

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Tuesday, March 31, 2026

Tuesday In Holy Week

Solemn Eucharist

5:30 pm

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A Sermon by

Professor Sarah Coakley

on

1 Corinthians 1:18–31; John 12:20–36

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Address 3: Passion

From ‘The Journey of Desire: Passion, Temptation and Transformation’

‘Truly, truly, I say to you: unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit’ (John 12. 24)

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

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I have spoken so far in this week’s addresses, first, of the *invitation* to the Passion, and of the costliness that truly undergoing it will involve; and then, last night, of the first symbolic sign of that costliness, the *gift* of excess that we saw in Mary of Bethany’s outpouring of ‘wasted’ ointment, wiped extravagantly on Jesus’s feet. Already we have come forcibly up against the limits of ordinary human reason and calculation in Jesus’s tender acceptance of this woman’s embarrassingly excessive act of love, desire and grief; already we glimpse the truth that this Passion business, whatever it may mean for us this year, now, is beyond the tidiness that – even in our frenetically busy lives – we constantly aspire to. Yes, tidiness and busyness: how weirdly and paradoxically and neurotically they support and sustain one another. And tonight, as John’s gospel pauses in its inimitable way to provide in advance the theological key to everything that is about to unfold in the coming days, we pause too, and are forced to reflect on how our addiction to both busyness and tidiness must give way to a deeper truth, the truth of Passion itself.

What then, is Passion, according to John?

‘Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains *alone* ...’ Ah. Here is John’s distinctive account of the truth and logic of Jesus’s Passion. Here is the key to all our thinking this week about love and desire. And this is nothing to do with the yearly return of John Barleycorn and his anticipated fruitful agricultural harvest year by year, as we might suppose on a quick or careless reading; but rather John’s distinctive way of announcing what *Jesus’s* death will achieve, how its overcoming of that terrible ‘aloneness’ of alienation and death will spread to all people, and bear infinite ‘fruit’. And John conjoins this theme with his equally distinctive paradox of a being ‘lifted up’ on a cross, as a means not of humiliation but of ‘glory’. Here, in this same gospel passage, also, we find just a hint of the agony in the garden (‘Now is my soul troubled’, says Jesus), but immediately an insistence that this hour of suffering, too, has already been ‘glorified’.

The ‘glory’ of the Passion, then, is John’s repetitive theme, so well-known to us now that we almost no longer hear its *offence*; but it remains inextricably connected with our universal terror of loss and death, of dying and ‘falling into the ground’. Let us muse anticipatorily on this tonight for a moment further, as John does, before the overwhelming pace of the events of the triduum overtakes us.

We spend most of our lives, do we not, aspiring to be in control, to leaving our imprint on the world and on others? Everything in our modern education urges this on us, as supposedly autonomous and individual actors; and *if* we are lucky enough to be supported to some degree by our birth family in our upbringing, and *if* we have enough natural gifts to be relatively ‘successful’ thereafter, we can spend our whole lives in this delusive economy of *aloneness* – of order, competitiveness and control. It is but a natural accompaniment to the economic order of gift-exchange on which we meditated last night: I help you up the ladder, if your accomplishments will in turn enhance my own shining reputation. Somehow, in the midst of all this, a dreadful *amnesia* causes many of us to forget that at least a third of the world’s population and more, even here amongst us so painfully in this country of extremities of rich and poor, has not even enough food, let alone enough acquired education or goods, to think this way at all.

So then comes the challenge, the out-of-left-field cataclysm for the so-called ‘successful’: a drastic failure in ambition, perhaps, an agony of love or a love gone wrong, a paralysing depression, a serious and life-threatening illness, even the quite ordinary business of a woman’s first giving birth – in which ‘control’ is suddenly out the window (how *can* this force of labour overtake my body? how *can* such a tiny person so completely hi-jack all my well-practised ways of autonomy?); and then we are up against, not just nasty little blips of misfortune or fate, but pressing intimations of the ‘seed falling into the ground’, as Jesus, facing his Passion, understands it. Instead of mastering, controlling, predicting, we are ‘handed over’ to the care, or abuse, or management of others: we ‘undergo’ what is laid before us, like it or not. Even so illustrious (and ambiguous) a political British leader as Winston Churchill once quipped of his school days that he did not so much go through them as ‘under’ them: a sensitive, bolshy, adolescent quite in the wrong place. He failed, we might say, with flying colours; he *underwent* that school experience, as others too, much less privileged than he, undergo their own agonies of loss of control or order. We die, we die, we fall into the ground and die. God is no respecter of persons.

But what the gospel of John tells us of such experiences is that in them there should be no resigned acknowledgement of fate, let alone any justification of abuse, but rather a matter of what Jesus *attains* in his ‘glory’. In the Passion is a ‘glorious’ meeting and contact with the One who has already ‘undergone’ what it is to be finally out of control unto death, already ‘handed over’ to events before which his own soul was deeply ‘troubled’. And in that ‘undergoing’, in that dying, there was according to John also a glorious overcoming of *cosmic* ‘aloneness’, an overcoming of the terrible individualistic competitiveness of success and busyness that dominates the order of the world.

How hard it is to believe, even as Christians, that ‘falling into the ground and dying’ could release us into that true glory and communion; that being ‘handed over’, rather than controlling the fallen world, could open our eyes to the extraordinary beauty and mystical connectedness of the world’s pulsing life, could show the way back into that unspoiled vineyard of love of which Isaiah originally spoke with such power. Here, *all* our desires may indeed be known, and finally fulfilled. And yet this is, according to John, the key to all that is going to unfold before us in coming days, in which the Christ who has up to now *done* so many signs, *walked* so many ways, *healed* so many people, and *said* so many things, will be himself ‘handed over’ to powerlessness: silenced, beaten, and ‘lifted up’ on the cross.

‘Amen, amen, I say to you: unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit’. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, in the days of real Roman martyrdom, embraced his own death and echoed John’s gospel, writing (in his *Epistle to the Romans*) ‘I am God’s grain’. There is really only one question that presses each year at this time, as we hover on the edge of the events of the triduum, and it is this: Is it busyness and order and control we aspire to, or is it the being of ‘God’s grain’, the sharing and undergoing – beyond ‘aloneness’ – in the ‘glory’ of the cross? If it is the latter, then – thanks be to God – we can leave for a while the terrible lists of things undone, the overflowing e-mail, the dirty laundry and the spring cleaning, the endless desire to get on top of things, and step once more, and defenceless, into the terrible meaning of Passion which shatters all aloneness and opens onto glory. That’s the deal; and if we can accept and bear it, we go forward yet more deeply into this week of Passion, and on into the transformation of desire which Christ alone offers us. *Amen*.
