

A Series of Meditations

Holy Week 2007

by Barbara Cawthorne Crafton

**These and other daily meditations by
Barbara Cawthorne Crafton
are available at The Geranium Farm
(www.geraniumfarm.org)**

Palm Sunday

April 1, 2007

With the five of us plus two dogs, Gonzo the RV was almost as full last night as he can get. Q and I had the most traditionally bedlike of the beds, in honor of our age, displacing my daughter and her husband, the vehicle's actual owners. Another in the party slept on a shelf over the driver's seat -- but then, he *did* have his own TV. And two more flipped the dining table and the banquette into a pair of identical twin beds.

We slept well, gently rocked just a bit whenever anyone got up in the night. In the morning, breakfast; such conversation as there was careful and quiet, to maintain personal space until after the coffee had done its work. You need to chose carefully the ones with whom you share such close quarters, for you will come to know each other very well. And so Holy Week begins.

Everyone involved thought he knew everyone else. They all thought they knew themselves, too: *I will not betray you, I will remain faithful, I am brave and loyal and strong. I know what it means to be a friend, and I am ready for what lies ahead.*

Well, maybe. And maybe not. Never think you know who you are, not for sure, not in every circumstance. And never use that flawed conviction as a weapon against someone who has been tried as you have not been tried -- or even as you have. Because no two of us are the same. You don't know someone else's life just because you know your own. And you know your own less well than you might suppose.

Perhaps that is the reason why we retain the stories of how even the disciples fell away: they were the leaders of the first Christian communities, and it is important to know that God can use us to lead even if we have not always been as good as we wish we were. Even your failures -- maybe *especially* your failures -- will be the building blocks of God's work in you.

So none of us are unworthy to walk with Christ through this difficult week, stumble though we may. And none of us are so excellent that we needn't bother.

Monday in Holy Week April 2, 2007

A week that looks long from the beginning will hurtle to its conclusion rather quickly, as the terrible events all pile up at the end. Modern scholars differ on the actions and motivations of the principal characters, but we all know how it ended: for us, if not for them, an inevitable death hangs over everything.

But it is only Monday. You have time. Perhaps you know from your own walks with the dying what it is like a few days before it happens, when you both do and do not acknowledge what is ahead. Sometimes you think things are looking up: a set of more encouraging test readings, an entire day with less pain, and you begin allowing yourself to hope that the cup of loss will pass from you both. And then things turn again, the main direction of the march reveals itself, and your hope deflates. Sometimes you even wish it would just hurry up and happen, so it would be over. And then you recoil from the wish, because you remember what it will mean.

As the week goes on, we will move farther and farther from our culture's steadfast euphemizing of death. To our friends who do not believe, we will seem for a few days like people from another time and another place, medieval people, the credulous natives of a more primitive age. We will venture out, from time to time, to buy a ham or a leg of lamb, a few dozen eggs, a rabbit made of chocolate. We will clear the dining table and the living room, and run through our Sunday menus in our minds. But mostly we will wait and listen to the story of some people in ancient times who lost everything, filling in the blanks they left with our own memories of ourselves.

Tuesday in Holy Week April 3, 2007

Do you train for your own death? Does a person make sure he's in good shape, that he's not tired, that he's had enough to eat and enough to drink? Does he wear an extra layer of clothing, in case the weather turns cooler?

How was he feeling? What if he had a cold? What if his head ached anyway, and then he was taken away for more pain, inflicted by people who didn't care how he felt?

Such thoughts must have been in the minds of many who loved him -- his mom, most of all, the woman who had cared for his body since he was too little to do anything for himself, the woman who had called after him for years, as he left the house: *Don't forget your lunch! Did you take an extra pair of socks?*

Begging him to reconsider the whole thing had not worked. We have a hint that there might have been a desperate ploy on her part, a visit to the place where he was speaking one day to try and get him to come home, maybe even a hope that she could cover him in some way by making people think he was crazy. Maybe if they thought he was just another lunatic they'd let her take him home where he would be safe. But he wasn't crazy, and he wouldn't come home.

How he felt, whether he was warm enough, whether his cold was better, all of the things that had filled so many of her days for so many years -- all beside the point now. Once in a while she approached him with a question; once she even felt his forehead, and he all but brushed her aside. It was too late now. He was intent on a process had begun that couldn't be arrested.

And so she became part of it, too, without a word. Took her place among the women who were shopping, indeed, already cooking for the meal on Thursday, making his favorite foods just the way he liked them. If it were not to be his last meal, it was certain that it would be one of them; she was sure of that. She tasted a dish, and it was like sawdust in her mouth.

But she knew it was perfect, because hadn't she been making it just this way, and her mother before her just this way, for years and years? And she turned it out into a serving bowl and covered it with a cloth. There was still much to do, here in this kitchen that was not her kitchen, in this city that was not her city. Nothing is where it's supposed to be, she said to herself. But still, she would make sure he was ready.

Wednesday in Holy Week

April 4, 2007

Perhaps I would dream of what to write about, I thought as I set up this eMo last night, to go out this morning. I have an early train to catch, and not much time for inspiration. And not much inspiration, even if I had the time. So I addressed it, typed "The Almost-Daily eMo from the Geranium Farm Copyright 2001-7 Barbara Crafton" into the subject line and typed in the title, "Wednesday in Holy Week." Then I waited a bit. Nothing. Then I went to bed.

To dream after dream of frustration: I was at a play, but was also supposed to be leading Evening Prayer at the convent -- something I never do, as sisters officiate, not guests. So I commuted back and forth between the chapel and the theater. I kept losing my prayer book, and trying to do it from memory, only to forget the prayers I have known since childhood. I kept finding prayer books, venturing once into the college chapel to borrow one, but they were all 1928s, with a set of color pictures in them where Evening Prayer used to be. There were seminary students in attendance, and one of them helped me out from time to time, while the others were dumbstruck at my utter lack of organization. There was a flying fish, orange in color, whose presence distracted everyone. Emily Mann directed the play and appeared afterward to greet audience members; she seemed unaware of the parallel Evening Prayer service failing all around her, but couldn't have been more gracious.

I awoke exhausted.

Things come apart. Your guides no longer guide you; even your strengths have grown weak. Your sleep does not refresh. Nothing you try works. Inexorably, the light fails.

But it never quite goes out. In the ancient liturgy of Tenebrae, often celebrated on this night, we begin with an abundance of candles. One by one they are extinguished, and the room grows darker and darker, until finally only one remains. Then even it is carried away, and we are in darkness. Then a loud noise -- an earthquake? the sound of resurrection? -- and the lone candle returns. There is just enough light to find our way out of the church.

Maundy Thursday

April 5, 2007

On this night of Jesus' last supper with his friends, he instituted what we would come to call the Holy Eucharist and also washed the disciples' feet, as if he were not their master, but their servant. These things, he said, were dramatic examples of a new commandment, that we should love one another as he has loved us. Unstinting. Self-giving.

But isn't that an *old* commandment? Don't we already know something about it? You are up in the night again with a sick child -- not the sick child you were up with last night, but her sister. The family is passing the same germ from person to person, and you yourself feel heachache-y and a bit limp as you set up the vaporizer in her room and prop an extra pillow behind her, so she's all but sitting up. You sit down on the floor by the bed, rub some eucalyptus on her chest and a little on your own, and then you pull an extra tee shirt over her head and her pajama top over that. She takes another drink of water and asks you to sing "Shadabee." It's three in the morning, but you rest your head on her mattress and quietly begin to sing the nonsense syllables your mother set to the tune "Long, Long Ago." Just a few rounds is all it takes; your little one's cough quiets down and she is asleep. You pad back to bed and pull the covers up to your chin. You drift back to sleep, smelling the eucalyptus.

Your wife wakes you in the night. She calls for her mother first, and then for you; her mother has been dead for thirty years. Your wife has soiled herself again; she is weeping tears of shame. She tells you she is sorry several times, and you tell her it's okay. You weren't a dad who managed dirty diapers very well back when your kids were little, but you are different now. You get up and turn on the lamp. You go to the bathroom for the washbasin and fill it water and with a squirt of the special soap the nurse gave you. You get two more quilted pads out of the closet, and a clean towel. Expertly, you lift your wife's legs, slide the soiled pad out and one of the clean pads under, and begin to wash her. Then you pat her dry with the towel; and finally you change pads again. You move the lamp a little closer to look for sores, as the nurse taught you to do, and there aren't any, which is good. You carry the soiled pad to the bathroom and rinse it in the tub so you don't have to deal with it in the morning. You lie back down and fall asleep immediately, because you are really tired, but not before you wonder for the thousandth time how much longer you're going to be able to keep this up. If it doesn't get any worse than this, you think, I'll be all right. But it's going to get worse than this. Just when, is the question. You decide to think about that tomorrow.

Love transforms service, teaching us that there's no such thing as a menial task. Love teaches us that, if nothing is beneath us, nothing will be beyond us. Love remains with us after our unstinting efforts have all failed -- it doesn't conquer all, as the old saying goes, but it bears all things without turning away from any of them.

Good Friday April 6, 2007

If one is naturally high-spirited and knows how the story ends, it can be hard to maintain the sadness proper to the day. The shopping for Easter dinner still needs to be done, after all, and tomorrow will be a day of baking, egg-dyeing and table-setting for the feast. If you are built to enjoy that sort of thing, you itch to begin.

There are a hundred tasks in which to lose oneself: the washing of dishes, the chopping of vegetables, the making of beds, the feeding of animals. Throughout human history it has been so: into each life, tragedy will come, but the cow must still be milked every day. Upon such mundane hooks we hang the sorrows of our lives. The very plainness of them provides a peculiar comfort.

But it is an intermittent one. The immensity of your sorrow intrudes on your ordinariness, again and again: you suspend an egg above the bright surface of the dye and think of it, stop stirring for a moment and stare into the middle distance, thinking of it. You stoop to dust a bottom shelf and remain kneeling there, thinking of it, blinded by your tears. You plunge into ordinary things, and in their matter-of-fact way they receive you. But they cannot conceal your changed world for very long.

The horrified friends of the slain found each other in the crowd and stumbled home -- which was not really home, only a rented room above someone else's house.

Mostly they did not speak. Someone put a plate of food in front of them and they picked at it. They went to bed as soon as they could, seeking the oblivion of sleep. It came in fits and starts, scraps of dreams and then horrid awakenings, to a nightmare that was real.

Those who had lost people before knew that the horror doesn't last forever. You get better in time. This they knew. But they also knew that it was too soon for that knowledge to be of any comfort at all. This would be like all the other losses, they knew: permanent.

We leave them in the upper room, shocked and sick at heart. They do not know how the story ends, because it hasn't ended, not for them. We are the ones who know. Back through centuries we send them love and try to send them hope: *Dear grandfathers, look up! Your sorrow is almost over. The feast is at hand. It is coming to you soon!*

HOLY SATURDAY

April 7, 2007

This is not the weather for which one might hope -- Easter comes early this year, and it would have been foolish to count on sun and warmth. These things happen, of course; next year, Easter will be even earlier, March 23rd, just about as early as it can get. We may not get another nice warm one until 2011, when Easter will fall on April 24th. Watch it rain.

With these and sourer thoughts, Holy Saturday begins. In the absence of a liturgical marker for the day, as opposed to the festival tonight, there is only feverish activity on the part of the altar guild to ready the church for the vigil, and more feverish activity in the office as the priest fiddles with the sermon and readies the baptismal register, suspecting that everyone else in the clericus probably had all this stuff done a week ago last Wednesday. There has been more than the usual amount of preaching of late, and it is difficult to find something else that needs saying.

Perhaps at least part of this day belongs elsewhere. Perhaps it is a day for home, a day to get out of the office as quickly as you can, to finish up the altar and get yourself home. Perhaps the last sermon of your preaching marathon is about as good as it's going to get. Perhaps it is a day to play some beautiful music and think a bit, as you go about mindless homely tasks, allowing the highly charged beauty of Thursday and the starkness of Friday to settle into your spirit, a day to remember with charity toward yourself how life, thought and reflex all slow when one is bereaved, and to give yourself a break.

Tomorrow you will dress a bit better than usual, perhaps, under your cassock. Perhaps you bought something new to wear tomorrow, if you are a layperson, something bright and springlike. Tomorrow might not be the day for it. They say it might snow.

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