

**Fifth Sunday of Easter -2010**  
**St. Mary's Catholic Church, Richmond VA**  
**Fr. Michael Renninger**

He was buried after a very moving funeral. He was in his early 30's. But I will never forget that summer day, almost 15 years ago, when everything changed.

15 years ago, he was a college student: a soccer player, a handsome guy with lots of friends, a good young man from a great family.

And then, one summer evening 15 years ago, his parents went out to dinner. And when his mother returned home, she found that he had hung himself in the living room. His mom was able to cut him down and revive him. But so much brain damage had occurred that he would never be able to speak, or interact, or undertake a voluntary movement again. For the next 15 years, his family and friends gave him round-the-clock care.

But we did not know all of that on that summer evening. When I arrived at the hospital, I found his mother sitting on the floor with the ladies from church. They were crying and praying.

His mother said to me: "This is the worst possible thing. I don't know what to do. I don't know where God is. But I have to figure out how to say 'alleluia' anyhow."

*I have to figure out how to say Alleluia anyhow...*

I believe that this mother was articulating a truth of the Christian life. In fact, I think that she was articulating the 'shape' of every human life.

Anyone who has lived a few years knows that *all life is cruciform*, that is, *all life is shaped like the Cross*.

What do I mean? Well, think of it this way: most days, we live rather ordinary, horizontal lives. We wake up, we know where our breakfast is coming from. We have a general sense of what the day will hold. Over the years, life takes on a certain predictability. We think that we know what is going to happen next Thursday, next month, a year from now.

And then.... Something completely unexpected, or awful comes crashing into our lives, like a vertical slash which intersects the horizontal flow of our expectations (+). Our 'ordinary' life was flowing along, and then, we are interrupted by suffering, or 'the worst possible thing.' It happens in every life – the horizontal and vertical meet – and we find ourselves living in the center of the Cross. It happens when:

Parents out to dinner, then come home to find their son.

Your spouse goes to work at World Trade Center on a clear September morning, and you never see her again.

You are the picture of health, then the doctor looks at you and says the word “cancer.”

Your spouse of 13 years, with whom you are raising wonderful children, announces that they love someone else.

You work your tail off for your employer, wanting to make a positive contribution – then they shut down and move your job away.

You have always been a strong person, then depression grips you like a vice.

You make your life choices, and then discover that you are living the quiet desperation of a lonely life.

In all of those things, we are at the center of the cross.

Visitors sometimes ask, “Why do we hang a cross in every church? Why do we begin and end each prayer marking our bodies with the shape of the cross?”

We do these things, because our lives get intersected – by senseless pain, and we don’t know what do to do - where is God? How do I say “Alleluia anyhow?”

In John’s Gospel today, Jesus invites us to love one another, as he loves us. He tells us that other people will be attracted to the Christian way of life, when they observe the way that we care for each other. But all of this is said in a paragraph which begins with these five words – “When Judas had left them...” Do you hear that? Jesus had just washed the feet of everyone at the Last Supper – including Judas.

Then John’s Gospel says, “When Judas had left them...” Judas is going out into the night to *sell* Jesus to the Romans. At the moment Judas left them, Jesus’ fate was sealed. He would die on the cross. And Jesus knew it.

We follow a savior whose life was interrupted, who experienced suffering. We follow a Christ who was willing to go to the center of the cross. We follow a savior who was willing to let the worse thing happen to him. Thus, we can know, with certainty, that when the worse thing happens to us, WE ARE NOT ALONE.

How did a mother sitting on a hospital floor find a way to say Alleluia? She was convinced that the crucified Christ was with her in her own cross. On the night of his betrayal, Jesus called us to love one another – to *choose* to do the loving thing, even when that is the *hardest* thing.

When my placid life gets interrupted by the cross, and I am wrestling with feelings of abandonment, I discover, in the middle of MY cross, the Jesus who was abandoned. When I wrestle with distress, I discover, in the middle of my cross, the Jesus who cried out in abandonment to his father. When I am not sure what it all means or where it is all going, I discover the one who went into the tomb, only to come out of it again.

And there is one more Christian insight which must be proclaimed today. When I met that mother in the hospital 15 years ago - she was not alone. She was surrounded by other Christians, who were there to help her carry her cross. When Jesus suffered his own crucifixion, he was not alone – his mother and some friends were at the foot of the cross.

When we see a brother or sister who is stuck in the center of the cross, we have a Christian obligation to surround them with our love and help. I don't know specifically how God wants you to help those who carry the heavy burden of violence, but I know that he wants you to help. I don't know how God wants YOU to be there for those who carry the cross of poverty, or depression, or sadness, or pain. All I know is – if Jesus needed folks to stand by him on Calvary, then we need to stand by those who are on Calvary today.

As Catholics we put the cross right in the middle of our sight, because the cross is where it all comes together. It's where the joys and sorrows, the hope and fears, the dreams and nightmares of life come together, and are given meaning by the person of Jesus. After all, even as the worse thing was happening to Jesus, he was able to say “Father, into your hands, I commend my spirit.”

Which sounds an awful lot like a mom who is able to sit on a hospital floor and say “Alleluia anyhow.”