

The Washington Post

April 14, 2017

The hope of pardon and peace

by [Michael Gerson](#)

The story of Good Friday — the garden, the bloody sweat, the sleeping friends, the torch-carrying crowd, the kiss, the slash of a sword, the questioning, the scourging, the mocking, the beam, the nails, the despair of a good man — is an invitation to cynicism. Nearly every human institution is revealed at its worst.

Government certainly comes off poorly, giving Jesus the bureaucratic shuffle, with no one wanting to take responsibility, until a weak leader gives in to the crowd in the name of keeping the peace. “What is truth?” asks Pontius Pilate, with a sneer typical of politics to this day.

Professional men of religion do not appear in their best light. They are violently sectarian and judgmental and turn to the state to enforce their beliefs. “Jesus was not brought down by atheism and anarchy,” theologian [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) sharply observes. “He was brought down by law and order allied with religion, which is always a deadly mix.”

The crowd does not acquit itself well, turning hostile and cruel as quickly as an Internet mob, first putting palms beneath his feet, then thorns upon his brow.

Even friendship comes in for a beating. The men closest to Jesus slept while his enemies are fully awake. There is betrayal by a close, disgruntled associate. And then Peter’s spastic violence and cowardly denials. The women — all the assorted Marys — come off far better in the narrative. But Jesus is essentially abandoned to face his long, suffocating death alone.

And, for a moment, even God seems to fail, vanishing into a shocking silence. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” says Jesus, in words that many of his followers would want to erase from the Bible. How could the Son of God be subject to despair? G.K. Chesterton called Christianity the only religion in which “God seemed for an instant to be an atheist.”

Consider how the world appeared at the finish of Good Friday. It would have seemed that every source of order, justice and comfort — politics, institutional religion, the community, friendship — had been discredited. It was the cynic's finest hour. And God Himself seemed absent or unmoved, turning cynicism toward nihilism. Every ember of human hope was cold. And there was nothing to be done about it.

Then something happened. There was disagreement at the time, as now, on what that something was. According to the story, Pilate posted a guard at the tomb with the instruction: "Make it as secure as you can." Then the cynics somehow lost control of the narrative. There was an empty tomb and wild reports of angels and ghosts. And the claim of resurrection.

Even those who believe the body was moved must confront certain facts. Faith in the figure who Rome executed has far outlasted the Roman Empire. The cowardly friends became bold missionaries, most dying torturous deaths (according to tradition) for the sake of a figure they had once betrayed in their sleep. The faith thus founded has given the mob — all of us, even the ones who mock, especially the ones who mock — the hope of pardon and peace.

For believers, the complete story of Good Friday and Easter legitimizes both despair and faith. Nearly every life features less-than-good Fridays. We grow tired of our own company and travel a descending path of depression. We experience lonely pain, unearned suffering or stinging injustice. We are rejected or betrayed by a friend. And then there are the unspeakable things — the death of a child, the diagnosis of an aggressive cancer, the steady advance of a disease that will take our minds and dignity. We look into the abyss of self-murder. And given the example of Christ, we are permitted to feel God-forsaken.

And yet . . . eventually . . . or so we trust . . . or so we try to trust: God is forever on the side of those who suffer. God is forever on the side of life. God is forever on the side of hope.

If the resurrection is real, death's hold is broken. There is a truth and human existence that cannot be contained in a tomb. It is possible to live lightly, even in the face of death — not by becoming hard and strong, but through a confident perseverance. Because cynicism is the failure of patience. Because Good Friday does not have the final word.