

English is a language that minds far more clever than mine know how to play with. For example:

Practice safe eating; always use condiments.\*\*\*Shotgun wedding – a case of wife or death.\*\*\*A hangover is the wrath of grapes.\*\*\*Does the name Pavlov ring a bell?\*\*\*The definition of a will: A dead give away.\*\*\*Time flies like an arrow. Fruit flies like a banana.\*\*\*The man who fell into an upholstery machine is now fully recovered.\*\*\*She was engaged to a boyfriend who had a wooden leg but broke it off.

The details of Mark's narrative of the Last Supper are quite telling. In response to the disciples' questions about where Jesus wants them to make preparations to celebrate the Passover meal, Jesus sends them into the city. The directions are very detailed, including who they will meet, what they should say, and what they will be shown. This amount of prediction cannot be attributed to human foresight or calculation. It is another instance of Jesus' ability to see into the future because of His alignment with God's plan. Also, the amount of prediction highlights the importance of the Passover meal, which will be celebrated in this Upper Room.

This journey into the city parallels an earlier episode of 2 disciples journeying into a village with specific instructions to find a colt for Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. Both episodes give the disciples firsthand experiences of Jesus' ability to predict the course of events. These experiences were meant to reinforce the disciples' understanding and commitment to earlier predictions of Jesus. In particular, Jesus has predicted His passion, death, and resurrection 3 times. Each time the disciples have not been able to grasp it. Once the narrator simply observes they did not understand but were afraid to ask questions (Mk 9:32); once Peter tried to disabuse Jesus of any scenario that had suffering and rejection in it (Mk 8:31) and Jesus calls Peter 'satan.'; and once James and John responded as if Jesus had never even mentioned suffering and rejection by making a pitch for power and glory when Jesus finally sits on His throne. (Mk 10:32-34) The lesson for the disciples is: if Jesus is right about the man carrying the jar, the owner of the house, and the Upper Room, maybe He is right about His suffering, death and resurrection.

There is something particularly eerie about what the disciples are instructed to say to the owner of the house. "The Teacher asks, 'Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?'" The phrasing suggests a providential arrangement. It has already been decided and the owner has been waiting for the question to be asked. Once again, the events that are unfolding are not haphazard. A divine plan is afoot.

At the meal, Jesus both takes and gives thanks for the bread and wine. This is an assertive gesture that shows He is actively engaged in His destiny, which has been determined by God. He connects the bread with His broken body and the cup of wine with His poured-out blood. This establishes a mutual interaction between dining and dying, between Eucharist and crucifixion. Got that? A connection between dining and dying, between Eucharist and crucifixion. Also, both His broken body and His poured-out blood are "for many." Although Jesus' present table companions are His disciples, He envisions "more," all the way down to us at this table in Apex in 2021. Jesus also looks forward to drinking wine anew in the kingdom. Since the drinking of the wine is how His life (blood) will be given to His disciples, what He looks forward to is His reunion with His disciples after His death. "He is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see Him..." (Mk 16:7) Tersely, but with great symbolic power, this meal solidifies the relationship between the disciples and the dying and rising of Jesus. (all adapted from John Shea, FOLLOWING LOVE INTO MYSTERY, p. 208-209)

Second, this passage puts us at the heart and center of our faith – the Paschal Mystery, so beautifully and sacramentally realized in the Eucharist. We proclaim in the heart of the Eucharistic prayer: "The mystery

of faith: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.” “When we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim your death O Lord until you come again.” “Lord by your cross and resurrection you have set us free, you are the Savior of the world.”

Now the human soul has many secrets. They are only revealed to those who want them, and are never forced upon us. Of the best-kept secrets, and yet one hidden in plain sight, is precisely the Paschal Mystery. The way up is the way down. Or, the way down is the way up. We proclaim it every time we come to Mass, AND this pattern is obvious in all of nature – from the very change of seasons and substances on this earth, to the 600 million tons of hydrogen that the sun burns every day to light and warm our earth, and even in the laws of eating and digesting. The down-up pattern is constant, too, in mythology, in stories like that of Persephone, who must descend into the world and marry Hades for spring to be reborn.

It is there in legends and literature, sacrifice of something to achieve something else is almost the only pattern. Sleeping Beauty must sleep for a hundred years before she can receive the prince’s kiss; Cinderella must sit in the ashes before she can become the bride of the prince. In Scripture, we see that the wrestling and wounding of Jacob are necessary for him to become Israel (Gen 32:26-32), and the death and resurrection of Jesus are necessary to create Christianity. The loss and renewal pattern is so constant and ubiquitous that it should hardly be called a secret at all.

Yet it IS still a secret, mostly because we do not WANT to see it. We do not want to embark on a journey if it feels like going down, especially after we have put so much of our time and energy into going up. Our whole American culture is all about being number one. The gospel is all about taking the last place. The problem is most disciples of Christ are more American than Christian, but since this is the very air we breathe, we often can’t even see it. This is surely the first and primary reason why many people never get to the fullness of their own lives. The supposed achievements of life have to fall apart and show themselves to be wanting in some way, or we will not move further. Why would we?

Normally a job, fortune, reputation, marriage has to be lost, a death has to be suffered, a house has to be flooded, or a disease must be endured. The pattern is so clear that we have to work rather hard to miss the continual lesson. This, of course, was Scott Peck’s major insight in his best-selling book, THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED. He said the he felt most Western people were just spiritually lazy. And when we are lazy, we stay on the path we are already on, even if it is going nowhere. (adapted from Richard Rohr, FALLING UPWARD, p. xviii-xix)

Third, this shows us so clearly the connection between the cross and the Eucharist and our daily lives. The cross HAD to be because God knew we would do everything we could to deny it, avoid it, soften it, or make it into a theory – which is exactly what we did anyway. Yet this is the Jesus message that cannot be pushed into the background. We love to argue about it in order to avoid having to live it out.

This is why the cross is our central symbol. At least unconsciously, we recognize that Jesus talked a lot about ‘losing your life.’ Ken Wilber makes a distinction between ‘climbing religions’ and ‘descending religions.’ The descending form of religion is the way of Jesus. Its primary language is unlearning, letting go, surrendering, serving others. It is not the language of self-development – which often lurks behind our popular notions of salvation. We must be honest about this. Unless we’re careful, we will again make Jesus’ descending religion into a new form of climbing religion, as we have done so often before. Counting up masses attended, rosaries prayed, novenas recited, scapulars worn. And then we concluded – despite a single whit of evidence of the correctness of our position from Jesus or the scriptures – that THIS would guarantee us entrance into heaven, regardless of how little we cared about the poor, the imprisoned, the immigrant, or anyone in need.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit” are Jesus’ first words in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:3). And although Jesus made this quite clear throughout His life, we still largely turned Christianity into a religion where the operative agenda was some personal moral perfection, our attaining some kind of salvation, ‘going to heaven,’ converting others rather than ourselves, and acquiring more health, wealth, and success in this world. In that pursuit, we ended up largely aligning with empires, wars, slavery, and destruction of our planet, instead of being with Jesus and the powerless. If we are honest, we have to admit that we have been mostly about climbing, not descending.

Anytime we surrender a negative, accusatory, compulsive, or self-serving thought, word, or deed, we begin to ‘get it.’ Power, self-image, and control do not give up without a fight, and this is first of all inside our minds, where the illusions begin. Just watch a 2-year-old learning to say no to his parents. The battle starts early, comes back in full force in the teenage and young adult years, and in truth never really stops. The saying is always true: You are only young once; but you can be immature forever! I’m living proof!

“Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a single grain. But if it dies, it will bear much fruit.” (Jn 12:24) Such daily and ‘necessary suffering’ is the price of both enlightenment for the self – and compassion for others. This is what is meant in our tradition by ‘dying before you die,’ or ‘practicing dying.’ Any other path is not the path of a disciple who follows a Master who carries a cross. Each time we offer to surrender, each time we trust the dying, our faith is led to a deeper level and we discover the God-self underneath and in the heart. We decide not to push ourself to the front of the line, and something much better happens in the back of the line. We let go of our narcissism and we start feeling much freer, much happier. We surrender our need to control, and finally the relationship blossoms. But each time it is a choice – and each time it is a kind of dying.

The mystics and great saints were those who had learned to trust and allow this pattern, and often said in effect, ‘What did I ever lose by dying?’ Or as St. Paul put it: “For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” (Phil 1:21) The Paschal Mystery is really the way life works, and we keep missing it. The Eucharist – the Body and Blood of Christ is designed to wed us to Christ, SO THAT WE MIGHT LIVE THE LIFE THAT CHRIST LIVED – which is a Paschal life, a life of dying to self for the sake of others.

The Paschal mystery and Christ are one and the same.

This is not a religion to be either fervently joined or angrily rejected.

It is a train ride already in motion.

The tracks are visible everywhere.

We can be a willing and happy traveler,

Or not. (adapted from THE UNIVERSAL CHRIST, Richard Rohr, p. 216-219)