

Message: “What Does This Mean?”

What does this mean? Jesus’ death on a cross is one of the most monumental and significant events in history. Lives are changed because of it and wars have been fought over it. A lot of people don’t know the circumstances, but anyone who is Christian, Jewish, Muslim or associated with people who are know how Jesus died. To paraphrase Andy Stanley, that may be everybody.

What does this mean? On the day Jesus died, there were no Christians. There were no believers. There were only mourners and people who were grieving and afraid. Those who had followed Jesus – his friends, family and others, were filled with fear, doubt and uncertainty about what would happen next.

What does this mean? For more than a year, the world has been gripped by a pandemic. It doesn’t matter how old you are, where you were born, what language you speak, how much money you have, what gender or sexual orientation you identify with, what tone your skin is, what political affiliation you claim, or whether you believe it or not, all of us are threatened. We’re suffering from trauma and grief.

Worldwide, more than 3 million people have died from COVID-19. The death toll in the United States has passed 550,000. 1,000 family members, friends and neighbors are dying each day.¹ We have lost family members, members of our congregations and friends in Corona, Norco, Riverside and the community around us. We feel the losses personally. Esperanza and I share your grief. We have lost three family members to COVID-19. Our prayers are with you.

But that’s not the only trauma and grief we face. There have been seven mass shootings in seven days. Our hearts, minds and prayers are with those who have lost loved ones, those injured and those who committed such heinous acts. Some of these shootings were racially motivated. Assaults on Asian-Americans are at a high. Others are due to mental illness. Every day, we’re inundated with news of trauma, violence, illness, disease, addiction and more.

¹ Source: Reuters, <https://graphics.reuters.com/world-coronavirus-tracker-and-maps/countries-and-territories/united-states/>

The world we live in is unwell. We are under great stress. It comes out in our interactions with each other – we are less patient and forgiving. It comes out in our feelings of loneliness and isolation. It comes out in our feelings of hopelessness and despair.

We know how Jesus' family and friends felt when they watched him, stripped, beaten, humiliated, bleeding and struggling to breathe as he hung on the cross. They couldn't go to him to offer comfort. They could only watch from a distance with tear-filled eyes and broken hearts.

What does Jesus on a cross mean? If we're honest, we struggle to understand it. Our minds go to the question most often asked, "If God exists, why would God allow this to happen?" That's the top question asked by people who don't believe AND people who do believe.

The struggle to understand suffering is one of the hardest to answer and one of the biggest barriers to faith. Some people have written God off because of what they have gone through. After all, if God exists, surely God wouldn't have allow THAT to happen.

There are NO easy answers to the question. I can't explain it. All I know is this: Jesus' death on the cross was, somehow, mysteriously necessary. Jesus didn't want to die, but he freely and willingly gave his life for us. Jesus went against our human inclination to avoid suffering and death. Dying on a cross, Jesus forces us to see the truth with open eyes: every one of us will die. We are not immortal or indestructible. It's better for us to realize the truth of the way life and the world are, rather than to live in a child's world of illusion and fantasy.

"Suffering and death belong on the road Jesus travels. Jesus doesn't glorify them, or call them beautiful, good, or something to be desired. Jesus doesn't call for heroism or suicidal self-sacrifice. Jesus invites us to look at the reality of our existence and reveals this harsh reality as the way to new life. The core message of Jesus is that real joy and peace can never be reached while bypassing suffering and death, but only by going right through them."²

² Source: Henri Nouwen Society, daily devotion, 3/27/2021, henrinouwen.org

We could say: “We really have no choice.” After all, no one escapes suffering and death. Yet there IS a choice. We can deny the reality of life or we can face it. When we see life with the eyes of Jesus, we discover that where we least expect it, there’s something hidden.

God keeps a promise that’s stronger than death itself. Jesus lived his life trusting that God’s love is stronger than death. Therefore, death doesn’t have the last word. Jesus invites us to face the painful reality of our existence with the same trust in God. This is what this season, this moment and our faith is all about.

What does this mean? To me, it means Jesus’ death on the cross isn’t the end of the story. It’s the end of one of Jesus’ missions, his work here on earth, and the beginning of the next. Evil doesn’t win. Suffering and death aren’t the final threat. Chaos, lies, pain, depression and anxiety can be calmed and tamed by a word from God.

Still not sure what it means? I think there’s a cue hidden in plain sight in John’s narrative. While the soldiers were busy, Jesus’ mother Mary, his aunt Mary and Mary Magdalene came and stood at the foot of the cross. John, the disciple Jesus loved, was with Mary, Jesus’ mother.

Jesus offers a final act of love. He said to his mother, “*Here is your son.*” And he said to John, “*Here is your mother*” (John 19:26-27). From that moment on, John accepted and cared for Mary as his own mother. Jesus cares. He loves us. Jesus died so our identity and life in him would be complete. There’s no sorrow or pain we can’t bring to him that will be met with scorn. He receives us with compassion.

Jesus’ death on the cross is an act of love so deep, so powerful and so compassionate it shifts all of creation. No longer are we on a path to death without hope because we’re separated from God. God’s promise is true. God spoke through the prophet Isaiah, “*I have sworn not to be angry with you, never to rebuke you again. Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed,*” says the Lord, who has compassion on you” (Isaiah 54:9-10, NIV). Even in the moment of his death, Jesus shows he cares and he invites us to care for one another.

What does it mean? It means we have hope, even in our grief.

John 19:23-30, 38-42 (CEB)

When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and his sandals, and divided them into four shares, one for each soldier. His shirt was seamless, woven as one piece from the top to the bottom. They said to each other, "Let's not tear it. Let's cast lots to see who will get it." This was to fulfill the scripture,

*They divided my clothes among themselves,
and they cast lots for my clothing.* (Psalm 22:18)

That's what the soldiers did.

Jesus' mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene stood near the cross. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that time on, this disciple took her into his home.

After this, knowing that everything was already completed, in order to fulfill the scripture, Jesus said, "I am thirsty." A jar full of sour wine was nearby, so the soldiers soaked a sponge in it, placed it on a hyssop branch, and held it up to his lips. When he had received the sour wine, Jesus said, "It is completed." Bowing his head, he gave up his life. [...]

After this Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate if he could take away the body of Jesus. Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but a secret one because he feared the Jewish authorities. Pilate gave him permission, so he came and took the body away. Nicodemus, the one who at first had come to Jesus at night, was there too. He brought a mixture of myrrh and aloe, nearly seventy-five pounds in all. Following Jewish burial customs, they took Jesus' body and wrapped it, with the spices, in linen cloths. There was a garden in the place where Jesus was crucified, and in the garden was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. Because it was the Jewish Preparation Day and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus in it.