

Sermon for Good Friday, March 25, 2016
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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For some reason
it's the soldiers
who stick in my mind
this Good Friday.

Perhaps it's because
when I went to the Holy Land
five years ago
and walked the Via Dolorosa, the Way of the Cross
some of the few things you can see
that actually date back to the time of Christ,
buried down
in the crypt of a church,
are some large slabs of paving stone.
And on the surface of the stone
are lines crudely etched
laying out a game board
where the soldiers played dice
as they waited to be called
into action.

We know the key players
in the story of Jesus death.
Judas the betrayer,
Peter the denier,
Pilate the judge,
the crowds shouting "Crucify him,"
the criminals hung beside him,
the three Marys and John his disciple
standing at the foot of the cross,
Joseph of Arimathea who gave his grave.
Other people come and go,
but all the way through
are the soldiers.
Arriving in the garden
with lanterns and torches and weapons

to arrest him.
Binding him and taking him
to be questioned
by the high priest,
and from there
on to the Roman governor.
And no doubt bored
as they waited for Pilate
to finish his questioning
they wove a crown
made of thorns,
and when Pilate ordered Jesus flogged,
they put the crown of thorns on his head,
and dressed him in a purple robe
and mocked him, saying,
"Hail, King of the Jews!"
and hit him
on the face.
It was the soldiers that took him,
bruised and bloody,
from the governor's headquarters
up to the place
called Golgotha, the skull,
forcing him
to carry his own cross,
and then crucified him
between two criminals.
By the time he hung on the cross
there were only four of them;
they divided up his clothes among themselves
and played dice for his tunic.
And they pierced his side with a spear
making sure
that he was dead.

But that's not the end of the story of the soldiers.
Matthew, in his gospel,
adds the detail
that soldiers were sent
to guard the tomb

lest the disciples steal the body away.

I wonder
what those soldiers were thinking
all this time?

Likely
it began as business,
just another job,
arresting
a trouble-maker,
then shuttling him
from decision-maker
to decision-maker.
No emotional investment.
Just following orders.

But they seem to have made a decision
by the time Jesus
is being interrogated by Pilate.
Guilty.

And so they humiliate him,
forcing him to wear
a parody
of a king's robes,
leaving him
to drag the means of his death
on his back.

And when they hang him
between two robbers
is it
a place of honor
or a statement
that he is no better than the others?
Is dividing his clothes
something they did with all the condemned?
Or a final indignity?

But once that is done,
the indifference is back.
Inspecting the bodies;
no need to break his legs
to complete the execution,
just a sword in his side
for proof of death.
Just another job completed.

But I wonder
was there any point
when they questioned
the chain of command?
And what did they think afterwards?
In those long hours
as they sat by the tomb
did they begin to question
what they had been doing?
Whether they
had been pawns
in a larger drama?

Recently, I've been watching a Canadian TV series called X Company.
It's set in France during the second World War
and focusses on the work of a group of Canadian spies,
working underground
against the Nazis.
And one of the fascinating things about it
is that it depicts both sides of the conflict,
both the Allies
and the Germans.
And the question is constantly asked,
how far will either side go?
Will they ever question
the commands given them
by their leaders?

Seventy-one years ago next month
a German Lutheran pastor

was executed
for plotting against Hitler.
His name was Dietrich Bonhoeffer.
He is one of the relative few
who challenged what
he was being told,
who asked whether
the policies of the leaders of his country
were consistent with his faith.
And then acted
from the conviction
that where the German people were being led
was contrary
to the gospel of Jesus Christ,.

And it makes me wonder
in a world
where division and hatred and fear
seem to be at a peak,
are we tempted
to simply follow orders?
To do what our society, our culture, our leaders
tell us to do
without question?
Without asking
is this consistent
with the gospel
of Jesus Christ?

Are we willing
to take upon cross,
to follow our savior
even to death,
for the sake
of the gospel?