

**Good Friday April 2, 2021**  
**Pastor Ann Hultquist**

Two years ago, the high school Breakfast Club class made the cross of branches that has been part of our sanctuary art this Lent. Erin Saboe and Deacon Shanna worked with the youth to create something that would be meaningful for the whole congregation. At the Lent prayer stations that year, people were invited to write prayers on strips of fabric and weave them into the cross. Their prayers joined the prayers of our young people, woven together on the branches, hanging down in an abstract array of pattern and color.

Last year, of course, the cross was bare for Lent and Easter. It stood in the church office at first, then moved to the hallway, although it didn't matter much where it was because no one was here. One of our Spiritual Art folks called it the 'twiggy' cross and the name has stuck because of the way the branches are also woven--not perfectly, but in a way that captures both a strange beauty and anguish today.

John's Gospel this Good Friday says "They took Jesus, and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called the Place of the Skull. There they crucified him." After a procession that was a total reversal of Jesus' entry days before, they took him outside the city wall of Jerusalem, to what was really a garbage dump, to execute him. Sometimes we think that Jesus' death was an unusual event, but the crucifixion itself was actually quite ordinary, in a horrific way. The Romans used this form of killing for hundreds of years to show their complete control, to brutalize and shame the foreigners they ruled.

In Israel, to say that the Jewish people resented the Romans would be an understatement. Every now and then a rebellious group would try to rise up, only to be squashed by the power and violence of their oppressors. It's likely that Pilate saw just one more insurrectionist when Jesus stood before him, and a weak one at that. He was interested enough to have a dialogue with Jesus, wasn't he, a dialogue that seems to have mystified him.

The religious leaders were not so baffled. Jesus challenged their management of God's love, their administration of the Temple, and also committed blasphemy. People were listening to Jesus, they believed he could do miraculous things, they were following in a crowd that was growing--Jesus needed to die, and a crucified man would show everyone that Jesus was just a shameful fraud.

All of this would seem like just a history lesson--except for the large cross behind me, and the one on the outside of our building, and perhaps the one on the wall in your home, or the one that you always or sometimes wear around your neck. An instrument of torture and punishment has

become something of powerful significance for us and for the millions of followers of Jesus all over the world who will gather around the cross this day.

If we were able to ask one another today “What does the cross mean to you?” there would probably be as many answers as people. Our own lives and our experiences of faith, suffering *and love* shape the meaning we hold.

“Jesus died there for me” many might say. We were taught that in one way or another, and in addition perhaps the idea that God’s anger against humanity--against you--had to be satisfied with Jesus’ death there. But Good Friday, especially in this particular year, is an invitation to open ourselves to deeper discoveries:

After a year of being surrounded by suffering of all kinds, we know in large and small ways how difficult life can be. We who love being in control found that we were not. We who sometimes see anxiety, hurt or illness as weakness found out that we ourselves are weak. Jesus willingly entered into human suffering on the cross, embracing pain and hurt, grief and loss, abiding always with us in all of those moments, never expecting that we must be strong or perfect or even good to know God’s presence.

When confronted with violence and hatred, Jesus refused to respond in kind, even to those who killed him. We live in a culture and in a world where violence still reigns--reminded of that in the past weeks in Atlanta and Boulder and California; and in agonizing video replayed in a courtroom in Minneapolis. Smaller acts of hatred and disregard happen every day--sometimes to us; sometimes *by* us. Jesus responded to all of it with overwhelming love, *responds* to us with love even when we participate, even when we turn away.

Our hard and hurting hearts are meant to be broken open and healed by Jesus’ love poured out on the cross. It might even send us to our knees today in gratitude. Seeing the cross, we might see our own life, our dreams, our hopes, our sins, our prayers, our brokenness woven into its branches, embraced again and again by the one who died there.