

Michael S. Lea
FBC | WJ
April 1, 2015
Holy Week

Looking to Jesus (To Get Over the Hump)
Hebrews 12:1-3; (John 13:21-32)

Today is Wednesday, also known as hump day, the day of climbing a proverbial hill to get through a tough week. Hump day takes on new meaning for us in Holy Week. No doubt this is a tough week for Christians. It's a tough week, for not only do we journey with Jesus who climbed Golgotha's hill upon which he was crucified, but every day we remember something about the story of Jesus and his disciples that uncovers the dark side of the journey to which we can relate. Martha was preoccupied with anxiety about the busy work of life that Jesus declared unimportant. Judas embezzled money from the church's budget. The church deacons and elders criticized Jesus for actually doing the work of God's mission in the world like healing and feeding people and raising his friend Lazarus from the dead. Then, Jesus told the disciples that this was not going to end well for him and that to be his disciples they must give up everything they've ever thought to be important, take up their cross and follow him. Yeah, I'd say it's a tough week. Yet, the author of Hebrews tells us not to lose heart or hope. Look to Jesus, the author says, to get over the hump.

Look to Jesus, *and* to that "great cloud of witnesses" that has gone before us and surrounds us, and who with the gift of their lives reminds us that we can persevere in the proverbial race, the moral and ethical struggle of following Jesus.¹ To do this, though, we must shed the extra weight of sin that surrounds us and clings to us so easily or closely. The image here is of a runner preparing for a race and needing to shed a few pounds of excess fat and take off clothing that weighs and slows them down. It's the reason the ancients participated in the games in the nude and athletes today wear clothing that is light weight and skin-tight. The point is that you can't run a race effectively if you're out of shape or wearing the wrong clothing, for it slows and weighs you down. In

¹ Fred Craddock, "Hebrews," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. XII (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 148.

comparison, we cannot endure the race of discipleship with Jesus if we are carrying around too much extra baggage, if we are weighed down with the sins of life, literally missing the mark, missing the point of life, which turns into extra weight. If this is the case, then we can't expect to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus and follow him faithfully.

This is particularly true this marathon of a week as we journey with Jesus to the cross. We are reminded what happens when we allow our own personal baggage/sin to weigh us down and lose focus on the goal of following Jesus and becoming like him. Judas, weighed down with his own guilt of stealing from the budget and his own expectations of what Messiah should be, forced Jesus' hand and betrayed the mission of God. Peter, weighed down with fear, denied he ever knew Jesus. In the gospel text for today (John 13:21-32), the disciples are so weighed down by their own perverse curiosity with who would betray Jesus that they couldn't look to Jesus, but selfishly looked out for their own personal agendas. It was the women, and a few of the men who had followed Jesus that persevered to the end. It was the Women's Missionary Union, whose bake sales kept the church budget afloat when Judas jeopardized the money that supported the mission of Jesus by taking the cash for his own personal use. The women, and others who instead of allowing sin to weigh them down, looked to Jesus. As a result, they were able to follow Jesus all the way to the cross, and get over the hump that led to the other side of the cross, the empty tomb, where the women experienced the risen Lord and were the first to proclaim that he is raised from the dead.

A few weeks ago, a pastor friend of mine preached on that weird and largely overlooked text in John 3:14-15, the one before John 3:16, where John says that "just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life" (NRSV). I don't remember learning to quote that verse as a kid in Sunday School. It's a reference to a story in the book of Numbers (21) where the people of Israel weighed down with the stress of wandering around in the wilderness for far too long. Weighed down with impatience and a lack of trust, they questioned God's leadership in the wilderness and God sent poisonous snakes to bite them and leave them for dead. But then Moses prayed for them and God instructed Moses to put one of the snakes on a pole, and have everyone look at it. Those who looked at it lived. After the service, a woman in my friend's congregation who takes copious

notes about the sermons came up to him and said, “So, you’re saying that in order to experience healing and salvation, I have to look at the very sin that caused my pain?”

Indeed. This week, we look to Jesus and his death on the cross, because in doing so, not only do we look at our sins and reflect upon our personal and collective brokenness, but we also look to the source of our redemption and healing, the pioneer and perfect of our faith, the one who in his dying has saved us. It is only after we are willing to confront that which is broken about us and others that we can begin to confess to and ask forgiveness from the one who invites us to place our burdens upon him so that he can give us rest. When we look to Jesus hanging on the cross, we see a God who suffers with us and for us, and who brings us healing by his wounds. It is only by looking at the suffering and pain that we can begin to experience healing and salvation.

The last few years we have seen a lot of attention given to racially motivated crimes and violence in this country. From Ferguson, MO to New York City to Mississippi to Oklahoma. We act surprised, but we shouldn’t be. As a nation, we have failed for way too long to openly address the systemic racism that still exists in this country. No person or community or nation can begin to experience reconciliation and healing until they begin to acknowledge and confess the sins of the past that still clings so closely. But we have been slow to do that. Slavery was legally banned in this country in 1865 with the ratification of the thirteenth amendment. Yet, it has taken us 150 years after the civil war ended to build a National Museum of African American History and Culture, a place where much of the history of racial discrimination and violence can be publicly acknowledged and remembered in our nation’s capital. The Holocaust Museum in D. C. was dedicated in 1993. It seems that as a nation we are quicker to look at others sins before we look to the sins that cling so closely to us and weigh us down.

A mentor of mine once said, “Hurt people hurt people.” And lots of people are carrying around a lot of hurt, both physical and emotional, hurt caused by prejudices and biases, judgments and assumptions, misconstrued perceptions and unresolved conflicts. The author of Hebrews tells us that in order to get over the hump, to get over that sin or wound or the broken pieces of our lives that keeps us from experiencing the healing power of God, we must look to Jesus, who himself did not want to drink the cup that had been given to him, but did so because he knew that the only way to save and redeem the

world was to take on the very sins that were destroying it. So, we look to Jesus, broken, bruised, naked, crucified, and dead, because when we look at the pain and suffering of the cross not only do we see the sins that are the source of our hurt but we also see the very source of our redemption. It is only when we look to the cross on which Jesus died that we can find strength and not lose heart, because we finally begin to understand his words that death gives birth to life. Until we confess and look upon our sins. Until we admit that it was our ancestors that owned slaves. Until we confess that we *all* are responsible for the mess in which we find ourselves. Until we confess that it is our sins that put Jesus on the cross, we are not going to get over the hump and experience the hope of resurrection.

In 1993, Mary Johnson's son, Laramiun Byrd, was shot to death during an argument at a party. He was only twenty, and Mary's only child. Her son's killer was a sixteen-year-old name Oshea Israel. Mary wanted justice. She said, "He was an animal. He deserved to be caged." And he was. He was tried as an adult and sentenced to twenty-five-and-a-half years in prison. Oshea served seventeen of those years before being released. Before his release, though, Mary Johnson did the unthinkable. She went to visit Oshea in prison. As a devout Christian, she felt compelled to see if there was somehow, some way that she could forgive her son's killer.² During their meeting, Mary embraced Oshea with a hug. When she did this, she said, 'I felt something leave me...the hatred, bitterness, animosity.'³ Johnson said, "Unforgiveness is like cancer. ...It will eat you from the inside out."⁴ Oshea Israel is still working on forgiving himself, but he is working out his own salvation by living beside the very woman whose son he murdered. He and Mary Johnson are literal neighbors. The very source of pain and suffering for Mary Johnson and Oshea Israel has also become their source of redemption, salvation,

² Steve Hartman, "Love Thy Neighbor: Son's Killer Moves Next Door," *CBS News*, June 8, 2011, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/love-thy-neighbor-sons-killer-moves-next-door/> (accessed March 30, 2015).

³ Roy M. Oswald and Arland Jacobson, *The Emotional Intelligence of Jesus: Relational Smarts for Religious Leaders* (Lanham: The Rowan & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc., 2015), 95.

⁴ Hartman, "Love Thy Neighbor" (accessed March 30, 2015).

and healing. This was made possible because Mary Johnson looked to Jesus to help her get over the hump, and shed the sin that so closely clings and weighs us down.

It's Wednesday, hump day of Holy Week, the day that marks hope that if we look to Jesus, we will make it out of this week alive. Even the liturgical colors change after today from red to white and gold. So, let's look to Jesus, because although we know that this journey leads to death, both Jesus' and ours, we have hope that Jesus will make it out alive, and if Jesus makes it out alive, he promises us that so will we.