

General Retreat of the Society of the Holy Trinity

Thursday Closing Service of the Word--Mark 14:12-20

The Rev. Dr. Ryan Mills, STS

*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Well, dear brothers and sisters, I am acutely aware that the only thing standing in between you and your free box lunch and your ride home is this sermon. So I will observe the *lex orandi*, the law of prayer, commanded by the patriarch of my first call in Texas: “Pastor, I don’t really care how you do worship. Just do the service from the book, tell us about Jesus, and make sure we get to lunch before the Baptists.” Amen?

Our Gospel lesson this morning finds the disciples in a position that no pastor, no minister of Word and Sacrament, can possibly relate to: they have no idea where they are headed, and no idea what they should be doing.

“Where do you want us to go and make the preparation for you to eat the Passover?” the disciples ask Jesus today. But this seemingly straightforward question is tinged with sorrow, with uncertainty, with *acedia*, and with even despair and death. As strangers to Jerusalem during the Passover, the most family-

centered of the feasts of Israel, the disciples have nowhere to go, nothing prepared, nothing ready for their Lord who has just been anointed for burial, and have no idea what they're supposed to be doing.

And as we return back to our homes and back to our ministries this afternoon, we can perhaps relate all the more to the position of the disciples. Sunday is coming, but not before tomorrow's funerals. Council and committee meetings loom, our phones will ding with impossible requests and with dashed hopes, the futures of our parishes seem increasingly fuzzy or even grim, and despite our education and letters of call and the support of our local saints and fellow members of this society, despite even our occasional zeal for the Lord, we too often feel as if we have nothing prepared, nowhere to go, and no idea what to do.

But as always, into our helplessness, into our discouragement, into our lonely sin and death, comes a word from the Lord this morning: "Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you, follow him, and wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house, 'The Teacher asks, Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready."

Christ provides the sign that leads to the place where everything is furnished and ready. "You will see a man carrying a jar of water," he says, a sign, under the

opposite, as it were, since carrying water was traditionally the province of women. “Follow the upside-down sign of a man carrying water,” says our Lord, follow under the sign of the opposite, follow under the holy Cross, follow under and through your doubt and uncertainty and despair and death, and be carried by those destroying, saving waters to the appointed place for Passover. As Tertullian once preached regarding this verse in his Sermon *On Baptism*, “Christ points out the Passover, by the sign of Baptism.”

And because you are baptized, Pastor, because God has chosen you and made you his own, because he has joined you to Christ’s death and so joined you to his Paschal rising, because of this upside-down daily drowning that brings us to life, you with Christ Pass-over daily from death to life, you are washed, forgiven, reborn, marked with the Cross of Christ and sealed by the Holy Spirit, robed in his righteousness, and you are brought into the place, into the reality, as Jesus promised, where everything is furnished and ready.

Everything is furnished and ready, because Christ has prepared everything by completing his saving work. He has accomplished your salvation, “It is finished,” he cries, and there is nothing you or I in our busyness can add to, or in our sin subtract from, what he has done, for you, for me, for the world, for all: “Behold the life-giving Cross, on which was hung the salvation of the whole world.”

Christ has prepared and made ready everything for you, everything for your parish, everything for all that you despair over, he has everything prepared and ready for you under the Cross, because he has given everything for you upon the Cross. For our Paschal Lamb has prepared a Passover feast of endless life and freedom by willingly giving himself to death and bondage. For you who have no idea where you are going, he has made himself the way. For you who do not know what to do, he has done it all. And for you who have no idea how you and your flocks can go forward, he has gone ahead and accomplished it.

For Christ is not afraid to prepare a feast of himself, and to give himself away completely for his family of sinners. “Look at the wonderful patience Christ shows as he dealt with his disciples,” St. Cyprian once observed. “He could eat calmly with his betrayer, with the one dipping his bread into the bowl with him.” It is the feast for washed and forgiven sinners, for those who know on their own they do not deserve it, a feast for you and me, a feast that by God’s wonderful mercy we are also authorized to preside, pray, and serve in, the feast of the one to whom the Passover points, the perfect Lamb who was slain, the Lamb of God who takest away the sin of the world, the Pass-over of Jesus Christ from death to life, bringing you and me still wet from that jar of water into the place where all is prepared, where all is ready, and where forgiveness, life, and salvation are yours through his true broken body and his precious poured-out blood.

It is the Eucharistic feast, the Lord's Supper, the Holy Communion, the Mass we have celebrated here, which, as Dr. Max Johnson said, some of us have not abolished, and to which we now return to in every nook and cranny of the Lutheran churches, as part of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church and the great Communion of Saints across every time and place. Maybe you don't know what you're doing or where you're going, but Christ has given you the true signs of his Word and Sacraments, and for you and for your ministry he has everything prepared and ready.

We go now, in the words of the prayer, "by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown," but following his sacramental signs: his jar of water that leads to his Supper, knowing that his hand leads us, and his love is supporting us, and that in Him everything is prepared and ready.

Amen.