

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ at Tokyo Lutheran Church:

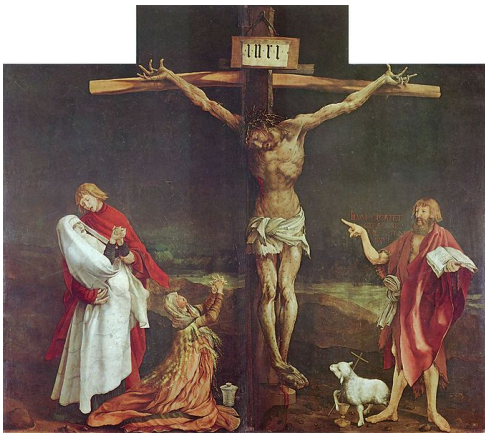
May 2020

It has been a very difficult spring! We have been worried about the coronavirus pandemic. Many of us have been affected in our jobs or schools. And of course, we were not able to worship together for a long time. It is especially painful to miss sharing Holy Week and Easter together.

I would like to share with you some reflections from my Good Friday message to the English congregation. We learn in the prophet Isaiah, chapter 53, how our Lord Jesus had “had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.” Jesus died on the cross, which is a terrible, shameful, and painful death.

However—for all the things that Jesus suffered, he did *not* suffer from sickness. As far as we know, Jesus was healthy until the last day of his life.

I never thought about this fact before, but the pandemic has brought it to my mind. What does our Savior mean for us in the face of a global health crisis?



Then I thought of a very famous painting called the Isenheim Altarpiece, which was painted in 1516 very close to where I used to live in France. The painter Matthias Grünewald was asked to make a picture of the crucifixion for a hospital that took care of people suffering from the bubonic plague and other skin diseases. So in his painting, Grünewald showed Jesus dying not only of crucifixion, but also of skin disease—just like the suffering patients in the hospital.

If you look closely at this painting, you’ll see that Jesus’ body is covered with spots and sores. He is suffering terribly of skin disease, at the same time that he is dying on the cross.

This painting is not, of course, historically accurate. As I already mentioned, Jesus was a healthy person in his lifetime!

Yet at the same time, there is a deep truth in this painting. The list of sufferings in Isaiah 53 is meant to include *all* kinds of suffering. The deep truth is that our Lord Jesus shares in everything that is painful, terrible, and frightening along with us. He does not leave us to survive or suffer by ourselves. He is with us always.

So, if you are sick, you can be sure that Jesus Christ is with you in your sickness. If you are depressed or sad, Jesus Christ is with you in your sadness. If you are scared, Jesus Christ is with you in your fear. If your life feels like a living hell, Jesus Christ is even in hell with you! As we say in the Apostles’ Creed, “He descended into hell.” Jesus goes to all the worst places, just to be with us and to save us.

That is already good news. But even *better* news is that Jesus does not *leave* us in the dark and terrible places! He rose from the dead, and he will raise us too, to live with him forever in the kingdom of heaven. Thanks be to God!

—Pastor Sarah Wilson