

"Rolling Away the Stone of Empire"
Reflections on Good Friday and Easter, 2005
by Ched Myers

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It is a longstanding church tradition to read the whole of the Passion narrative on Good Friday. This ancient story invites believers to reflect on the meaning of the arrest, trial and execution of the one we call Messiah. This morning, because we have other important things to attend to, such as blocking the entrance to Livermore Labs, we will only read the culmination to Mark's version of this terrible tale. We will read it mindfully and prayerfully, in three parts, reflecting as we go on this Word as it confronts our World.

I. Mk 15:16-32: The Via Crucis Today

We pick Mark's story up just as a show trial before the imperial procurator has sealed Jesus' doom, the crowd having turned against him. The convicted prisoner is marched, in the grand tradition of Roman conquest, to the site of execution, a display of public humiliation and official intimidation (15:21f). Mark's narrative, which began with John the Baptist heralding a Way through the wilderness (1:2f) just before he got whacked by Herod, now concludes with Jesus walking the Way of the Cross. Neil Elliott, a N.T. scholar & activist Episcopal priest, pointed out recently that last year at this time, two images of torture were fascinating and troubling the American public. One was

Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ*, which opened in theaters nationwide, sparking much controversy. Critics... contended it portrayed a sadomasochistic theology of atonement. Others countered that the grotesque suffering of a bloodied Jesus was the sublime point, and found the movie all the more devotionally powerful... In the same weeks ... the Abu Ghraib photos broke... fueling a different debate. In one of the most notorious images in human history, a man stands, barefoot, balanced precariously on a bare wooden box. He has been stripped, then covered in a rough woollen blanket, a hood pulled over his head. His arms are stretched out from his body, electrical wires trailing from clips on his fingertips.... He is a figure of abject terror... a prisoner of U.S. forces... His anonymous form has become the internationally-recognized symbol of abuse and torture, and for many around the world, of American brutality and arrogance.

"What I find troubling," continues Elliott, "is the tremendous distance in the American psyche between the figures of Gibson's Bleeding Jesus and Abu Ghraib's Hooded Man." He wonders why millions of Americans were in tears watching Jesus suffer under Roman torturers, while "the anonymous Iraqi does not merit our sympathy." Instead, White House counsel (now Attorney General) Alberto Gonzales argued about what exactly might qualify as torture. "There is a perverse symmetry," Elliott concludes, "between these two representations... of torture."

In Gibson's film, the soldiers who apply whips and iron-tipped flails to Jesus' back are depicted as rogue sadists. Former Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger described the abuse at Abu Ghraib in his report as 'Animal House on the night shift.' Higher up the chain of command, however, Pontius Pilate is portrayed as a decent married man, horrified by the violence he discovers has been inflicted on Jesus. Surely, we are meant to imagine, he would have stopped it if he'd known. The film lingers over Pilate's anguish; after all, he bears the awful burden of carrying out the empire's noble project, bringing justice and civilization to a bunch of violence-prone, tribal thugs... Such great and rough work inevitably involves 'accidents,' or what a general investigating Abu Ghraib nervously termed 'confusion incidents...' The symmetry of qualification and denial [between Gibson's Pilate and the Bush administration's reactions to Abu Ghraib] leads to a disturbing rhetorical question: would the legal minds shaping policy for our current administration even have regarded the crucifixion of Jesus as 'torture'?

Mark's narrative of Jesus' *via crucis* has almost nothing in common with Mel Gibson's version, but everything to do with Abu Ghraib. The gospel story is echoed in the current U.S. occupation of Iraq: an occupying imperial army chases a small band of dissidents, using undercover operations and midnight arrests to grab them, kangaroo courts and forced confessions to convict them, and torture and death to punish them.

While the way of the cross in Gibson's film is an agonizing, interminable study in blood pietism, Mark's version is spare and grim, needing no embellishment. This is because in the first century, the cross could have scarcely been further from a religious icon. Rather it represented an imperial spectacle which functioned to deter subversives and to aggrandize the Roman military presence. The cross inspired not beatific sorrow in the beholder, as in the Gibson film, but rather sheer terror. To "civilized" Romans, it represented a form of capital punishment considered so inhumane that Cicero once urged that it be "banished from the body and life of Roman citizens." To restive imperial subjects it conjured the fate awaiting those who dared challenge Caesar's sovereignty. But to Jesus the cross was the stark symbol of the cost of true discipleship to God's sovereignty.

The prisoner would normally carry his own execution stake, but Jesus, too weak from torture is relieved by a peasant forcibly recruited for the task by the impatient soldiers. Jesus is offered wine to deaden the pain, but he refuses (15:23). Mark's simple phrase "and they crucified him..." would have conjured in his first century audience's mind horrific images of flesh being nailed to wood. The Roman soldiers divided up Jesus' clothes as souvenirs--not unlike U.S. soldiers mugging in photographs with their humiliated Iraqi captives. Jesus is nailed up at the "third hour" (the first of Mark's three "watches" of the cross), and left to asphyxiate under Pilate's sarcastic sign identifying him as "King of the Jews" (15:25f).

Gathered at Golgotha like a tableau are representatives of the whole spectrum of ancient Judean politics. Nationalist rebels flank him on right and left hand, and join the passersby in ridiculing Jesus (15:29f). Even the local authorities are there, joining the chorus of contempt (15:31f). Presiding over the sordid scene is a Roman centurion, while watching in horror from afar are a few female disciples (see 15:39f).

There is an imploring tone to their taunt that Jesus "save himself." It seems that even his opponents desire a less ignominious end to this tragedy. Their plaintive cry is the pitiful culmination to the struggle for faith in Mark's story: "Come down from the cross so that we might see and believe" (15:32)! Indeed, they do not have "eyes to see" the meaning of this event—but do we see any more clearly in our time?

Denial and willful blindness are the handmaidens of empire, then and now. How is it that the American public last spring flocked to see a film about Jesus' suffering as an exercise in religious devotion, but failed to mount a popular groundswell of outrage about the torture chambers at Abu Ghraib? How can we celebrate the Resurrection Life of Jesus at Easter, but remain blissfully ignorant about the work of this place, Livermore Labs, where the next generation of nuclear weapons is being designed as we speak?

"Take up your cross and follow me," said Jesus to his disciples (Mk 8:34). But the *via crucis* today requires that we shed our denial and our insularity, and face squarely the violence of empire.

II. Mk 15:33-47: The Cross as the End of the World

When a human being is executed, a particular darkness enters the world. So in the wisdom of this ancient story, we are told that when the Human One is executed—representing in his body every person who has ever suffered and died as the result of injustice, oppression and violence—"darkness came over the whole land." It is a sort of cosmic protest—nature's moment of silent grief—and it is re-enacted every time folks vigil over at San Quentin for a death penalty victim.

Jesus screams his own rage against it all, Mark's last of 3 allusions to the lament of Psalm 22 (15:34; Ps 22:1). A bystander misinterprets this anguished Aramaic gasp as a petition to Elijah, the eschatological prophet who was supposed to rescue Israel from judgment (15:34f; see Mal 4:5f). But Mark's story offers no eleventh hour intervention, no deus ex machina, no Hollywood ending. We must stay with this darkness, because it still lingers around us in our own imperial moment. That is the spiritual discipline of Good Friday.

Here now is the great "apocalyptic moment" in Mark's story. The darkness recalls the time when Yahweh blotted out the sun for three days over Pharaoh's Egypt to aid Moses in his struggle against an earlier imperial order presided over by the sun god Ra. For Mark it also symbolizes the unraveling of the cosmic Domination System, promised by Jesus in his last sermon. Quoting Isaiah's oracles of judgment on empire (13:10; 34:4), he warned that:

After the great suffering, the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.
Then they will see the Human One coming
in great power and glory (13:24f).

In apocalyptic language, this means that the cross is a revelation of the only power potent enough to undo the rule of the Principalities: the power of nonviolent love.

So what do we see as we "behold the wondrous cross"? Is it Jesus reviled in agony, just another victim of imperial justice? Or is it the Human One revealed in glory, bringing down the rule of Domination? To help us, Mark narrates a second "sign." As Jesus' body expires in a great death-rattle we are told that the Temple curtain is "torn" in two (15:37f). This torn curtain confirms the fundamental conflict between Jesus' "body" (symbolizing the power of healing and liberation, 14:22) and the institutionalized legal-cultic-political system of oppression. In other words, Jesus' death has exposed a fatal crack in the seemingly invincible façade of the Domination system.

Twenty-five years ago yesterday, on March 24, 1980, Archbishop Oscar Romero was gunned down while celebrating Mass in San Salvador. The murder of this follower of Jesus also exposed the weakness of oppressive power. An outspoken defender of the Salvadoran poor, Romero was part of a liberation theology movement that was renewing the Catholic Church throughout Latin America in the '70s and '80s, and which was brutally suppressed by U.S. backed authoritarian regimes.

Romero's story and our Mark's Passion narrative illuminate one another, revealing that the worlds of imperial past and present are not so different. Today we remember Oscar Romero not only for his witness as a Christian martyr, but also because that painful chapter in El Salvador's history is being invoked by the Bush administration as exemplary for situation in Iraq. Mark Engler reminds us of the context:

During El Salvador's long conflict, which stretched from the late 1970s to 1992, the country's government and its paramilitary death squads murdered some 75,000 citizens... Romero was resolute in his response to this situation. He insisted on the need to "denounce the social structures that give rise to and perpetuate the misery" of the people... The U.S. had a significant role in supporting the government responsible for rampant human rights abuses. Six weeks before his death, Romero wrote to President Jimmy Carter, warning that increased military aid would "undoubtedly sharpen the injustice and the repression inflicted on the organized people, whose struggle has often been for their most basic human rights." Carter, wary of being tagged with "another Nicaragua," ignored the plea. Presidents Reagan and George H.W. Bush later sent hundreds of millions of dollars worth of armaments, aid, and advisers.

When the Salvadoran regime put this support to murderous use, officials like Elliott Abrams built their careers by denying, obscuring, or minimizing the harrowing abuses. Today, Abrams is the newly appointed deputy national security adviser to President Bush, responsible for coordinating the administration's efforts to "advance democracy" abroad.

...In past months, officials including Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld have held up El Salvador as a model of successful U.S. intervention, relevant to Iraq and Afghanistan... Romero's martyrdom has done little to alter conservatives' view that the Latin American "dirty wars" were a matter... of "totalitarianism vs. democracy..."

"Until our country comes to terms with its role in the history of El Salvador's conflict," Engler concludes, "we will be condemned to accept a vision of U.S. infallibility that neither allows us to appreciate Archbishop Romero's moral example, nor to ensure that events like those that led to his murder will never be repeated."

So we are left keeping vigil at the foot of "the old rugged cross," remembering all who have fallen in resistance to militarism and empire. Alongside us are three gospel characters, symbolizing the reactions of the three main political groups to the drama. A Roman soldier dutifully reports Jesus' death to Pilate (15:44f). A Judean

official procures Jesus' body and throws it in a makeshift tomb, so that the corpse will not profane the Sabbath, disdaining the rudimentary obligations of a proper Jewish burial (15:42-46). As for the followers of Jesus, the only ones left on the scene are some women, keeping vigil. It is they who, as we shall see in a minute, represent the lifeline of Mark's narrative.

Throughout this Passion story Mark switches to the historical present tense, as if to draw us into the drama, asking us where we ourselves stand in it. And is there not a part of us in each character here? Surely we can identify with the male disciples, who abandoned Jesus at the first whiff of confrontation. Isn't there a part of us in the women, able only to watch the proceedings from a safe distance, incredulous and numb? And how often do we join in the howls of protest against this ending, or wag our heads in pity, or even feel twinges of sarcasm, like the centurion? Indeed, this spectacle demands an explanation! Does the universe bend toward justice or not? And what about all those who have dared hope for a better world, only to see justice deferred, again and again. Who of us really is prepared to accept that this Cross is the way to liberation?

The shadow of this cross extends to our own time. The fate of Jeremiah and John the Baptist and Jesus was also shared by Gandhi and King and Romero. And what of Bryan Wilson's witness on the tracks not too far from here, or of Rachel Corrie in Palestine, or of Dorothy Stang in Brazil, the American nun murdered last month as she tried to stop illegal logging? The unflinching realism of the gospel stipulates that those who speak nonviolent truth to Power must face the consequences. That is why so few of us seem to have the courage, character and conviction necessary to walk the via crucis.

But the cross of nonviolence is the only way to change a world locked in a spiral of violence, to liberate a history held hostage by the nuclear weapons designed right here at Livermore. Mr. Bush, Mr. Cheney, Ms. Rice: were you there when they crucified my Lord?

III. Mk 16:1-8: Who Will Roll Away the Stone?

When Joseph rolled that stone over the entrance of Jesus' tomb, it seemed like a final, cruel closure to the story of God's sovereignty (15:46). Jesus was dead, the Powers had prevailed, and Peter, James and John were nowhere to be seen. We are left only with three women: Mary, Mary and Salome. Mark tells us that they "had been following Jesus and practicing servanthood and had come up to Jerusalem with him" (15:40f). Which is to say, these women, unlike the men, were true disciples. Which is why they are still there, witnessing the terror of the cross. And they are about to witness something even more disturbing.

Mark closes his Passion narrative with the simple indication that these three women "saw where Joseph laid Jesus' body" (15:47). Charitable guilds of Jerusalem women were known to be present after executions in order to assure proper burial. So these women are attempting to salvage some dignity by re-burying Jesus according to custom; thus they bring spices to the tomb early in the morning after the Sabbath (16:1f). It would have been a risky act for them to demonstrate solidarity with so notorious a political dissident. But they are determined to fulfill the duty of last respects, to weep over Jesus' corpse and muster brave eulogies. So at dawn they trudge to the tomb, numb from that aching, inconsolable emptiness that comes from hope crushed. This was the last, pitiless leg of their discipleship journey, ending at the cemetery of their dreams for a better world.

Yet cruelly, even the therapeutic ritual of mourning is denied. For the entrance to the makeshift tomb is sealed shut by a boulder that "was very large" (16:5). They halt in their tracks, pulled up short. "Who will roll away this stone?" they cry to no one in particular (16:4). Is there not in this anguished question an echo of Sisyphean tragedy? What an abrupt and bitter closure to the story!

But there is one more scene, and upon it hinges the possibility of a non-imperial future. "When they looked again, they saw that the stone had been rolled away" (16:4). The verb "to see again" was used by Mark in his stories of the two blind men (8:25; 10:51f). It represents his master metaphor for a faith that looks fearlessly at the way things are, yet sees the way things can be. We might translate it literally: "to re-vision." In Mark's Easter narrative the weary old story of the world, in which the Powers always win and the poor always lose, is radically "revised." The great stone of impediment has been removed.

But how? Neither by human muscle, nor technology, nor any other Promethean scheme. The verb here expresses the perfect tense and the passive voice -- the grammar of divine action. This stone has been rolled away by an ulterior leverage, by a force from beyond the bounds of this story and our history, with the power to regenerate both. This intervention comes from outside the constraints of natural or civic law and order, from the One who is unobligated to the State and its cosmologies, radically free yet bound in Passion to us. Mark continues the old biblical argument with Sisyphus and Prometheus: nothing we can do could move this stone. By Grace it has already been rolled away for us. If we look with revisionist eyes.

Improbably the tomb, and with it the future, has been re-opened. Tentatively the women move forward, only to find that their noble mission is no longer needed. Peering around in the dim light of the cave they make out the figure of a "young

man" sitting alone (16:5). He is "dressed in a white robe," the apparel of martyrdom (9:3; see Rev 7:9,13). "Don't be incredulous," he says to the women. "You're looking for Jesus of Nazareth, the one they executed? He is risen. He's not here where they put him. See for yourself." (16:6). The women look around frantically, their heads swimming, their hearts grinding to a halt. Don't be incredulous?! That doesn't begin to describe their confusion at this inconceivable news, this absurd contention. Is it possible that neither the Executioner's deathgrip nor the imperial seal have really prevailed? This epilogue presents us with the most dangerous of memories, a living one; the most subversive of stories, a never-ending one.

Ten days from now peace activists will gather at the Riverside Church in New York City to commemorate the thirty eighth anniversary of Martin Luther King's famous "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break the Silence" speech, from which we have been hearing excerpts this morning. It was delivered on a Spring day in 1967, to a gathering of Clergy and Laymen Concerned about the War in Vietnam. King made the following plea:

This madness must cease. We must stop now. I speak as a child of God and brother to the suffering poor of Vietnam. I speak for those whose land is being laid waste, whose homes are being destroyed, whose culture is being subverted. I speak for the poor of America who are paying the double price of smashed hopes at home and death and corruption in Vietnam. I speak as a citizen of the world, for the world as it stands aghast at the path we have taken. I speak as an American to the leaders of my own nation. The great initiative in this war is ours. The initiative to stop it must be ours.

Exactly one year later almost to the hour, Dr. King was gunned down in Memphis. As you have heard, this speech resonates powerfully with our present moment, as the war in Iraq drags on. So on April 4th, peace activists will from Riverside's pulpit again call Americans to take the initiative to "stop the war." King's challenge to resist the "giant triplets" of militarism, racism and poverty represented a radical, re-visionary and prophetic word, which on this Good Friday, 38 years later, we embrace. Like Romero, King had eyes to see the violence and injustice, and the promise of a "beloved community." Like Romero, he followed his Lord on the via crucis. And like Romero promised, King's vision will "rise in the people"—but only if we believe that even now, God is rolling away the stone of empire that blocks a human future—and act accordingly.

Jesus is Risen! But where has he gone? He is neither entombed (as the Romans planned) nor enthroned (as later church traditions imagined). Mark refuses to "show" him to us. His story concludes with the enigmatic messenger's invitation to the women to "Get up, go tell his disciples and Peter that he's going on ahead of you to

Galilee. There you will see him" (16:7). If we wish to encounter the Risen Jesus, we too must journey to where he is--ahead of us, still on the Way.

Terrified, we race with the women out of that tomb as if we have just seen a ghost. And so we have. For the only thing left in Jesus' empty tomb is the ghost of our imperial present and the promise of a non-imperial future. From deep within us, from that unexplored space beneath our profoundest hopes and fears, roars a tidal wave of "trauma and ecstasy" (16:8). God has heard our brokenhearted cries before the stone of impediment, and responded with another invitation to take up the cross and follow. So what will we do?

Today, on this holiest of days, we make a modest effort to "act accordingly" here at Livermore Labs. We follow in the footsteps of Jesus and King and Romero, as we march to the gates. We proclaim the good news of God's sovereignty that has no room for torture, no room for oppression, no room for nuclear weapons research and development. In the name of the Christ whom empire could not vanquish, we join the Spirit in rolling away that stone just a little bit more, so that our children may have a future.