



Rev. Emily Williams Guffey, Rector
Homily
Maundy Thursday
April 1, 2021

A couple weeks more than a year ago, the night before our building shut down due to the onset of the pandemic, I was still in my office here, sifting through books and packing some into a box. It was March 22nd and the middle of Lent and all buildings were to be closed for at least two weeks, which seemed like an unconscionably long time.

I - we - had never experienced our collective lives shut down precipitously due to a deadly, unseen virus. I tearfully packed books to use for Holy Week and Easter, texting friends who had given them to me or written them that I was thinking of them: that if I had to pack my priestly life into a box for a time, that they had changed my life for the better and I was carrying their memory with me into the unknown.

And then, a text from Kathryn, asking if she and Jim could come in to check on the perishables in the kitchen fridge and freezer. Being awash in my own memories and not having lent a wit to the whipped cream, eggs, and milk in the kitchen, I replied, "Yes! It will be good to see you, even from a social distance."

And so, in characteristic fashion, they worked thoughtfully and lovingly through the kitchen, packing up perishable food, and loading me up with armfuls, which my boys were happy to eat. We savored one another's company, walked each other to the door and to our cars, and parted ways.

It felt to me, even then, all too much like Maundy Thursday, when we savor one another's company, the food on the table, the bread and wine on the altar, and then cleanse the altar not only of the elements but also every ornament, every thing, as an act of preparation for Jesus' own burial.

The stripping of the altar on this night originates from the Jewish ritual of *tahara*, the loving preparation of a body for burial. The *tahara* is performed by a small group of volunteer members of a *chevra kadisha*, a Jewish burial society. The *tahara* is considered to be the greatest *mitzvah*, the greatest good work, for there is no way to be repaid; the deceased cannot say "thank you".

The preparation for burial consists of three parts. The first is to cleanse the body of anything extraneous: bandages, jewelry, clothing. The second is to pour a cascade of water (24 quarts) over the body in a continuous stream. As Rochel Berman, a member of a *chevra kadisha* said, "It's as if we're washing away all the suffering of the last periods of their lives, as if there's a veil that they leave behind."¹

¹ "Jewish Burial Practices", interview with Rochel Berman and Bob Abernethy, *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*, February 6, 2004: <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2004/02/06/february-6-2004-jewish-burial-practices/1794/>

Tonight, we enter the veil that Jesus leaves behind: the bread, the wine. And we care for his physical presence as his own friends - men and women - did for him.

His friends, famously, failed a lot. They were enshrouded in mystery. There was no script for what they would do. They were stripped of his presence, and of their hope. Yet in that moment, and in the days, the weeks, and the years to come, they were astonished and they told about it²; they told his story.³

“When someone’s gone and you are the primary keeper of their memory,” asks a character in Rebecca Makkai’s novel [The Great Believers](#), “letting go would be a kind of murder, wouldn’t it? I had so much love for him, even if it was a complicated love, and where is all of that love supposed to go?”

It goes into our hands and into our souls as we care for what is left behind: his precious body, his words that institute new life in us. When it feels like and looks like all is lost, we feast on memories, and we dare to carry them and hand them on.

The third and final step in the *tahara* is to dress the body, as Berman describes, into a white shroud, “usually made of linen, hand-sewn with no knots...no hems, to signify impermanence, and no pockets...you take no worldly goods with you. And everybody, rich or poor, young or old, religious or nonreligious, are all buried in the same garments. And then the body finally is placed in the casket and wrapped in a large sheet, which creates almost a cocoon.”⁴ And new life begins.

² From the poem “Sometimes” by Mary Oliver: “4. Instructions for living a life: Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it.” Accessed <https://www.livingcompass.org/wwow/pay-attention-be-astonished-tell-about-it>

³ “Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story”, finale song of *Hamilton*, by Lin-Manuel Miranda

⁴ Berman/Abernethy interview, above