

## *Good Friday Sermon April 3, 2026*

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When you think about it, it's an astoundingly odd name: Good Friday. This is, after all, the day of Jesus's crucifixion. We just read the story of his trial, sentencing, hanging on the cross, and death. We also heard how his companions and friends either betrayed, denied, or abandoned him. So, why do we say this day is good?

We are taught that through Jesus' life and death God acted to save the world. Atonement. Atonement is the word I hear most often, and it means just what it describes: at-one-ment, the process by which God restores our broken relationship with God and makes us one again. At-one-ment.

The "penal substitutionary theory of atonement" says that because humanity sinned, God must punish humanity by sending us all to eternal hell. But, Jesus substitutes himself for us and takes the punishment we deserve, satisfying God's wrath and releasing us from penance if we believe in him. In this telling, Jesus' death isn't just inevitable; it's necessary—not necessary because of human sin but because of divine justice.

This may be the truth. All I can share with you is that personally, I struggle with this. I was always told. "Jesus died for our sins," "The price of sin is death," and "Jesus paid it all." And I didn't question it, or the incredible guilt and shame that came with it, until more recently.

I started secretly wondering: If God is love, why would love require death? If grace is a free gift, why did it have to be bought with blood? If Jesus came to reveal God's heart, why would God's heart be centered on torture and crucifixion? I didn't have answers, only questions.

On Ash Wednesday 22 years ago, Mel Gibson's movie, *The Passion*, was released. The poster featured an image of Christ wearing a crown of thorns. The caption read: "Dying was his reason for living." Really? Dying was his reason for living? Jesus had a whole, full life before he died.

He confronted religious complacency and political oppression, offering a genuinely inclusive vision of God's reign; one where the last are first, the peacemakers are blessed, and the poor are called the beloved. Maybe that is why he was killed? He challenged systems that took advantage of widows, of women, of the poor, and of the outcast. Maybe that is why he was killed?

He was on the side of people who were oppressed by the economic policies of the temple and on the side of people considered unclean, untouchable, or sinners by the religious. Maybe that is what got him killed? He told parables that upset people. He used the phrase "kingdom of God" as opposed to the kingdom of Caesar.

It was a movement. It was a kingdom of justice and compassion. In this kingdom, in this political economy, the hungry are filled with good things. That was Jesus' message. Jesus was about making changes in this world. Maybe that is what got him killed?

He talked about compassion. He talked about moving beyond ethnic boundaries and divisions. He talked about forgiveness. Jesus worked to bring people together: Samaritan and Jew, Greek and Roman. He practiced an open table, rich and poor, male and female. He challenged unjust boundaries and rules. Maybe that is what got him killed?

Dying was not his reason for living. Living was his reason for dying. For life, he died. For integrity, he died. For compassion, he died. For justice, he died. For change, he died. He was in the way.

I don't think Good Friday is about appeasing an angry God. I believe it's about becoming one with a God who suffers with the world and calls us to join in the work of healing it. I think Jesus' death is God's ultimate act of identification with the oppressed.

This would affirm any who have read about the life of Jesus and defined discipleship as solidarity. Solidarity, meaning to stand with or beside the crucified. To recognize that the Cross is still present in detention centers, in hospitals, in broken families, in scorched forests, in war zones, under bridges, and in homeless camps, to name just a few of many places.

Rather than the crucifixion of Jesus being the end of anything, the execution of Jesus was the beginning of the Church. This is what I picture.

The Easter acclamation, "Christ is Risen!" meant the people—the Church—was finished with Rome's bullying. As though they said: From now on, when we gather for a meal of bread and wine, we will remember. We are Christ's body. Christ is within us. We will not forget all he said or how he lived, and we will resist. We will be good to those who are victims of imperial bullying. We will be good to the outcasts, to the slaves, and to the stranger. We will take care of each other. We will share the stories of the less fortunate, of those who did not survive, of the brave and the faithful. And we will dream, hope, and work for the day in which the kingdom of God, the Kingdom of justice and peace, will be realized on Earth as it is in Heaven.

I hope we have a sense of those thoughts when we proclaim Christ Risen and when we proclaim ourselves Easter People.

And if this Noonday service, where we are remembering what Jesus went through, helps us to live a life that reminds us to stand up for those who are abused or put down or who suffer injustice from bullies big and small; if today helps us live in the example and spirit of Jesus, then and only then can we dare to call it Good Friday.

Amen