

Holy Week, 2021



Dear friends,

The Gospel narratives during Holy Week tell a familiar story, this time a story that is particularly poignant. What has always been touching about these Holy Week readings is felt more deeply this time. From our socially distant places away from our families, friends and praying communities, the Gospel writers speak of the intimacy of Jesus and his disciples had at their prescribed ritual meal. Yet one of them betrays him with a kiss, that universal sign of friendship and affection. Our own story merges with the account of another disciple lying as he denies knowing Jesus. Others flee fearing that the violent mob that surrounds Jesus will seize them as well. His Mother and the women who are also his followers stay helplessly at his side and watch the drama unfold. The distress of a hurried burial of Jesus is lessened a little by the respectful placing of his body in a borrowed tomb having been hastily wrapped in a linen sheet.

Isolated, feeling helpless, fearful, surrounded with lies and betrayal, we witness our own story of a country besieged with insurrection, violence and racial hate. Unbelieving citizens claim “freedom,” dismiss the dangers of pandemic disease and ignore the safety measures that science and medicine urge upon us daily. Numb to the astonishing news that there have been over a half million victims of the disease, we stand at a distance and see the shocking scene — refrigerated trucks parked outside hospitals that serve as overflow morgues. From a distance we watch the burials of our loved ones and wonder when we can safely gather to grieve their loss. We find our story woven into the Gospel narrative in ways it has not been there before.

This is hardly a joyful Easter story of victory over death, but rather, one that tells the truth that is impossible to deny. This time we are closer to the disciples’ incomprehension. Ours are not the Easter alleluias I wish I could sing. As I wove palm fronds on Palm Sunday evening this year, I wondered how I might bring them to family and friends as a symbol of our common journey toward discovering an empty tomb and singing our alleluias.

It is when I recall the story of the two disciples meeting Jesus on the way to Emmaus that something closer to the Easter alleluias I long for begins to happen for me. The Gospel account says that their hearts were burning as they listened to Jesus who appears as a stranger to explain the scriptures, giving meaning to what they had lived through the previous three days. Recognizing him when he broke bread that evening where they had stopped for the night, becomes a call to recognize Jesus in every stranger we see, all the “outsiders” who don’t look like us, or pray like us, or speak the same language we speak.

It just may be possible that a spark to ignite our hearts from sadness and grief into hearts on fire that begins to heal our collective brokenness. Will healing begin when we recognize strangers as brothers and sisters and invite them to sit in the chairs left empty by those who have died during this long pandemic night?

Our Orthodox Christian sisters and brothers chant “alleluias” during their liturgical prayer on “Holy Friday” night. I’m told it is because they do not separate the Paschal Mystery of the death of Jesus from his resurrection, not even for a day. Rather, they are kept together even on Friday of Holy Week. During the very moving “Holy Friday” evening prayer service in which the icon of the dead body of Jesus is symbolically buried, alleluias are chanted. When I first heard this at the evening service I attended, I thought to myself, “They are simply unable to wait for the resurrection they know is coming.”

In the midst of our sorrow and despondency we can sing our alleluias this year, perhaps more softly than usual, hoping that our singing will usher in the new life we long for as God’s people.

alleluia, alleluia, alleluia, - Joseph Kilikevice

