

First of all, I do not want to preach an Easter sermon today. I want to preach a Passion Sunday sermon. Easter is next week, not today. As some preachers said, people move too fast to Jesus' empty tomb without spending enough time at the cross.

We have to take on what Passion Sunday means to us in its entirety; no trick, no detour, no easy answers!

We need to go a little deeper in our spiritual quest for meaning. We need to be honest; we need to be up front; we need to show ourselves that we are just humans.

Life is short and people have many struggles during this short time of life. That is the reality. A big part of life happens near the cross; suffering and violence is the reality of our life. So without tackling this issue of the cross, there is no real meaning of the resurrection.

The Christian Gospel is not cheap; it is rather demanding, with a lot of sacrifices on our part. I wish life could be all easy and good as some of the TV preachers promise.

We do not have to explain all this. All the news we hear tell us about the whole thing: the reality of life. We just heard that 13 people were killed by a gunman in New York. And another shooting took three police officers' lives in Pittsburgh, PA; this time it was all about a domestic dispute. We are still grieving over the deaths of several police officers in Oakland; and we hear new stories every day.

I was especially disturbed to find out the result of the trial I was part of as a juror last December. The local news says that the man who had been convicted by the jury was sentenced to 50 years of prison term.

He is only 25. I saw his face every day while I was on jury; he was a fine looking young man. But I was one of the people who told the judge that he was guilty; the man had to be told that what he had done was wrong and he deserved some kind of punishment.

But at the same time, I was so sad when I heard that he would spend the rest of his life in prison! But what hurt me more was that we do not have any other alternative; people may call it justice; but isn't it another violence that we need to spend \$50,000 a year for the next 50 years just to keep this young man behind bars while there are thousands of school teachers who are worried about their layoffs because of money?

We live in a very violent world; we do not have to talk about the crazy North Korean government that tries to launch a missile while millions of their people are starving; violence is everywhere; I just don't know what to say.

And today, Mark's Gospel talks about just that: we have four Gospels in the New Testament; but each Gospel is different in its perspective, content, and mood each book is describing. Especially, Mark's Gospel is very unique; if I borrow a word from Werner Kelber, a NT scholar at Rice University:

Mark's passion narrative is shrouded in darkness, gloom, and tragedy. More than in Matthew, Luke, and John, his is the story of an execution, of the victim's God-forsakenness, and of the demise of the victim's closest followers. There is an oppression air hovering over the final days, and almost no relief from the horror of death. Divine intervention is not forthcoming during Jesus' hours of suffering....There is ... no resurrection appearance to lighten up and overcome the

anguish. (Werner H. Kelber, *Mark's Story of Jesus* (Philadelphia: fortress Press, 1979), 71. Cited from Richard Jensen, *Preaching Mark's Gospel*, 193)

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus is powerless at least before the cross; he feels that God has abandoned him. It is a very sad and gloomy picture.

And especially in today's text, 14:32-42 where Jesus is praying at Mt. Gethsemane, Jesus is very confused. But for me, this is the best part of the whole book: even Jesus, the Son of God, was troubled and confused when he was facing the trouble time.

He says in verse 34, “My soul is deeply grieved to the point of death.” And in verse 36, he is asking God to rescue him if that was possible. Wow!

I think Mark is a great theologian/preacher. He is trying to tell his church that what they were going through was understandable; he is saying that even Jesus was confused.

Mark, probably as pastor of this suffering community under the Roman persecution, saw the gloomy and gruesome reality of what was going on; and he wanted to remind his people of Jesus, and what he had gone through moments before his death.

As a pastor, there was nothing Mark could do for his people when things were going from bad to worse. Violence was all over; Christians were turned over and killed just because they were Christians, nothing else.

There was no such thing as justice; to him, God was just silent even though they prayed, prayed, and prayed. People were

confused; people were wondering if God really existed!

As we hear and see the same reality of violence today, I think of Mark and his church. I don't know what I would say to them if I were the pastor of one of the victims' churches in Binghamton, NY or here in Oakland, CA.

My 17 years of theological education and Ph.D in theology would not be helpful at all; all I have to do would be just cry with them.

To me, the reality of violence we face is too big to explain.

No wonder, according to Mark, even Jesus was grieved and did not know what to do. But there is one thing Jesus tried to show his disciples; he was committed to God even in his troubles; he said, “Remove this cup from me; yet not what I want, but what you want.”

In other words, in the midst of spiritual agony and struggle, Jesus realized that he had to be faithful to God's will, no matter what.

We all know how Jesus got to his empty tomb; we know there is Easter because of the cross Jesus took upon his shoulder.

The only way for us to get to that empty tomb, the victory of promise, is the passion we need to endure, the cross we need to bear for the cause of the Gospel, the suffering we need to go through.

The world is a violent place; yes, evil seems to prevail all over; yes, there is darkness hovering over us. But that does not mean God has disappeared. The very first Palm Sunday

turned into a Passion Sunday 2000 years ago; that was sad.

But here is this good news for all who are faithful to God; Easter is waiting for us. The time of promise is ahead of us in God’s faithfulness.

For the followers of Jesus Christ, “success” must be understood as faithfulness; if I have done what God has called me to do, then I have succeeded.

Those faithful people may not necessarily become high and rich in the world; but they will see beyond their suffering to the new reality of hope and promise.

Amen.