Columns
Coronavirus
Spirituality



Filipino members of the Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate harvest olives in Jerusalem's Garden of Gethsemane Oct. 19, 2019. Catholic nuns, locals and international volunteers gathered to pick olives that were made into liturgy oil that would have been used during the Chrism mass on Maundy Thursday in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. (CNS/Debbie Hill)



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When we entered the Lenten season just six weeks ago, who among us would have imagined celebrating Holy Week and Easter amid so much death and suffering?

Entering the mystery and agony of this most sacred of seasons, we are also witnessing — now in real time — the mystery and agony of Earth's peoples.

Some are gasping and fighting for each breath. Some are grieving the loss of loved ones, spirited away to die in isolation.

Some are exhausted doctors, nurses and first responders wondering where they will ever find strength to see this pandemic through.

Some are government officials — governors, mayors, congressional representatives and public health experts — seeking to calm a terrified citizenry and diminish the havoc wreaked by a vicious virus that does not discriminate.

Others are scientists, inventors, and drug and equipment manufacturers working to find desperately needed curative medicines and machines.

Still others shelter at home, educating their children, caring for their elders and wondering how to pay looming bills with no money coming in.

How are we, who believe in God's great love, called to experience a Holy Week the like of which we have never experienced?

Where *is* God's great love in this week?

Is it possible to comprehend the paradox of Jesus' own witness during this excruciating time?

It is painful to be powerless in the face of great suffering.

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For this reason, I would like to reflect briefly on the experience of Jesus' women disciples during this week of suffering. They were powerless, but their witness points to a reality even deeper than our overwhelmingly painful present.

Gospel accounts in Mark and Matthew tell of a special meal held in Bethany at the home of Simon the leper two days before Passover (Matthew 26: 1-14; Mark 14:1-9). Both passages say the religious leaders were seeking to arrest and kill Jesus. In this context, an unnamed woman approaches him with an alabaster flask of expensive ointment and anoints his head.

Immediately the other (presumably male) disciples reproach her and complain that the ointment was wasted and could have been sold "for a large sum" and given to the poor.

Yet I wonder if the real reason for their complaint lies elsewhere.

This unnamed woman understands Jesus's messianic destiny more deeply than the others. In the Hebrew tradition, prophets are the ones who anoint kings — as Samuel had anointed David to succeed Saul as king of Israel (1 Samuel 16). The word "messiah" means literally "the anointed one. "

This woman's silent act of prophecy affirms that Jesus is the one all Israel has been expecting — the Messiah — who will save them from oppression.

Jesus, at least, appreciates her action: "Let her alone; why do you trouble her?" he asks. "She has done a beautiful thing to me. She has done what she could, and truly I say to you wherever the Gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her."

Jesus knows he is about to die, and so does the unnamed woman. It must have comforted him deeply that like him, she saw beyond impending suffering and affirmed the profound reality of a saving, if pain-filled grace. A grace that — against all odds — ultimately frees believers from the power of evil.

Though powerless, the anointing woman witnesses to a saving reality that transcends our present pain.

"She has done what she could," says Jesus. "She has done a beautiful thing to me."

Where are we being invited to "do what we can?" What beautiful thing reflects our solidarity with our suffering world during this holy season?

Perhaps we are like the "many women" who Palm Sunday's Gospel says, "watch from a distance," silently accompanying Jesus through an unimaginably painful death (Matthew 27:55).

Like the women at a distance, we too are powerless.

We are powerless as we watch the powerlessness of a crucified Messiah — and as we watch a crucified world during this pandemic.

We offer what small comfort we can, the comfort of our presence, our sorrow, our lament and our prayer.

Matthew's passion narrative tells us that Jesus cried out his sense of desolation and abandonment, "My God, my God, why have you deserted me?"

What is less well known is that Jesus is praying the first line of Psalm 22, which continues:

> Yet, Holy One …
>
> In you our ancestors put their trust;
>
> they trusted and you rescued them.
>
> They called to you for help and they were saved;
>
> they never trusted you in vain.

It is good to pray Psalm 22 when we are angry, abandoned, and hopeless as many of us are feeling right now.

Jesus found comfort in naming his sense of being abandoned by God. But then he placed his trust in God's power to save.

A dear friend once told me to never look at the cross without at the same time seeing the Resurrection. So, when we contemplate Jesus' suffering on the cross —

we begin to fathom the mysterious reality of evil and death — but we also apprehend a deeper reality — God's power to save.

Now is a time to remember that our world is one — and our cosmic Jesus is suffering in it.

Now is a time to trust in God's pain-filled power to save.

During a season of Resurrection that still feels like Good Friday, where are we invited to "do what we can?"

What beautiful act reflects our own solidarity with a suffering world?

[St. Joseph Sr. Christine Schenk, an NCR board member, served urban families for 18 years as a nurse midwife before co-founding FutureChurch, where she served for 23 years. Her recent book, *Crispina and Her Sisters: Women and Authority in Early Christianity*, was awarded first place in the history category by the Catholic Press Association. She holds master's degrees in nursing and theology.]