

**Grace Lutheran Church**  
**Third Sunday of Easter, May 1, 2022**  
**Pastor Nancy M. Raabe + “The Trauma of the Community of Faith”**

Holy Week is long past, but the experience should still be very much with us. Palm-Passion Sunday, Maundy Thursday and especially the events of Good Friday are deeply formative for us as Christians. Christ’s resurrection is the foundation of our faith. But do we take this mysterious truth into our bones, into the sinew of our muscles, into our gut, the same way that we totally get Jesus’ suffering and death? Be honest—for those of you who were with us on both Good Friday and Easter, were you as affected by the music, liturgy, and story of Easter as you were by that of Good Friday? Which left a deeper impression (and the pinwheels don’t count)?

Our understanding of who God is and what God has done for us begins in Easter. But I contend it is the trauma of Good Friday that binds us together in a shared experience that continues to trouble the water of our souls, year after year after year. Who have we nailed to the cross that we might have embraced? Who have we left hanging that we might have rescued with a kind word? To whom have we given vinegar to drink when we might have offered them champagne? What does reliving each year the devastating account of Jesus’ death bring up in us, and why?

We’ll come back to that. But as we listen in to this strange dialogue between Peter and the risen Jesus, we must keep in mind that the trauma of Jesus’ death continued to trouble the waters of his community, and Peter’s soul in particular, long after his death.

Reports that circulated of the empty tomb and Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances did not change the fact that the Jesus’ community of followers had been shattered by watching him slowly asphyxiate on the cross. The whole affair was as public as it could have been, from the masses who were crying for his blood, to the crowds who stood near the cross in shocked silence during the six hours it took Jesus to die as he writhed in agony, struggled to breathe, experienced his body in catastrophic collapse and finally cried out to his Father as the last bit of life ebbed out of him.

This scenario quickly became known as *the things* or *these things*. “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know *the things* that have taken place there in these days?” one of the disciples on the Emmaus Road said to Jesus before they recognized him. “What things?” Jesus asked. “They replied, ‘*The things* about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him.’”

And in John 19, after describing the full sequence of events of Jesus’ trial and death, the gospel writer concludes, “He who saw it has borne witness...that you also may believe. For *these things* [the crucifixion] took place that the Scripture might be fulfilled.”

The community’s trauma over *these things* was rooted not so much in the spectacle of Jesus’ death but in the fact of who he was. All the hopes and dreams of the Judean people, cultivated by their prophets across the centuries, had splintered on the cross into a thousand fragments. What did the Emmaus Road disciple go on to say in one of the most heartbreaking lines in all Holy Scripture? “But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.”

At the conference I attended this past week, a brilliant young professor from the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Chicago defined trauma as a wounding of the body, mind and spirit that brings us to the edge of our experience. A destructive act has been suffered that exceeds a person's or a community's ability to cope.

Its impact is felt in two ways—first as a crisis of time, in which the event becomes part of an eternal present as those affected suffer flashbacks triggered by reminders of the event; and second, as a crisis of coherence, in which the stories that had been told and the way that life had been understood no longer make sense. We thought our town was safe, and then this happened. We thought our children were protected, and then that happened. We thought he was the one to redeem Israel, and then *these things* took place. Such crises can produce a disconnection from one's sense of self, from one's community, and from one's relationship with God.

I think this is exactly what is happening to Peter in today's reading. We find the clue in a word in verse 17. Our translation reads, "Peter felt hurt because [Jesus] said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?'" Every other translation I checked either has that Peter felt hurt, or that Peter felt deeply hurt, or that Peter was grieved. None had "Deeply grieved," which gets closer, but the real sense of the original word indicates a pain so intense that the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, uses it in Genesis 3 to describe the pain of childbirth.

In other words, at this moment Peter was not merely miffed or hurt. He was traumatized, ripped apart, as Jesus' three questions triggered a flashback to Peter's own threefold denial of Jesus. Had he stood by his Master that fateful Maundy Thursday it would not have saved Jesus' life, but it would have saved Peter's, in terms of his sense of self-worth as a disciple.

Because what Jesus is really asking him here is not "Do you love me?" but, "Are you with me? ARE you with me? Are you REALLY with me, this time around? If so, take up the mantle of my ministry and feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep." Which Peter eventually goes on to do. But in today's gospel, Peter is in the midst of a psychic collapse that called everything into question.

How someone responds to a traumatic event varies. If there is a strong support system, little or no prior traumatic experience, and if the individual is strong and resilient, it may not affect their mental health. But Peter had always been impulsive, uncertain, and even the subject of rebuke.

Trauma recovery hinges on compassion, support, and truth. This is exactly what Jesus provides at this critical moment for Peter. He not only affirms Peter's ability to become a leader—"Feed my sheep"—but makes clear his solidarity with Peter in the kind of death Peter is to die, which will be much like Jesus' own. "When you grow old," Jesus tells him, "you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go." And finally the affirmation of Peter's calling that restores his faith: "Follow me."

What is the church's response to personal and community trauma? Worship, preaching and liturgy, just as Jesus is offering Peter in this three-fold liturgical dialogue. Remembering that we are not alone. Recognizing our brokenness. Avoiding easy solutions—"God's got this, we'll be OK." Not being afraid to linger in Good Friday. Standing on the ramparts and holding out for hope. Then when the time is right, we will hear the same call that Peter did—"Follow me"—and take the first step into resurrection life.

Amen.