# April Remarks from Our Pastors

In their reports to Council each month, Pastor Gregg and Pastor Rachel conclude with some personal remarks that summarize the most recent period of their leadership here at Grace.

***Senior Pastor's Remarks:***

I was driving to a meeting yesterday, listening to NPR, when I heard some truly startling news. Apparently, there was an Executive Order signed late last month that, among other things, directs the Vice President of our country to work with the board of the Smithsonian Institution to eliminate aspects of their museums deemed, "improper, divisive, or anti-American." I hoped the report was inaccurate. I looked it up later to see that it was not.

The Smithsonian Institution was created by Congress in 1846 as "an establishment for the increase and diffusion of knowledge." Today it is the world's largest museum, education, and research complex, comprised of 21 museums, 14 education and research centers, and the national zoo. With a purpose that expansive, and a repository that massive, the mind simply reels at the task of trying to remove all things "improper, divisive, or anti-American" from what it depicts. For example, how would a museum address the Civil Rights Movement without touching on these subjects? How would a museum cover the *progress* our country has made without including those injustices and ideologies that had to be overcome? And most importantly, how can we as a nation – or as people in general – ever hope to progress if we do not know the full history of how we got to where we are today? Borrowing from that famous saying, history is our only hope to avoid making the same mistakes. And, if we're honest, we can acknowledge that a great many people do not know well the history that is readily available; how much worse does that problem get when history is censored?

Towards the end of a SALT Sunday School class I taught earlier this month, Mary told me she was excited to attend a Jewish worship service later that coming week. She was going with a friend, and it would be her first experience in a synagogue. I was excited for her and already eager to hear what she experienced when we met again the following Sunday. Then a thought occurred to me. I asked Mary whether she knew about some of Martin Luther's writings against the Jewish people. She did not. I started to quickly explain how, towards the end of Luther's life, when he was physically ill, he published at least four anti-Semitic writings, some of which have been used to persecute Jews ever since (including in 1930s Germany). I told her the ELCA has publicly disavowed these writings, publicly apologized to the Jewish people, and has worked to make restitution for the harm done by (and in the name of) the person whose name became our denomination. When I followed up with Mary the next week, she told me that someone *had* spoken to her, and upon learning she went to a Lutheran church, was surprised to know that she would be willing to attend a Jewish event. Nearly 500 years later, Luther's legacy is known in more than one way. How many of us know this history of the otherwise loving man who gave us the Luther Rose?

The point of these stories is not to highlight all our faults as Americans and as Lutherans. Rather, the point is, we need to *be aware* of them. We need to know how our story – including all the parts we had nothing to do with – includes both highlights and lowlights. We have examples that should fill us with some sense of pride in our inheritance and examples that should fill us with determination to do better in our time than our ancestors did. Knowing more of the story is the only way we can get the next generation to do better in their time than we are doing in ours. There is wisdom in the *whole* truth. It is only the *whole* truth that can set us free.

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We have nearly made it to Holy Week. You know, there are Christian congregations that do not celebrate the events of this week. I do not share this to cast aspersions, but that approach is simply impoverished. This is one of the gifts Luther gave us – the theology of the cross. It would be easy enough to skip over everything that happened during this week. It would be easy to wave a palm one Sunday and take a smiling picture in front of the Easter flower cross the next. But the cross covered in flowers is a sign of a *transformation* that has taken place. It is meaningless without knowing what it looked like before – stark, somber, bare. This is the improper part of the story, the divisive part, where for generations people have raced to blame the Jews, the Romans, Judas, and the feeble disciples who ran away when things got tough. Perhaps avoiding that division and not wanting to contend with all the failures that led to the execution of our Christ, some people would prefer to be 'Easter People' without dwelling of the darker themes of Holy Week. Luther, however, taught that the only way to understand God and Scripture is to see the limitless love God has for a broken humanity, which is nowhere more visible than the cross on which Jesus hung and died. The theology of the cross is proof that God does not give up on us. And it is only through that death he willingly endured that the resulting empty tomb has power in it. We need the *whole* truth. And we need to know how one came to embody truth with his whole being, only to be rejected for something easier – a collection of lies, each suggesting that humans could secure life for themselves.

My prayer for you this week is that you will not skip over the hard parts of the story. We find ourselves there. We see human weakness on full display in the stories of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. Yet, that is not all there is to see. We also see Jesus, who knowingly dines with his betrayer, who washes the feet of his fearful friends, who goes willingly to Gethsemane, who never relents until his last breath. And then, in the absence of Holy Saturday, we begin to remember that even the story of Jesus is one part of the larger whole. We gather in the waning lights of the Easter Vigil to be reminded how God's people have been hopeless and helpless many times, and how God has always provided a way forward for us – opportunities to reform ourselves and our future. Only then does the empty tomb make sense. We need the *whole* story, the *whole* truth. We always have. We always will.

Peace in Christ,
Pr. Gregg

***Pastor's Remarks:***
This past Sunday, both the Young Youth and Youth took a tour through Holy Week. We asked: what days have worship? What are those services called? What things do we do? Why do we do them? Should we show up? They were great conversations, and as we talked, I realized that if someone did not grow up going to these services each year, or had not been in a while, they may not know these answers, regardless of their age. And so, I'm going to give a little Holy Week tour for us all. This is for those who have never been, and for those who go every year; it never hurts to reflect on the how and why of what we are doing as God's people in Holy Week.

Holy Week begins on **Palm Sunday**. At Grace, we begin worship by gathering in the Fellowship Hall or on the porch, waving palm branches and saying "Hosanna!" which means "Save us!" On this day, we remember Jesus entering Jerusalem, hailed by crowds of 'ordinary people' as the one who would save them from the Roman occupation, who laid their coats and branches on the road ahead of him. It's a celebratory day, though we know that the cheering won't last for long. Some congregations also tell the whole story of Holy Week on Palm Sunday (calling it Passion Sunday), but we prefer to spread the story across the days, dwelling in each one as it comes.

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**Maundy Thursday** is the next worship day, and it begins what is known as the Triduum – the Three Days. On this night, we gather around the altar table, remembering the last meal Jesus shared with his disciples. This is the Last Supper, which becomes the Lord's Supper, or Communion, as we follow his instruction to do this in remembrance of him. The name "Maundy" comes from the Latin word "mandatum" which means "command". On this night, after he washes their feet, Jesus commands the disciples to love one another as he has loved them. This command is for us, the current disciples, too. Some congregations include foot washing in their Maundy Thursday worship, as well. At the end of the service, the altar space is stripped. We remove all the paraments (decorative cloths on the altar and pulpit), the Communion elements, the books of Scripture and liturgy, the candles, and finally, the pastors remove their vestments (stoles and chasubles). In this removal, we remember how Jesus was stripped as part of his arrest and trial and how his disciples abandoned him one by one. We leave the service in silence.

**Good Friday** comes the next day, and this name raises a question – what is good about this day? We call this day "Good" because it is the day our Lord loved us, and lived according to God's will, so completely that he was willing to die. On Good Friday, we remember how Jesus was denied, abandoned, condemned, and crucified. This worship service can be done in many ways, incorporating readings, candles, and/or music. Often, the lights get lower as the service goes on, leaving the congregation in near darkness at the end. Some years, we have ended by venerating the cross, lighting candles and praying. Each year, we leave silently, in the dark, reflecting the darkness of the tomb and the hopelessness felt by those who loved Jesus.

**Holy Saturday** is the day in-between, when the world is quiet, holding its breath. Jesus is in the tomb, and we are waiting. In the evening, we will gather for **Easter Vigil**. We've been preparing for Vigil in Lent, focusing on the readings we'll share, which trace God's work through time. We start in the darkness from Good Friday, lighting the new fire of Easter and blessing the new Paschal Candle, which lights candles for each of us. We enter the Sanctuary, bringing light with us, and as we tell God's story, the light increases as the night continues (to be clear, we're planning around 90 minutes, not multiple hours, at Grace). Finally, as 'dawn breaks' we celebrate that Jesus has been raised! And we join in the Paschal feast – Communion. After worship, we will gather in the Fellowship Hall for refreshments and rejoicing!

**Easter Sunday** is the final day of Holy Week, the full day we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus! We gather together to hear God's Word, join in God's holy meal, and praise God for this incredible new life brought through Jesus Christ. We bring back the Alleluias and we sing our Easter hymns, kicking off the 50-day season of Easter!

The final question for the tour: **should we go to these services**? If you are able, I say **YES**! Each service is an important part of our Holy Week experience. Each one is a different piece of the holy story. Each one draws us closer to God. And these services are strengthened by your participation – you are supporting the faith of your neighbor, too, when you show up. I hope you'll join us, and I'd love to hear what you experience in this Holy Week!

Peace in Christ,
Pr. Rachel