an inevitability. He is being baptized into the death of Christ. Notice this, because I want you to come back on Sunday morning and notice him again. He will be in the empty tomb, clothed in the white robe of the newly baptized, and announcing Jesus' resurrection. Because that was another practice of the early church around baptism. The newly baptized were then given the task of proclaiming the gospel! What seems random to us, would have been an elbow in the ribs of Mark's community. "I see what you did there!" they would surely be thinking, "This guy is us, isn't he?" And that makes sense of that cryptic short ending to Mark that we will hear on Sunday. But I'll get to that then. In the meantime, we are invited with the disciples to stay awake. (May we do a better job than they did!) And we are invited to stare down death with Jesus it's conqueror.