

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on April 2, 2021 (Good Friday)

I've always loved the term "rubbernecking." It's a wonderfully illustrative, even cartoonish description of turning to watch something that really isn't our business. I don't love what people normally *see* when they rubberneck. I mean, it's easy enough to feel a sense of *schadenfreude* when the guy who just raced passed you on the highway gets pulled over for speeding a mile or two down the road. But slowing down to stare at a grisly accident is hard to see, even as it is nearly impossible to look away.

I get the sense there was a lot of rubbernecking during that first Holy Week. With all the drama surrounding Jesus' arrest, trial, and crucifixion, there were ample peak rubbernecking opportunities. The forces of empire and the seeds of rebellion, the mix of religious conviction and charges of heresy, the passions aroused on all sides — all of this came together to create a highly-charged environment with an intoxicating swirl of emotion. It must have been hard for even the most causal observer to turn away.

And, regardless of where they stood on the question of this *particular* religious movement — whether they viewed Jesus as a misguided zealot, a dangerous heretic, or the Messiah — people couldn't help but be drawn into the drama of what was unfolding before their very eyes. They simply could not avert their gazes.

But for people of faith, the crucifixion of our Lord, isn't merely interesting or captivating from a detached, observational point of view. Just as it was for Jesus' closest friends, Good Friday is an integral part of our story. The pain is our pain; the death is our death; the grief is our grief.

In some ways we've gotten desensitized to the full violence of the cross. You can buy sweet little silver crosses at Kay Jewelers, you can spot crosses on bumper stickers, they're seen on the steeples of picturesque white clapboard New England churches. They've become so ubiquitous as emblems of personal and communal faith, that the shock value has worn off. But it's not just the violence, it's the symbolism and meaning behind crucifixion itself that demands our attention.

We forget that crucifixion was not the normal means of capital punishment in the ancient Roman world. It was typically reserved for a certain class of criminal. The crucified class included those deemed especially worthless by the powers that be, which is why Roman citizens themselves were exempt from such a fate.

Crucifixion was used exclusively for outsiders — for slaves; for enemy combatants; for insurrectionists. Victims were stripped naked and put on public display. Besides excruciating pain, crucifixion carried with it the stigma of dishonor and humiliation. And so to be crucified, was to be dehumanized, shamed, and literally lifted up as an example of all that was wrong with the world.

So in a very real sense, for Jesus, crucifixion was his final earthly act of allegiance with the poor, the marginalized, the hopeless, the devalued, and the scorned. After casting in his lot with tax collectors and sinners, bringing good news to the poor and downtrodden, pushing back against the hypocrisy, privilege, and abuse of authority, it's not surprising, really, that he ends up dying among those he so lovingly and compassionately served. Jesus lived among the outcasts, and Jesus died among the outcasts.

I'm reminded of the story of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, the young white Union officer who commanded the all-black 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, made famous in the 1989 film *Glory*. In 1863, Shaw was killed leading a fierce but ultimately unsuccessful charge on Fort Wagner near Charleston, South Carolina. The Confederates dumped his body in a mass grave with the rest of his unit's

dead soldiers, figuring that would be the utmost insult, burying a white man with a bunch of black bodies.

As word of the regiment's bravery started to spread, a movement to return Shaw's body for a proper burial in Boston with full honors was initiated. But Shaw's parents, avowed abolitionists, would not have it. Shaw's father wrote to Union officials, "We would not have his body removed from where it lies surrounded by his brave and devoted soldiers."

This isn't a perfect parallel to Jesus being crucified among those he sought to lift up. There's danger in viewing Colonel Shaw as a white savior, as many even well-intentioned people initially did. But that's not how Shaw viewed his role, nor is it how his parents saw it. They objected to the design of the famous bronze relief that stands on Beacon Street showing Shaw on horseback, elevated above his soldiers. The true memorial, however, is Shaw's unmarked final resting place, lying among those he loved and respected.

Through the shame and scandal of the cross, Jesus placed his broken body between God's vision of a beloved community where all are equally valued and loved, and the sinful reality of the human condition where *some* are loved and elevated, and others are derided and rejected and treated as less than. Which is why you can't fully face and embrace the power of the cross without confronting and condemning racism and sexism and every other human construct that stands between God's vision and our reality.

In the end, the cross stands as the ultimate act of love. The attempt to strip Jesus of everything — his dignity, his power, his beliefs, his life — only reveals that God's love is everything. In one way or another, we are all outcasts and sinners. And God loves us anyway. God casts his lot in with us, despite all that we do or fail to do. And God loves us anyway. Through belief in Jesus Christ, God forgives us and lifts us up and loves us anyway.

All of which is why, when it comes to the crucifixion, we can't just rubberneck. As people of faith, we are not merely interested bystanders. The cross isn't something to casually gaze upon, but to venerate with all of our being. That's what Good Friday is all about. A reminder that hope and joy and love sprout forth even from the hard wood of the cross.

Don't avert your eyes from the pain of this day. Stare intently and intentionally into it. And know that this act of love is not just for all of humanity, but also very specifically for you.