

**OPENING:**

The late author and Presbyterian minister, Frederick Buechner, tells the story that after his brother had been dead for about three years, Buechner dialed up his brother's number on his phone, calling him up at his New York apartment, knowing full well that no one would answer on the other side. Buechner said that he called because he missed his brother and so he just let the phone ring and ring and ring.

Despite knowing that his brother would not answer, Buechner wrote that he called because he "couldn't know... for sure because nothing, nothing, is for sure in this world, and who could say that at least some echo of his (brother) mightn't be there, and (he) would hear him again, hear the sound of his voice again, the sound of his brother's marvelous laugh."

So Buechner sat there from his house in Vermont, ear to the receiver, and he "let (the phone) ring, let it ring, let it ring."<sup>1</sup>

A similar situation is present with the Disciples at the Last Supper, and it's present here with us on this Maundy Thursday, as we read the story of Jesus departing, him leaving, Jesus slipping out of the grasp of his friends and brothers.

Peter asks "where are you going?"

Thomas joins and says: "We do not know where you are going.

How can we know the way?"

But Jesus will drift off into the night and into his death.

Tomorrow, Jesus will answer us with the awful silence of Good Friday, a phone ringing into the ether, with no response but that persistent ringing...

or, worse, the awful echo of the dial tone.

Tonight Jesus does answer with a goodbye, a farewell, the Last Supper, with the Eucharist, with the Footwashing, with this teaching.

Ultimately, Jesus answers with his very self... and in such a way that it has taken us about 2000 years for us to wrap our hearts and souls and minds around that goodbye.

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<sup>1</sup> Buechner, Frederick. 2006. "Let Jesus Show" in *Secrets in the Dark: a Life in Sermons*. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 269-270.

Jesus answers the disciples' questions, in part, by turning it around and asking them:

"Do you know what I have *done* to you?"

We don't know how to answer that question.

So we keep calling Jesus up and trying to get one.

What we hear today and tomorrow, and if we are honest at countless other times in our lives, is the silence of his absence.

So, we let the phone ring and ring and ring.

### **PASTORAL CARE:**

I spend no small amount of my time with people saying goodbye to their loved ones. It's a great privilege of my vocation to be there as they prepare to die, to be there sometimes as people do die, and to be there after, when the loved ones are left picking up the pieces.

Those are all miniature versions of the Last Supper because, through one's grief and love and pain, we try to hold on as they let go and people attempt to manage their own goodbyes.

At these moments, we are at the precipice of holiness, in those 'thin places' between heaven and earth, and, if we are lucky, we can attune ourselves to listen for God's voice.

I met with a parishioner recently who talked about the guilt she felt over not being able to say goodbye to her husband of 51 years because she had COVID when he got sick and they did not expect him to die.

I meet very often with parishioners who have said their goodbyes, and are very much ready to go, and oftentimes there are family members alongside them who are not quite as ready.

We all have our own stories, of course, of our own 'Last Suppers,' saying 'goodbye' to our loved ones, stories that have been beautiful or painful and everything in between.

### **SILENCE & ABSENCE:**

One of mine is Easter Sunday 2004,

I was in New York City, at all places at Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum, and I was touring the museum and my phone rang.

It was an early-era flip-phone on vibrate deep in my pocket, and I felt it and heard it and fumbled for it, trying to wrestle it out from my keys and wallet. I finally got the phone out and saw it as an unlisted number as it went to voicemail.

It was my brother calling from Iraq, or so I discovered as I listened to the voicemail a few minutes later.

That was the last time I would hear his voice and he would be dead within a month.

Buechner writes that: “The sadness is that we don’t see that every supper with (our loved ones)—is precious beyond all telling... because the day will come beyond which there will be no other supper with them ever again.”<sup>2</sup>

Sad to remember, sad to relate, sad to hear. I share because I know, if you are here for Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, that you are willing to travel into the dark, to go with Jesus into the shadows, to journey into the silence and to let the phone ring... and ring... and ring... knowing that there is something **there** in that silence.

We will strip the altar at the end of the service as a reminder of that silence. The beauty and the majesty of an empty altar compels us to think about grief and loss, and all the empty places in our lives.

We will return here tomorrow for Good Friday to a stripped-down service without Communion or hymns, as a reminder that these silences and absences persist in this world, and that only the Easter miracle can fill those voids.

## **SHIFT**

I indeed would call my brother’s cell phone for months after his death, many of us are guilty of this, to listen to the message and hear his voice again.

Eventually the number switched over and the cell phone user who inherited had to text me and say “Someone from this number keeps calling, why?”

Why do we that? Why do we hold on against all reason?

Buechner answers that question, writing that: ““In my father’s house are many rooms”” says Jesus and I would bet my bottom dollar that in one of those many rooms that phone rang and rang true and was heard. I believe that in some sense my brother’s voice was in the ringing itself, and that Jesus’ voice was in it too.”<sup>3</sup>

*Let it ring, let it ring, let it ring*

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<sup>2</sup> Buechner, 266.

<sup>3</sup> Buechner, 270.

Why? Because we seek someone who is not there.

That, of course, is the Resurrection hope...

the hope that “Welcome Happy Morning” will be our salutation and our reply when we do finally get our loved ones on the phone and when we see God face to face.

## CONCLUSION

Until then, our journey continues and we are reminded that we are no better than the disciples, who attempted to stay with Jesus, to hold on to that goodbye, but failed him in Garden and at the Cross.

Until then, we are certainly no better than Jesus who in his moment of agony tried to call his father up, he had him on speed dial, with the question that rings through eternity “why, oh why, have you forsaken me?”

We call him up. We let it ring, let it ring, let it ring.

At times like this, words eventually lose their power, that’s why we have to go to these powerful images of the altar, the Eucharist, the cross.

With that, this week I have gone to the musical lyrics of Bob Dylan, and his song *Ring them Bells*, I think it capture this sense of loss and pain and searching that Maundy Thursday strives for. I will close by sharing a few.

*Ring them bells Sweet Martha  
For the poor man’s son  
Ring them bells so the world will know  
That God is one*

*Oh the shepherd is asleep  
Where the willows weep  
And the mountains are filled  
With lost sheep  
Ring them bells for the blind and the deaf  
Ring them bells for all of us who are left<sup>4</sup>*

*Ring them Bells.... Ring them Bells.... AMEN*

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<sup>4</sup> [Ring Them Bells | The Official Bob Dylan Site](#)