

Maundy Thursday '19
April 18, 2019
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Religious relics aren't usually a topic of great interest for journalists, but this past week the Holy Stairs, the *Scala Sancta*, in Rome and the Crown of Thorns in Paris have been front page news. Both last weekend's Gospel, the Passion according to St. Luke, and tomorrow night's, the Passion according to St. John, talk about the religious leaders sending Jesus to be judged by Pilate in the wee hours between Thursday night's arrest and Friday's crucifixion. Tradition has it that there was a staircase in Pilate's headquarters that Jesus ascended to be interrogated by Pilate and that He descended again after His brutal flogging.

Some travelers among us may have seen those Holy Stairs, **but** while visiting Rome, not Jerusalem. Somehow a legend sprang up that Constantine's mother, Helen, had the stairs transported to Rome in the early 4th century, soon after Christianity became legal. That staircase has been a destination for Christian pilgrims ever since. People ascend on their knees, reflecting on our Lord's suffering and death, as an act of penance, sorrow for their sin. So many people have done so that there are grooves worn in the marble steps themselves and also in the wooden covering created to save the steps from direct wear and tear. The imprint of countless knees, hands, feet, tell a tale of devotion. Exactly one week ago the stairs were reopened after 6 years of rehabilitation. For the next two months visitors will be able to touch the steps themselves; after that the refinished walnut covering will be in place again. Reflecting on the human need to touch things associated with those we love, one person said, "This need to touch is a concrete way of seeking the benediction [the blessing] of God."¹

Many believe, if Jesus walked these stairs **then**, and I ascend them on my knees **now**, **I'm brought especially close to Him**. When the stairs were taken apart for restoration, workmen found coins that either slipped out of people's pockets or were left there as an offering – and they also found photos and notes that pilgrims had squeezed through cracks, tucked behind the wood covering, like prayers wedged into the Wailing Wall.

Moving right along from Jerusalem to Rome to Paris: a Crown of Thorns, the “most precious and most venerated relic”² of Notre Dame, was thankfully saved from Monday’s fire. When Pastor Mark & I visited Notre Dame last October, we didn’t see that crown of thorns, because it was locked in a gold chest in the cathedral treasury. But we learned it was a gift to the cathedral from King Louis IX almost 800 years ago, and according to carbon dating it is approximately 2,000 years old. So important is that gold-filament-wrapped wreath made of rushes and thorns, which many believe is the crown our Lord wore when He was mocked by Pilate’s soldiers, so important is a 9 ½ inch fragment of wood and a 3 ½ inch nail that many believe were part of the True Cross, that Paris Fire Department chaplain Rev. Jean-Marc Fournier risked his life to find them and carry them to safety. Why are people fascinated with these visible, tangible things that may or may not have been part of the Passion of Our Lord? Because many people believe if we draw near to them, we draw near to Him, and that’s where we all **want** to be, right?

When Martin Luther was still an Augustinian monk, he walked over the Alps and made a pilgrimage to Rome. This is how Roland Bainton describes Luther’s experience in his classic biography of Luther, *“Here I Stand”*:

He was climbing Pilate’s stairs on hands and knees and repeating a *Pater Noster* [literally *Our Father*] for each one and kissing each step for good measure in the hope of delivering a soul from purgatory. Luther regretted that his own father and mother were not yet dead and in purgatory so that he might confer on them so signal a favor... The stairs were climbed, the *Pater Nosters* were repeated, the steps were kissed. At the top Luther raised himself and exclaimed... “Who knows whether it is so?”³

Luther later decided he definitely knew it **wasn’t** so! He was skeptical of relics, ultimately rejected the existence of purgatory as non-Scriptural, and passionately taught that we are saved by grace through faith, because of what Christ has done, not because of anything we could ever do, be it climbing stairs on our knees, saying the Lord’s Prayer a million times, or going on pilgrimage to the holiest or most far-flung of places. **But** there were other very important things of which he could say without any hesitation:

“This is most certainly true.”

In the *Small Catechism* Luther teaches about the Lord’s Supper which we celebrate tonight. He asks,

What is the Sacrament of the Altar? [He answers:]

It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine, instituted by Christ himself for us Christians to eat and to drink.

He says that in, with and under this blessed bread and wine we receive our Lord's Body and Blood, which bring **these** gifts: forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. "[Our] need to touch is a concrete way of seeking the benediction of God." Better than scaling those Holy Stairs (even if they were the same ones Jesus climbed), better than gazing upon that Crown of Thorns (even if it were the same one Jesus wore), better than touching that splinter of wood or that ghastly nail (even if they once served an angry purpose in a place called Calvary), is extending our hands to receive our King who comes in bread and wine.

Chaplain Fournier who rescued relics from Notre Dame also removed the reserved Eucharist from harm's way. Christ is more truly present in the bread and wine of Holy Communion than in any other physical object, even if it were the Holy Grail itself. But the fire chaplain didn't do his duty alone. There was a daisy chain of people passing treasures from hand to hand, from threat of flames to safety. That's how God often works: harnessing the strength of the Body of Christ to save.

We **all** touch our Lord in one another: holding hands for the Lord's Prayer, singing songs, linking arms to serve those in need, welcoming new arrivals to our land, embracing those who grieve, visiting the sick, teaching the children, tilling the ecumenical garden, weeding the church flower beds, changing the church light bulbs. This is most certainly true: wherever two or more of us gather in His name, He is present in power. We worship a crucified and risen Lord who has promised, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (Matt. 28:20) May the Holy Spirit help us recognize, love, serve Him whenever He appears, no matter the circumstance, no matter the cost. Amen

¹Elisabetta Povoledo, "Restoring Marble Stairs Pilgrims Climbed on Knees," *New York Times* (Thursday, April 11, 2019), A6.

²Elian Peltier, "Racing Against Flames, Chaplain Led Rescue of Cathedral's Sacred Artifacts," *New York Times* (Thursday, April 18, 2019), A9.

³Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1978), p. 38.