

Palm Sunday / Passion Sunday  
March 29, 2015  
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## Denials and Death

Every time I reflect upon Our Lord's Passion I am overwhelmed by the contrast between Jesus and everyone else in the narrative. Jesus witnesses to the truth; Jesus is strong; Jesus shows the power of God's love; Jesus is accepting, confident, peaceful.

Everyone else is anxious, conflicted, self-absorbed, weak, cowardly, hateful, agitated, scornful, violent, evil and in denial.

Jesus lives the truth. His Passion is the story of God's love, God's life, God's justice. The cross is the everlasting sign of love, of life, of justice. Everyone else in this story refuses to accept the truth, denies the truth.

It begins with those closest to Jesus, his disciples. They don't understand all that happened at the supper, the bread and the wine, the washing of feet. They are exhausted by the time they get to the garden. Jesus says, "*Keep awake and pray... the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.*"

Judas and Peter show us the depth of his disciples' denial. Events have not gone the way Judas had hoped. So he arranges for Jesus to appear before the council. His plan doesn't go the way he wanted.

Peter professes loyalty, and does not understand Jesus' warnings about denial. When violence erupts the disciples fight back. Blood is shed. They still don't understand. "*All of them deserted him and fled.*"

Mark's account includes this strange detail. A "*certain young man*" is "*caught*" but escapes "*naked.*" Some commentators think this is actually Mark, the author of the earliest Gospel. Mark's family may have owned the garden where Jesus stayed. One scholar points to the paradox. Jesus has told them to leave everything to become a disciple. Mark "*literally leaves everything to become a non-disciple,*" to run away.<sup>1</sup>

The Jewish leaders deny Jesus a true hearing. Instead there is conflicting and false testimony. The High Priest charges Jesus with blasphemy, but because they won't follow the Jewish law to stone blasphemers, Jesus is sent to Pilate.

Pilate realizes the priests are jealous of Jesus, so he would like to release him. What has been a Jewish religious debate now becomes a political problem the Roman authority has to resolve.

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<sup>1</sup> *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 2*, James Ernest (quoting Eugene Boring) Westminster Press, Louisville, 2008, p. 183.

To satisfy the crowd, Pilate releases Barabbas, a murderer and a true enemy of the empire. Jesus is ordered to be crucified.

This horrible progression of denial and evil grows as the soldiers mock Jesus, and the crowd at Golgotha scorns him. Mark writes that even the two bandits crucified near Jesus taunt him.

After such betrayal, denial and evil, it seems Jesus is God-forsaken, all alone, completely abandoned. We know the rest of the story. Jesus prayed Psalm 22 which includes the following after the first verse questioning God...

*“Thou art holy... in thee our fathers trusted and thou didst deliver them. To thee they cried, and were saved; in thee they trusted and are not disappointed...”*

My former seminary professor, Margaret Farley, a Roman Catholic nun and theologian, believes that the cross shows us a faith of “resistance and hope. The point of the cross is not suffering and death; it is, rather, that a relationship holds. There is a love stronger than death... the meaning of the cross can be understood finally only within the whole of the good news of the promise of God to overcome terror, enfold us in life, and dwell with us forever...”<sup>2</sup>

This holding of a relationship – God with us overcoming terror and death – is why Mark ends his narrative with the one person who can and does speak the truth, a Roman centurion, who has witnessed the hours of denial, torture and death. Then, and only then, can he proclaim,

*“Truly, this man was God’s son...”*

Isaiah 50:4-9a  
Psalm 31:9-16  
Philippians 2:5-11  
Mark 14:32—15:39

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, Margaret Farley, p. 182.