

Pastor's Point - April 17, 2025

The passage below is excerpted from *While I Breathe, I Hope - A Mystery of Dying*.

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Into the Heart of the Paschal Mystery

Christian discipleship is a way of life—a doing and an undoing, a going and an undergoing. Yet, in the midst of that dailiness, spirits must be ignited, imaginations stirred. So we undergo shared ritual practices that leap into our consciousness and seep into our bodies by force of their gestural power.

No liturgical event can match the majestic symbolic sweep of the Paschal Triduum—one extraordinary feast parsed into distinct acts and performed over three days. This year, I celebrated the Triduum under the weight of my grim terminal cancer diagnosis. The shocking news conferred a singular intensity and hunger to my anticipation of this singular intensity and hunger to my anticipation of this great paschal feast. I worried that in my weakened state I might not make it through what is, after all, a liturgical marathon. Yet the Siren-like Spirit was calling me into the heart of the paschal mystery with its odd logic that the way of new life goes through and not around our debilities and fears.

The first act: Holy Thursday. I approach the Mass of the Lord's Supper hungering, as never before, for a spiritual food that might nourish a chemo-wracked body and bruised spirit. We commemorate Jesus washing the feet of this disciples and respond to his mandate that we do likewise. I sit awkwardly, as my wife tenderly bathes my unclad and gnarly feet; it is both a ritual synopsis of decades of marital love, and the very touch of the Healer.

The second act: Good Friday, the most austere and haunting of the Three Days. Altar bare, tabernacle door left open. These bleak symbols of absence reach into the pew with a hard blessing on my own harrowing emptiness. The solemn recollection of Christ's passion leads us to the veneration of the Cross. Here, in all its harsh and stark realism, our Christian faith confronts us, yet again, with the inevitability of diminishment and death. Weakened by my illness and with my son Brian at my side, I approach the large cross and kneel gingerly, my balance out of kilter. For much of my life, I have associated the cross with my own sinfulness and guilt, but today this cross is where my own aching infirmity is embraced and enfolded into Christ's own suffering. I feel myself lifted up by an unseen force, Christ perhaps, reaching from that very cross to draw me to him. Or my son, concerned I might fall. Both.

The third act: In this great Vigil, the Spirit calls to us again with a blazing fire in shivering darkness, offering a supernatural warmth to chilled spirits. Light to light, candle to candle, we process into the church, welcomed by the achingly beautiful *Exultet* that daringly insists "this is the night" in which God's salvation is on offer. The Vigil's scriptural feast bestows a surfeit of drama, brimming with promises of divine love and fidelity; it is a rich fare to delight and console battered and weary pilgrims. Then, we shift and summon the entire church from across the ages, "a great cloud of witnesses" (Heb 12:1), to join us in the baptism of new pilgrims into Christ's death and resurrection.

And so, we stumble into the dawn of Easter morning—some under the weight of terminal illness, but every child of God wracked by fear or sin, betrayal or discouragement—to bask in the promise of resurrected life that is indeed our inheritance.

He is risen. And so shall we be.

Dum spiro, spero. ("while I breathe, I hope")