

“For Their Eyes Were Heavy” Ben Dorr
Matthew 26:30-46 Westminster, Greenville
Maundy Thursday April 9, 2020

There’s a word that’s come up a lot in the news during the past month.

I’m sure you’ll recognize it.
The word is overwhelmed.

We are social distancing and, as we are able, staying at home right now, and one of the reasons is that we want to help prevent our hospitals and medical workers here in Greenville from becoming overwhelmed.

But you don’t have to be on the medical front lines to know this feeling.

Whether it’s just the emotion of the moment, or you’re in a quiet place with your own fears, or you worry for your economic security...it’s a very human experience to become, at any point in time, overwhelmed.

Never mind the pandemic for a moment.
Who here hasn’t ever had the experience of ever being overwhelmed?

I remember when I was a senior in high school.

Our cross country team was never the best, but we had a chance that year to beat the team just down the road from us.

Waverly High School always creamed us in cross country, but my senior year, we knew we had the runners to beat them.

So we were ready.

We went on the school announcements—no one ever announced cross country meets on the school announcements—but we went on the announcements, and we said, “Come watch us beat Waverly!”

We invited the former cross-country coach, retired, to come to the race.

It was going to be on our home course.

And the day came, the hour arrived.
And the race began.
And I choked.

I ran my worst race of the year.

At one point in the race, one of my teammates ran by me with one of the Waverly runners, and this teammate—who ended up beating that runner—this teammate was someone I knew I could stay with!

If I had just gone with him, finished with my teammate, we would BOTH have beaten that Waverly runner, and our team would have won that race on a tiebreaker!

Do you see how these things stay with you?
That was over 30 years ago.

And I am still fixated on how if I had just gone with Lamar when he ran by me...

What happened that day?
You know what happened.
The pressure, the tension—I got overwhelmed.

Do you know what it's like to be overwhelmed?

Sure you do.

And tonight, you don't have to go very far to be reminded of that feeling, because it is right here in our text.

During the Last Supper, the disciples are feeling brave.

When Jesus tells his disciples: “You will all become deserters...”—

Peter responds: “Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you.”

And Jesus says to Peter, “Truly I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.”

To which Peter replies: “Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.”

And so said all the disciples.

At the meal, they're courageous.
At the meal, they're confident.
But then they're no longer at the meal.

Then they have moved on to Gethsemane, and Jesus leaves eight of them, and he takes Peter and James and John, and he goes a bit deeper into Gethsemane with those three, and Matthew writes that Jesus said to those three:

*“I am deeply grieved, even to death;
remain here, and stay awake with me.”*

So what do Peter and James and John do?
You know what they do.
They stay there, and they fall asleep.

Jesus comes back, finds them sleeping.

“So, could you not stay awake with me one hour?” he says.

Jesus leaves again, comes back again, and what does he find?

You know what he finds.

*Again he came and found them sleeping, for
their eyes were heavy...*

How could they fall asleep?
This is the last night they’ll be with Jesus!
After all their boasting, can’t they pay attention
to Jesus?

Why are they going to sleep?
I think...we know the answer.
I think...they were overwhelmed.

You see, there’s this curious little phrase that Matthew includes in our text.

...for their eyes were heavy...

It’s almost as if Matthew is providing an excuse. As if Matthew is trying to explain the failure of the disciples.

Trying to say to his readers, perhaps, don’t be too hard on these disciples...look!

Their eyes were heavy.

Do you know what that’s like?
You don’t have to be in Gethsemane to know what that’s like.

I remember the time years ago when I was visiting an elderly parishioner, and she was talking and she was talking, and it was right after lunch, and I felt my eyes go like this....and my head go like this...NO! No, no!

That can’t happen to me.
I’m her pastor.

My eyes aren't supposed to get heavy when I'm one-on-one...with a member of my own church!

But sometimes it happens, right?

You don't have to be in Gethsemane, but in Gethsemane, Matthew says that is what happened.

Why did they fall asleep?
I think they were overwhelmed.

They see Jesus distressed, agitated.
They hear him say, "I am deeply grieved, even to death..."

And the reality hits them.
And they don't want the reality to hit them.

Even Jesus, I think, on this night, was feeling overwhelmed.

Grieved is how Matthew describes him.
Agitated is how Matthew talks about him.

When Luke tells this same story, Luke says that Jesus "withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed..."

That's not how Matthew describes it.

Matthew writes:

"And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed..."

There's no kneeling in Matthew's account.
Jesus throws himself on the ground.

Like he's out of control.
Like he's in agony.
Like he can no longer bear it!

And then he prays this prayer:

"My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want, but what you want."

I think, I think...we could say that on this last night of his life, even Jesus was overwhelmed.

So what happens in those moments?

Those moments when we come face-to-face with our own weakness...and what's out there just feels like too much for us?

I'm reminded of what the Apostle Paul said to the church in Corinth long ago.

Writing about his thorn in the flesh, Paul says:

“Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’”

Do you know anything about that?

About the power of God coming to you in your moment of weakness?

The poet Christian Wiman has written about what it's like to have cancer in his 40s, to be a father and a husband, and to not know what the future will hold.

“Fear,” he writes. “Of nothingness. Of dying. Of failure. Of change....”

“There are [different] ways you can deal with this fear. You can simply refuse to acknowledge it,

dulling your concerns with alcohol or entertainment...or even a sort of virtuous busyness...”

“There is another way. It is the way of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, pleading for release from his fate.... It is something you cannot learn as a kind of lesson simply from reading the text. Christ teaches by example, true, but he lives with us, lives in us...

“It is through all these trials in our own lives, these fears however small, that we come close to Christ, if we can learn to say, with him, ‘not my will, Lord, but yours.’”

“This is in no way resignation,” Wiman concludes.

It is hope,
“hope in its purest and most powerful form,
for hope, as Vaclav Havel has said,
is a condition of your soul—

NOT a response to the circumstances in which you find yourself.

Hope is what Christ had in the garden, though he had no reason for it in terms of events,

and hope is what he has right now, in the garden of our own griefs.”¹

Can you picture the weakest part of your life right now? That place where you feel most helpless and out of control—even overwhelmed—right now?

I believe that what Paul wrote long ago, and what Christian Wiman wrote more recently is true.

In that place of weakness, Christ will come to you. And the grace of Christ...it will be sufficient, but more than that.

What’s the word?

May you find it...OVERWHELMING.

May the grace of Christ overwhelm you this very night.

Amen.

¹ Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer*, New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2013.