The Open Door Community

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Open Door: A Prophetic Discipleship Community Honoring The Black Jesus, Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King Jr.

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Flee or Follow? Mark 16:1-8

By Andrew Foster Connors

But do you believe it *really* happened? That's a question I get every Easter. Usually, I dodge it. On one side of that question are those of you who want me to say directly, no it didn't happen. Armed with historical facts that show the many resurrection stories about people other than Jesus circulating in the world around the same time, as well as the scientific worldview that cannot allow for divine loopholes in the laws of nature, you implore me to tell the truth. The resurrection story is a metaphor, you say, about God's ability to overcome evil or hardship or injustice. The resuscitation of a corpse (or something like it) is not the story. The triumph of love in the universe and in our lives, the triumph of God's justice over the domination systems of our time — *that's the true story*.

On the other side are those of you who want me to say that if it didn't actually happen, then you can't say that love or justice actually triumphs outside of fairy tales. If God doesn't win in the real, historical, flesh and blood life of Jesus, what makes you think God can prevail in the actual, brutal world that we live in? What good are fairy tale love and justice if they only operate *inside of myths*? You, too, want me to tell the truth, as it comes to us from Scripture.

The problem is that Mark's Gospel doesn't seem all that interested in this question, at least not the way we usually ask it. "Do you believe" is a question we ask as if we are located outside of the story, as if we are critics reviewing someone else's performance: disinterested viewers of someone else's Gospel act. "Do you believe" is a question we can rate or review, accept or reject. Like or dislike. Swipe left or right. "Do you believe" is a question that solicits little more than our intellectual assent, most often divorced from our action.

Rita Corbin

Mark's Gospel is much more confrontational that that. Instead of "Do you believe?" it asks a question that demands a real-life choice: "Will you flee Jesus or will you follow him?" Unlike the question of belief, Mark's question is one that you cannot answer only once and be done with it. It's a question would-be followers of Jesus face repeatedly in Mark's Gospel. From the moment the disciples are called to follow Jesus in the very first chapter of Mark, to the moment the last few of the faithful flee the tomb, it's the question that haunts us, that unnerves us, that confronts us from inside our own story.

When God attacks not your enemies but the very system of retribution that creates "us" and "them" categories, will you flee Jesus or will you follow him? When God challenges not just our stinginess, but the whole system of fear that drives us to put the security of some above the wellbeing of others, will you flee Jesus or will you follow him? When God invites us to leave behind the stereotypes that we create about other people because of their race, or because of who they voted for in the last election, or because of their immigration status, will you flee Jesus or will you follow?

I hesitate to raise Mark's question on *this* morning since confrontation is not what most people sign up for when they go to church on Easter. Some of you come because you were taught that Jesus raised from the dead is mostly about hope for an afterlife. Others come because of the flowers, or the music and the seasonal hope that spring might get here this year. Still others of you are here because someone in your family expects you to be with them in church on Easter Sunday, and if listening to a preacher drone on for 20 minutes is their idea of happiness, it's a sacrifice you're willing to make. Flee or follow is a little more intense that what you expected before brunch.

> Jesus promises freedom and courage and life to anyone who would follow, but our fear causes us to flee instead.

Apparently, it was just as intense for the early church, since, sometime after Mark was written, someone tacked on an entirely different ending that tries to turn everything back into a question of belief.

But don't be fooled. Flee or follow is the question that Mark puts before all disciples. Will you flee Jesus or will you follow him, knowing what you know about the suffering that Jesus' way of justice sometimes entails? Knowing what you know about the way of service that Jesus commends?

Flee or Follow *continued on page 8*

Diverging Roads

By Nibs Stroupe

It is no small irony that Billy Graham died in the 50th anniversary year of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination. They both came into the public eye in the 1950s. King was reluctantly dragged out of the comfort and relative quiet of a prestigious church pulpit into the life of public activism and eloquence that, in hindsight, he seemed destined for. Graham burst onto the public scene in a pattern prescient of modern times: William Randolph Hearst loved Graham's anti-Communism and saw him as a vehicle for winning over the masses. Hearst's media power sent Graham's star soaring in the popular imagination.

They were both religious giants in America in the 20th century. Both had a strong sense that America had a great religious destiny. In his most famous speech, King lifted up the unfulfilled promise of America in "I Have A Dream," calling out white America to live up to our tenets of equality and freedom for all. Graham emphasized over and over again that America was God's chosen nation. He also emphasized that the goal of the religious life and of religious institutions was to proclaim the necessity of individuals to claim Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

Here, to use Robert Frost's famous metaphor, their two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and they took differing routes. King continued to call America out — calling out our better selves, calling us to re-imagine ourselves as a nation that seeks to live out the true meaning of the idea that all people are created equal. His strong commitment to non-violence got him in trouble with everybody, and the deep resistance that he encountered among the power structures began to shift him to add the ideas of justice and equity to the ideals of freedom and equality. When he spoke out against the Vietnam War in 1967, the powers on all sides were stunned. And when he began to organize the Poor People's Campaign to talk about economic injustice, the powers decided that it was enough, that he was too dangerous. It is no surprise that, of the many opportunities to assassinate him, the occasion came when he was in Memphis, not to assist in voting rights, but to raise the wages and working conditions of people who were garbage collectors. Though we have sanitized him and have made him a saint on the MLK holiday, the reality of King's life at its end was reflected in J. Edgar Hoover's assessment of him: one of the most dangerous men in America.

Graham, meanwhile, stuck with the idea that all God cares about is what happens to individuals when they die. His strong emphasis on claiming Jesus Christ as Savior had little to do with our lives here on earth. It rather had to do with what our eternal status would be. In sticking with this emphasis, Graham became an easy captive of the powers and of the long-held American belief that religion is an individual, not a communal, matter. This approach to religion is what enabled

Diverging Roads *continued on page 8*

I Am Still Remembering Him

By Catherine Meeks

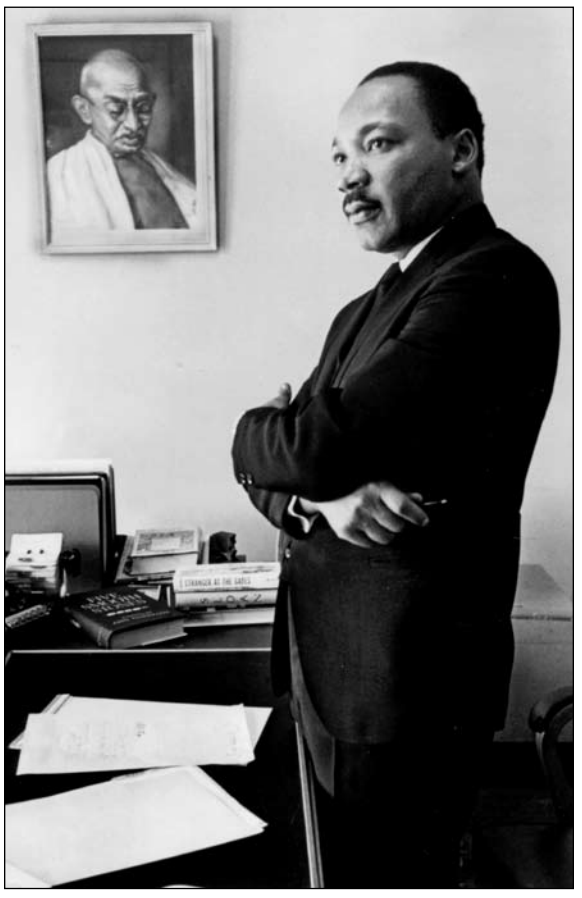
On April 4, we remembered Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who was assassinated on that day in 1968. Though several weeks have passed since I sat on the stage at the National Civil and Human Rights Museum in Atlanta speaking about his legacy, I am still talking about remembering him because it takes more than a few days to reflect upon his death, which feels more recent than 50 years ago.

I will never forget that day. I was sitting at my work station in the office of the African American general surgeon for whom I worked until I graduated from college. It was quite amazing to me to be working for Dr. Ross M. Miller Jr. because I had never seen an African American physician until I moved from Arkansas to Los Angeles. Dr. Miller was a political activist and helped me to develop a deeper awareness of political issues and of the need for community service. He was quite a champion for young people in pursuit of their education. I was twenty-two years old, working my way through college and trying to figure out how to find my voice and listen for whatever was waiting for me as I navigated my way in the world, and Dr. Miller was a valued mentor.

The program on our office radio was interrupted by the announcement that Dr. King had been shot in Memphis, Tennessee. As I hurried to go tell Dr. Miller, he met me in the hallway; he had heard the announcement as well, and we went to my work area. Dr. Miller stood at the corner of my desk and said, "I wonder if I should go to Memphis." But it was not long before that question was made irrelevant as we were told that Martin Luther King Jr. had died.

My life was bookmarked by his death. There are some deaths that make such a mark upon you that you begin to think of yourself in terms of your life before the person died and after the person died. Dr. King's death was such a death. I am not alone in this way of thinking. Following my talk at the museum, many of the folks who spoke after my keynote address talked about how they had been impacted by his death and shared how deeply their lives had been punctuated by it.

Though we continue to remember, it is critical not to get lost in those memories, or in the ongoing grief that lingers to this day. We have to honor his legacy. The most important first step in giving him the honor he is due is not in the pageantry of our parades, marches and speeches, but in the effort that we put forth to hear God's call to us as Dr. King heard that call for himself. He was truly living into what he was called to be and to do. My heart bubbles with gratitude for the insight that has come to me about the necessity to live one's call with all of the heart, mind and soul that is possible. Once there is head and heart consent given to that path, it is possible to go out into the world and do the right work — the work that was meant for you and not the work which someone else might imagine for you.



Bob Fitch

The most important first step in giving him the honor he is due is not in the pageantry of our parades, marches and speeches, but in the effort that we put forth to hear God's call to us as Dr. King heard that call for himself.

The culture makes it difficult to hear God's still, small voice. Most of the time, God is far more interested in talking to us than we are in listening. But it can be heard. Dr. King's death set off an avalanche of questions for me. I was not alone in feeling desolate, but there were not many places to seek solace. I did not have a very good community of support at that time. But I did have a little flame of faith that was not about to be extinguished.

The summer following Dr. King's assassination, I began to remember a two-volume set of books about him that I had spent the previous summer reading, and I reconnected to the sense of empowerment that I felt while reading about him and reading his own words, too. Though I had heard the "I Have A Dream" speech, it was clear to me that I needed to understand his "Letter From A Birmingham Jail" and his "Beyond Vietnam" speech. That summer's realization has grown stronger for me over the past 50 years, and I am completely clear today that there is no place for the version of Dr. King that makes him simply a one-dimensional messenger of reconciliation. He was so much more, and respect for his legacy requires us to engage his whole person, including the radical preacher who knew for a fact that all of God's children deserved justice and freedom. He saw militarism, materialism and racism as the major hindrances to that justice and freedom. He was not seeking to have reconciliation without justice.

He gave up his life. If we honor his legacy, we will give up our lives to whatever God calls us to do. ⌖

Catherine Meeks is the Founding Executive Director of the Absalom Jones Episcopal Center for Racial Healing, and the retired Clara Carter Acree Distinguished Professor of Socio-cultural Studies and Sociology from Wesleyan College. She has published six books and is editor of Living Into God's Dream: Dismantling Racism in America *(2016), which focuses on racial healing and reconciliation. She writes for the* Huffington Post *and is a regular contributor to* Hospitality. *She is involved with prison work, visits on death row and works for the abolition of the death penalty. (kayma53@att.net)*

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David Payne

Eduard Loring, Sr. Helen Prejean and Murphy Davis at Loyola University Maryland before Helen spoke to the University community.

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Please join us on **Facebook** for the continuing journey of the **Open Door Community** in **Baltimore.** Thank you. David, Eduard and Murphy.

I've Been to the Mountain Top Fifty Years Later

By Peter Gathje

April 3, 2018: Fifty years after Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I've Been to the Mountain Top" speech at Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee, I am spending the morning at Manna House.

It is women's shower day. A small African American woman, a guest with us for many years, comes to shower. She got housing and I have not seen her for a while. Today she tells us she is fresh out of the hospital; she has had another stroke. A hospital ID band is on her wrist. She can barely walk; her speech is slurred. A volunteer gently helps her select clothes and then guides her into the shower room, steadying her as she walks.

"Mr. Pigues! How are you? Where have you been?" He is a tall, slender African American man. "I've been here and there. I got run over by a car. I can't move so fast and I don't see so good and drivers don't care." He explains that he has no sight in one eye now and the other eye is working at about thirty percent.

Another guest arrives with disturbing but not entirely surprising news. "The police are moving people out of the parks downtown. Squirrel Park and that one where Jefferson Davis used to stand. I got run out because I had a backpack; that's how they say you're homeless."

"The big people are in town for this Martin Luther King thing. They don't want us to be seen," says another guest. Given the city leadership's apparent failure to know anything about Dr. King, I start asking guests, "What does Martin Luther King mean to you?"

Given the city leadership's apparent failure to know anything about Dr. King, I start asking guests, "What does Martin Luther King mean to you?"

I head out to the front porch. It is an unseasonably warm day. Thunderstorms are in the forecast and strong winds are already starting to blow, much like the weather 50 years ago. An older African American man comes up the steps. He carefully measures each placement of his feet. He makes it into the house. A few minutes later he comes out with a cup of coffee.

"Take my arm. Help me down the steps," he says to me. "I can't see so good with this glaucoma." I do what he says. With our arms intertwined, we carefully make it down the steps. Then he slowly moves down the street until he is out of sight. He was a new guest, one of the many who arrive today that I do not recognize. There is never a shortage of new people who come for a cup of coffee, some conversation, a shower, or with greater needs.

"Can I get some underwear and a pair of pants? I'm just out of jail. All I have is these clothes, and they stink." He, too, is a newcomer. I take him into the clothing room and the volunteers running the showers get him set up. Another guest arrives. He's wearing an orthopedic boot. I recognize him as a guest from many years ago.

"He means freedom and equality. As Black people we aren't treated like equals even now. He was killed because he challenged that in America." Fifty years ago, Dr. King said, "All we say to America is, 'Be true to what you said on paper.'"

"He was a civil rights pioneer." Fifty years ago, Dr. King said, "We are determined to be people. We are saying — we are saying that we are God's children."

"He means I'm alive. Just to survive as a Black man is resistance." Fifty years ago, Dr. King said, "Now, let me say as I move to my conclusion that we've got to give ourselves to this struggle until the end. Nothing would be more tragic than to stop at this point in Memphis. We've got to see it through."

"He was a modern-day prophet. He spoke God's truth that judged this nation and all the wrong it was doing and is doing." Fifty years ago, Dr. King said, "Somehow the preacher must have a kind of fire shut up in his bones. And whenever injustice is around he tell it. Somehow the preacher must be an Amos, and saith, 'When God speaks who can but prophesy?' Again with Amos, 'Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.' Somehow the preacher must say with Jesus, 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he hath anointed me, and he's anointed me to deal with the problems of the poor.'"

"I remember people in my church who were upset that he came in here. 'He's just causing trouble, stirring things up.' People forget now that he wasn't popular then because they don't pay attention to what he said." Fifty years ago, Dr. King said, "The nation is sick. Trouble is in the land; confusion all around."

"He came to Memphis and lost his life. When they killed him, they brought the National Guard in. I was a little boy. I remember the green trucks and the men with bayonets. It was a troubling time. My momma said, 'Stay low. If they can kill Dr. King, they can kill you.'" Fifty years ago, Dr. King said, "The cry is always the same: 'We want to be free.'"

"I wasn't born yet. But I think I miss his personality. I wonder what he would have become. I wonder how he would have stayed in the struggle. We need leaders like him today, with his courage to confront evil." Fifty years ago, Dr. King said, "Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!"

Peter Gathje is Vice President for Academic Affairs/Dean of Memphis Theological Seminary, and a founder of Manna House, a place of hospitality in Memphis. He wrote Sharing the Bread of Life: Hospitality and Resistance at the Open Door Community *(2006) and edited* A Work of Hospitality: The Open Door Reader 1982 – 2002. *(pgathje@memphisseminary.edu)*

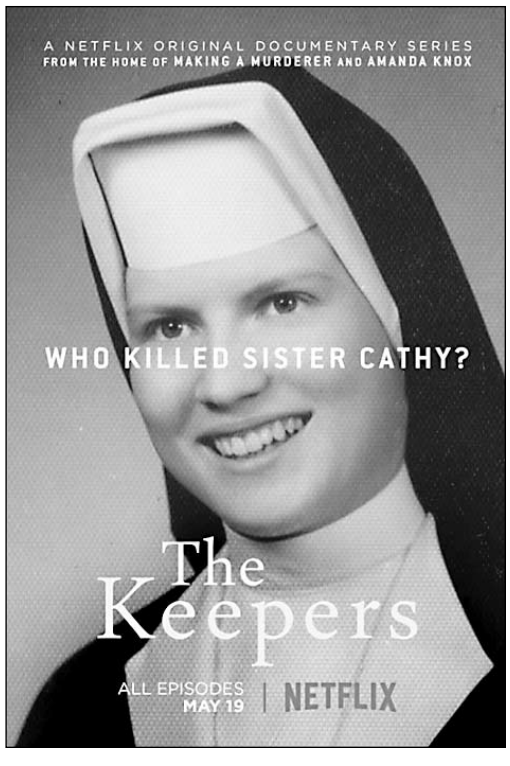
"The Keepers," A Netflix Documentary

By Rosalie Riegle

This chilling documentary, which first aired last May, is, on one level, a shocking story of the still-unsolved 1967 murder of Sister Cathy Cesnik, a nun who taught high school in Baltimore. It soon becomes clear that Cathy was murdered because she learned that a priest was abusing many of the girls at Keogh High where she taught, and she was trying to do something about it. This Baltimore story of sexual abuse by those with power — of murder, collusion, bribery, intimidation, bad policing and outright cover-up — could happen anywhere, and much of it has. Particularly in the later episodes, viewers will be appalled and angered by the over-reaching power of the Catholic Church as an institution, as it thwarts justice at all levels in a country whose constitution supposedly guarantees separation of church and state.

The most compelling parts of the story for me, though, were the careful and persistent attempts of two Keogh graduates to uncover the truth about their classmates' abuse, and the courage of the victimized girls who came forward as adult survivors.

Thankfully, groups like SNAP (Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests), founded by former Catholic Worker Barbara Blaine, work nationally and internationally to both support survivors and bring perpetrators to justice. And in June of last year, the Maryland State Legislature finally passed a law increasing the statute of limitations for sex abuse crimes.



Silence-breakers in the past year have uncovered the abuse of power at the heart of all patriarchal institutions — church, state, sports, entertainment, media, you name it, it's there. Watch this powerful documentary and then search your own heart and the patriarchal institutions you support to see if you, too, have been secret-keepers, have remained silent when silence was cowardice.

Rosalie Riegle is a grandmother, an oral historian and emerita in English from Saginaw Valley State University in Michigan. Now living in Evanston, Illinois and active with Su Casa Catholic Worker on the South Side of Chicago, Rosalie's latest books are Doing Time for Peace: Resistance, Family, and Community*, and* Crossing the Line: Nonviolent Resisters Speak Out for Peace.

My Lai: Remembrance and Repair

By Bill Ramsey

Rick Reinhard

Earl Martin, Mennonite Central Committee, speaks at the Vigil.

Where were we, and what were we doing on the morning of March 16, 1968, when U.S. soldiers of Charlie Company massacred 504 women, children, babies and elderly men in the Vietnamese hamlet of My Lai? Unlike other significant murderous acts — the assassination of President Kennedy in Dallas, the killing of Dr. Martin Luther King in Memphis, the attack on the Twin Towers in New York City — I would guess that most of us have no idea what we were doing when Vietnamese villagers were herded into ditches and executed at close range.

Why? First of all, word of the massacre was deliberately sidetracked and sequestered on its way to us. Twenty months later, the carefully designed cover-up finally collapsed. On November 17, 1969, investigative reporter Seymour Hersh broke the story of the atrocity on the front page of *The New York Times*. Three days later, his interviews with three soldiers who participated in the attack on My Lai appeared in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. Later in November, we heard the account of one of those who participated in the killing interviewed by Mike Wallace on "60 Minutes." In early December, as pictures from a clandestine roll of color film appeared in *Life* magazine, we saw the desperate faces and ravaged bodies of the Vietnamese victims.

Second, and perhaps more telling, the desperate faces and ravaged bodies were not *ours*. They were *theirs*: Asian peasants, halfway around the world. We had been taught, and our troops trained to believe, that *Asians do not value human life the way we do*. It is a myth that has served our country's larger purposes in the Philippines, Japan and Korea, as well as Vietnam. Its roots existed at the founding of our nation and persist in our refusal to recognize the full humanity of those from whom we stole this land and those whom we enslaved to make "our land" prosper. Atrocities perpetrated against "our people" on "our soil" appear to count more and capture our collective memory, isolating one moment or one day away from all others. But for the Vietnamese people, My Lai counted — just as did the hundreds of atrocities that preceded and followed it, week after week, year upon year.

We had been taught, and our troops trained to believe, that *Asians do not value human life the way we do.*

Third, once the story broke, the U.S. media focused on the trial and fate of one of the perpetrators of the massacre, who was turned into a cause célèbre by those supporting the war. His name many of us do remember: Lt. William Calley. But who were his commanders? Who were his victims? Who were the U.S. soldiers who tried to stop him? How exceptional were his crimes? With the media trained like watchdogs on the singularity of his guilt, who stepped forward to ask the hard questions about responsibility for the killing? And what lessons were we able to learn from My Lai about ongoing U.S. military interventions abroad, on our borders, and in our cities?

These questions, and our memories of the desperate faces and ravaged bodies, compelled a group of us to gather in front of the White House on March 16 of this year. Sponsored by the Vietnam Peace Commemorative Committee, we kept vigil as our friends in Vietnam were also commemorating the 50th anniversary of the My Lai massacre. A cold, 30-mile-an-hour wind buffeted our banner bearing the words "My Lai: Never Forget." We rang a Buddhist prayer bell, as Vietnamese Americans read the names of all 504 people who had been killed in the massacre. One participant was an older man who joined us off the street to share his memories.

Tourists looked on and read our leaflets as Earl Martin related a recent visit to My Lai and told us about his work in surrounding Quang Ngai Province with the Mennonite Central Committee at the time of the massacre. Rose Berger of *Sojourners* magazine read her haunting poem, "An Outline for a Service Acknowledging War Crimes." Greenpeace activist Charles Cray disclosed the continuing deadly impact of Agent Orange and unexploded landmines in Vietnam. University of Alabama historian Howard Jones spoke of the courageous and honorable people he had discovered while writing *My Lai: Vietnam, 1968, and the Descent into Darkness*.

Just when it seemed that the truth of what was done in our names was unbearable, we offered up a litany of remembrance and repair, including the names of those who had tried to stop or worked to expose the massacre. Punctuating the reading with the unison response, "Let us not forget, so that we never repeat," we lifted up these words:

> "We remember those victims whose names we read today, and all the residents of My Lai who were killed while cooking breakfast, huddling beneath their homes, shielding their children, running from danger or being herded into ditches. We attend to the testimonies of the villagers who suffered rape and witnessed atrocity, to all who survived the massacre submerged in rice paddies, hidden in tree lines and lying still under the bodies of their families and neighbors.
>
> We recognize the soldiers who, at some point during those murderous four hours in My Lai, gathered the presence of mind and heart to refuse, ignore or stop following orders to kill unarmed civilians. We honor those who intervened to stop the killing, who rescued villagers while holding their fellow soldiers at gunpoint and then immediately reported the slaughter, saving the lives of many others in the planned path of massacre.
>
> We lament with all the soldiers who were tormented by what they did in My Lai, including at least one who took his own life as a result, and with all those who continue to be haunted by their actions that day. We salute those who courageously exposed the atrocity, who gathered accounts and refused to be silenced, who insisted that the war crimes be investigated, who publicly voiced their remorse and shared the trauma they suffered.
>
> We give thanks for all the soldiers, journalists, historians and attorneys who boldly insisted that the crimes in My Lai were not an aberration, but routine and rooted in the objectives of the U.S. war. Across Quang Ngai Province, almost 70 percent of all villages were destroyed, 40 percent of the people were made refugees and civilian casualties were close to 50,000 a year. We mourn the tens of thousands of villagers who were wounded and killed while planting rice, irrigating fields, cutting wood, gathering limes, fishing lagoons, herding livestock and walking to market in hamlet after hamlet. We grieve for the more than 300,000 civilians killed or wounded by 1968 in free-fire zones across Vietnam — victims of U.S. artillery shells, helicopter machine-gun fire, napalm drops, saturation bombings, search-and-destroy missions and the racist, unconscionable military order to "kill anything that moves."
>
> We voice all these names and lift up these lives today so that their suffering and their courage will not be lost to history. Fifty years later, those who sacrificed reputation, safety and life beckon us to expose and name our My Lais: to speak truth to power, to embrace risk and to take upon ourselves the responsibility to work for reconciliation and repair in a world that still runs on lies and profits from violence. We give thanks that their legacy lives on, as we seek the clarity and courage to carry it forward."

Many of the images and descriptions of the actions of individuals in this Litany are from accounts in Howard Jones' *My Lai: Vietnam, 1968, and the Descent into Darkness* (2017), Nick Turse's *Kill Anything that Moves* (2013), and Yorkshire Television's film "Four Hours in My Lai" (1989). ⌖

Bill Ramsey is a native of Georgia whose experiments in activism have included draft and war-tax resistance, farmworker boycott organizing, nuclear disarmament campaigns, racial and economic justice projects and movements to oppose U.S. military interventions from Indochina to Afghanistan and Iraq. He worked for the American Friends Service Committee in the Southeast and in St. Louis, where he lived in inner-city neighborhoods for 32 years and founded the Human Rights Action Service. Bill and his spouse, Joyce Hollyday, live on a wooded ridge outside Asheville, North Carolina. Presently, he coordinates a congregational working group of the Western North Carolina Sanctuary Movement, manages a war-tax resistance alternative fund, and serves on the local steering committee of JustPeace for Israel/Palestine.

The Healing Power of Forgiveness

By Walter Everett

My life was shattered when I received a call from my 20-year-old son, Wayne. I was 300 miles from home, on my way to North Carolina along with seven members of the church of which I was then pastor. We were planning to work with Jimmy Carter on a Habitat for Humanity building project.

"Are you sitting down?" Wayne asked.

"Yes," I lied. There was no place to sit.

"Scott was murdered last night."

I slumped to the floor in shock. My friends immediately purchased a plane ticket for me, and I flew back to New York, where I was met by another couple who were members of my "flock." They drove me home to Easton, Connecticut where I cried with my family and we then began to plan a funeral service that I had never imagined I would have to plan. As a pastor, I had worked with countless families to help them plan services for their loved ones, but now I was planning a service for my oldest son, who was just 24 years old.

About two months later, I was invited to join a newly formed support group for families of homicide victims. Knowing that I was struggling with my grief, I welcomed the invitation. At my first meeting, I heard someone blurt out, "Anybody who kills anyone should be taken out and shot immediately, no questions asked."

I understood her anger, but I certainly did not agree with her conclusion. I have always opposed the death penalty. As a follower of Jesus, I know we are called not to repay violence with more violence. Yet I considered the source, and because the source of my anger was fresh, I assumed that the speaker was still dealing with a fresh source of anger. How wrong I was! I discovered that her son had been murdered 14 years earlier, and she was still carrying that heavy load of anger.

My own anger and depression had been eating away at my ability to function as a pastor, indeed to live the life of inner peace and joy that Christ offers. My prayers thus began to be consumed with my own personal need, and I found myself asking God again and again, "How do I unload this anger?"

At first it seemed as though God was not even paying attention, let alone giving me an answer. But all at once, God's answer seemed to ring loud and clear: "Wait."

Wait?? What kind of answer is that? But all I continued to get was, "Wait."

I had always told others to be patient, that God would answer at the right time. Now I was struggling with my own advice about patience.

Several months later, I received a call from the state's attorney, asking me to come to his office so that we could discuss the case. However, when I arrived at his office, I discovered that the "discussion" was not a dialogue. The prosecutor's first words were, "We've come to a plea bargain with the person who killed your son. He was originally charged with first degree homicide, but we have reduced the charge to manslaughter; Mike will plead guilty and will receive a sentence of ten years, suspended after five."

"Five years for killing my son? You call that justice?"

"Well, I know you don't like it, but in the first place, you don't have any say in the matter. The state is the injured party; the state prosecutes. You are just a bystander."

"I'm a bystander? You're talking about my son!" I screamed.

"And in the second place, the police did a shoddy job of investigating and we want to make sure he does at least some time." (I later discovered that Mike had been arrested 43 times prior to Scott's death. In most cases he received little more than a slap on the wrist.)

I walked out of the office more angry than when I arrived. I continued to pray, but the only answer I received was, "Wait."

Two months later, we went into court for the sentencing of Mike. I was asked if I had anything I wanted to say. I stood and spoke for about 15 minutes. I have no recollection of anything I said. Then the judge asked if Mike had anything he wanted to say. Mike stood and, against his attorney's advice, began to speak. I remember clearly everything he said: "I'm sorry I killed Scott Everett. I wish I could bring him back. Obviously I can't. These must sound like empty words to the Everetts, but I don't know what else to say. I'm sorry."

At that moment I felt a nudge from God. "This is what I've been asking you to wait for." Nothing else. No direction as to what I was supposed to do next.

I assumed God wanted me to respond to Mike's words, but how was I to do that? I probably would not be allowed to visit him, nor did I believe I wanted to do so. I finally decided to write him a letter, but I knew that even that would be difficult. I was sure that I would keep procrastinating, feeling as though I would be more ready to write at some future date. I thought, "If I don't pick a specific date and time, it will never get done."

Twenty-five days after Mike's sentencing was the anniversary of Scott's death. That morning I sat down at my desk and began to write. I told Mike of all the pain, loneliness and depression I had endured for the previous year. I finally added, "I want to thank you for your words in court on the day of your sentencing, and as hard as these words are to write, I forgive you." I then wrote of God's love and forgiveness, and invited Mike to write back to me. He did so, and that started a continuing series of letters until he wrote and asked me to visit him. Thus began a growing relationship in which I began to see in him a developing trust in God.

Two-and-a-half years later, during one of our regular visits, Mike asked, "What would you say if I told you I was thinking about going before the Parole Board to ask for an early release?" I am convinced that this was Mike's way of asking permission. Without hesitation, I responded, "Mike, God has changed your life, and I see no point in the state of Connecticut keeping you in prison any longer." He asked, "Would you say that to the Parole Board?" I responded that I would be glad to do so. Two months later, I told the Board why I thought he should be released. They sat there, giving no indication that they were hearing what I was saying. However, that evening I received a call from Mike. "They gave me a date, and I'm convinced that what you said made the difference."

Mike was released just 35 months into his sentence, and soon found a job with a trucking firm. He had been totally honest when applying for the job, and the owner said, "I appreciate you honesty; I'm going to give you a chance." Incredibly, within a year, the boss made Mike a supervisor. Later his boss told me, "Mike is the best supervisor I've ever had." Today, Mike supervises 180 people.

More than that, he is active in Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, often chairs meetings of both groups, and regularly sponsors as many as six people in 12-step programs.

Mike and I often speak together at churches, universities and prisons. Someone once asked him how it felt, after being in prison for three years, to finally be free. Mike's immediate response was, "Oh, I was free long before I got out of prison."

At another event, Mike, who recently celebrated 29 years of sobriety, said, "Walt saved my life." I interrupted, "Correction, Mike, God saved your life, and God saved my life, too." Now Mike says, "God saved my life, but He used Walt to help Him do it."

Today Mike has clearance to go into any prison in Connecticut to lead 12-step programs, and to tell of the change God has wrought in his life. He has traveled to Pennsylvania, where I now live, to speak with me at a number of events, including at prisons. He often says, "I like speaking in prisons, because it was while I was in prison that God changed my life."

God has changed two lives through this chain of events: Mike's and mine. Both of us have been healed through the power of forgiveness. As has often been said, "Forgiveness is not only a gift that you give to someone else; forgiveness is also a gift, by the grace of God, that you give to yourself." ⌖

Walter Everett retired after pastoring United Methodist churches for 49 years. He now lives on a farm in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania and has devoted the rest of his life to the joint project of sharing the story of forgiveness, working against the death penalty as well as against life imprisonment, and fulfilling Jesus' call to visit those in prison.

poetry corner

There We Stood!

Reflections Upon the March 15, 2018 Execution of Carlton "Mike" Gary

Julie Lonneman

Betty Carroll

There we were. Just a small group of us.
Standing on the steps of the Georgia State Capitol in Atlanta.
Holding our anti-death-penalty banners and hand-made posters.
Protesting the execution of Carlton "Mike" Gary.

Mike Gary had been found guilty in 1986 of being the "stocking strangler."
A serial killer/rapist who allegedly murdered
7 women in Columbus, Georgia in 1977-78
All older women, 55 to 89 years old.
All raped and murdered in their own homes
with their own stockings.

Why such senseless crimes?
Why did these women suffer such a horrific death?
Why did their families have to mourn the loss of their
mothers, aunts and sisters?
Why these particular women?
Why? Why? Why? So many questions.

Mike Gary was arrested and found guilty of three
of the seven heinous crimes.
Some said he did it; some said he didn't.
In the end, a jury concluded that he did it,
and he was sentenced to die.
He was sent to "death row" to await execution.
And to wait. Wait for 23 years.

Eventually, in 2009, his execution was scheduled.
After all those years, DNA and other physical evidence
raised questions about his guilt.
The State's Supreme stopped the execution
so that new evidence could be considered.
So he waited nine more years.

Then, this year, the powers-that-be rescheduled his execution.
The Board of Pardons concluded that Mike Gary must now die.
The State Supreme Court rejected his appeal for a new trial.
The U.S. Supreme Court likewise refused him.

And so, 30+ years after his original conviction,
Carlton "Mike" Gary was killed by the State of Georgia
by lethal injection on Thursday, March 15, 2018 at 10:33 p.m.
The Ides of March!

Perhaps he committed these terrible acts of evil. Perhaps not.
Only Mike and the victims knew for sure.

But there we stood in front of the Georgia State Capitol, avowing...
"Stop the death penalty!"
"Not in my name!"
"Why do we kill people who kill people
to show that killing people is wrong?
"An eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind."
You've heard the sayings.
We've all heard them for years!

But there we stood,
Surrounded by the sounds of the city.
Standing on the steps of the very building
where laws are made that authorize capital punishment.
Hearing a few passing cars honking in agreement with our protests.
Seeing many others glance our way as if to ask, "Why the fuss?"

But there we stood,
repeating the same litany that we have used for 70 previous executions,
protesting this medieval way of dealing with our worst criminals.
For some, this was our first time to take a stand
against the death penalty.
Some of us have been standing there for years.
Calling upon the Empire to repent from this evil practice.
Calling upon the public to give a damn.
Calling upon ourselves to do more.
Calling upon God to teach us anew how to be faithful
in such chaotic times.

Were we just a voice crying in the wilderness?

Perhaps, just perhaps, we were a voice announcing...
there is a reason for hope amidst much despair.
there is a light amidst our darkness
— even though we seem perfectly satisfied with darkness.
there is love amidst so much vengeance, anger and hatred.

Perhaps, just perhaps, we were pointing to an alternative way of life...
Life lived as though Gospel promises are really true.
Life lived as though God can really transform human lives.
Life lived as though God is more powerful than evil.
Life lived as though Easter reality is more trustworthy
than Good Friday executions.

There we stood. Just a small group of us.
And we'll continue to stand as long as life is more important than death.

— Lee Carroll

Lee Carroll chairs the Open Door Community Board of Directors. He is Professor Emeritus of Urban Ministries at Columbia Theological Seminary.

Finding Grace in the Midst of an Execution

By Mary Catherine Johnson

On the evening of March 15, twenty other Georgians stood with me in a field outside the prison where Georgia's death row is located, holding vigil for the man who was scheduled to be executed that night: Carlton "Mike" Gary. A few months earlier, I was standing in the same place when the news came that Keith "Bo" Tharpe had received a last-minute stay of execution, and the joy of that occasion still lingered in the air, giving us hope that Mike Gary might get a similar reprieve.

Due to the high-profile nature of the crimes of which Mike Gary was accused, the press outnumbered us this time, giving this particular vigil the feeling of a media circus rather than the more sober atmosphere that I am accustomed to. And for the first time since I've been leading the vigils outside the prison, there was one person standing in the area designated for people in favor of the execution — a woman connected to the victims who had intended to witness the execution, but decided to stay behind. I wanted to speak to this woman, to tell her that we were praying that she and all of the victims associated with this case would experience God's peace and healing, and to assure her that, while we did not agree on the punishment for Mike Gary, we nonetheless wanted to stand with her in honor of the victims. But the ropes and the guards between us did not allow us to interact.

Around 10 p.m., the news came that the execution would go forward, and by 10:33 p.m., Mike Gary was dead. It's difficult to describe what it feels like when I know that an execution is happening just down the road from where I'm standing. It is a darkness, a heaviness that overcomes me, and it always surprises me, as if it is happening for the first time. But it is not the first time; God's grace has simply distracted me until now, as before, so that I may continue to do this work. But now that the moment of Mike Gary's execution is here, I experience it fully, allowing the grief to permeate my body.

Experience has taught me that grace would come through for me again this time, in the wake of Mike Gary's death, and I was not disappointed. As I was saying my farewells to my fellow vigilers, I encountered a man who had been present the entire night, but had chosen to stay silent during our prayers and reflection time. Suddenly his silence broke, and the man revealed to me who he was: one of the jurors from Mike Gary's original trial. He shared with me how, the day before, he had told the Georgia State Board of Pardons and Paroles that he would not have voted in favor of a death sentence for Mike Gary if the forensic evidence being used in Mike's appeals had been available during his 1986 trial. He also spoke of how he is a different person than the 23-year-old who sentenced Mike to death over 30 years ago — that he has not only come to see the truth about the evidence in Mike's case, but he has also come to know the truth about the death penalty — that it is morally wrong and goes against the heart and nature of God. I thank God for allowing me to meet this gentle and courageous man, which has in turn given me the grace and courage to show up next time — to stand in that field outside the prison and once again say no to state-sponsored murder. ✠

Don Plummer | The Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta

Mary Catherine Johnson is the director of New Hope House, a ministry that serves Georgia's death row prisoners and their families. (mcjohnson78@yahoo.com)

The Margo and Ron Santoni Christ Room

David Payne

We are delighted to share this joy!!! Our Margo and Ron Santoni Christ Room is full to the tee. *Left:* Simon Ibo from Nigeria has moved in with us. Christ Comes in a Stranger's Guise and now Simon is no longer a stranger, but still an ambassador of the Black Jesus.

Dear Ed and Murphy,

My activism must continue. Don't worry about my being in Margo's travel chair. I went to the march in Columbus two days after getting a number of shots in my back, so Sondra suggested that I travel by wheelchair.

I'm so impressed by the spirit and articulateness of the young high school students — things they are a changin'. I now have hope. Let them continue. A new generation of activists, and they won't take crap from these weak-kneed politicians. Watch out, Trump, you disastrous president. You're going to get your comeuppance yet. You're crumbling in your ridiculous defense!

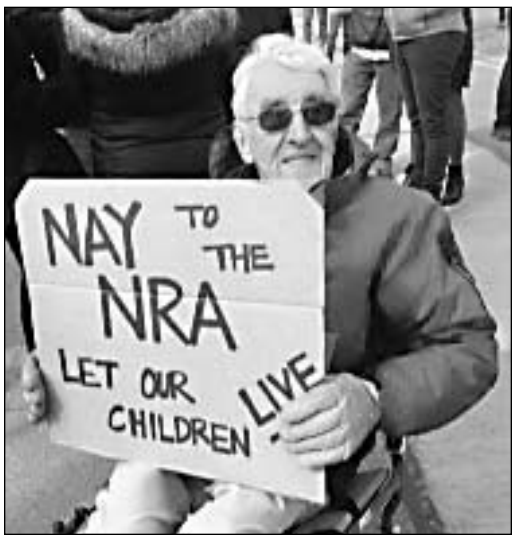
Apparently I was on Facebook from Senator Sherrod Brown's office with some of my accompanying words. One of his assistants interviewed me at the march. I don't have Facebook. Did any of you see it?

My best love to all of you.

Peace and justice.

Big hugs to each of you. I love you all.

Ronald E. Santoni
Denison, Ohio



Flee or Follow? *continued from page 1*

Knowing what you know about the way of forgiveness Jesus commands? Will you flee or will you follow?

And while it's obvious that following Jesus is the right answer in Mark, nobody in his Gospel seems able to live up to the task. The men flee *at the crucifixion* — just when they realize that following might involve suffering. The women flee *at the tomb* — either when they realize that Jesus is not where they left him or that he's back in Galilee where it all began. Nobody demonstrates that they can follow Jesus completely in Mark's Gospel. Everybody winds up fleeing in fear.

Which makes Mark's Gospel completely out of sync with the way we celebrate Easter. There's no actual appearance of the resurrected Jesus — just testimony from some random dude dressed in white. There's no promise of everlasting life. No model disciples. There is only an empty tomb; the command to go and tell that Jesus is back in Galilee, back doing his work in the world; and the fear that no disciple of Jesus seems able to shake.

Which makes me wonder if the real question confronting all of us on Easter is not, do you believe in the resurrection, but, where is your fear causing you to flee Jesus instead of follow him? Does your fear cause you to flee when you realize that God's reign is going to cost you something — the way you've arranged your life around too many things that can't bring you happiness, or around our region's real estate patterns insulating you from relationships that could help free us from our racist past? Does your fear cause you to flee when you realize that new life means leaving behind the life you are currently living — leaving the grief of distant losses that you've become attached to, forsaking the habits that have worn ruts so deep in your path they've become difficult to escape, parting from the routines that have locked you into a prison you're afraid to leave behind? Where is your fear causing you to flee?

It's like Mark believes that fear is the foundational human problem that stands between us and the world Jesus births into being. *It's not death, but our fear of it. It's not suffering, but our fear of it. It's not new life, but our fear of it.* Jesus promises freedom and courage and life to anyone who would follow, but our fear causes us to flee instead.

And I don't know if we can even hear Mark's message in the world that we're all living in. Because our world is built on fear. Fear of the immigrant. Fear of the Black male. Fear of the police officer. Fear of the Muslim. Fear of the president. Fear of the person who is homeless, or addicted or mentally ill. Fear of the next 9/11, the next Parkland, the next Pulse, the next uprising. Fear of not having enough, not being enough, not risking enough. Catalogue any day and note the number of times that fear creeps into your living, flashes across your screens, headlines your newspaper.

I don't know if we can hear Mark's message of following Jesus. I know I've never seen it lived 100 percent of the time. None of the disciples answer it satisfactorily 100 percent of the time. But maybe Mark isn't looking for 100 percent compliance. He certainly isn't adding shame on top of fear that is real for all of us at least some of the time. I think Mark is confronting us with the very real possibility that the fear that makes our world go 'round won't deliver the safety it promises, can't deliver the security that we crave. Disciples who flee Jesus because of the fear of suffering in his name just end up huddled together in more fear. Disciples who flee from the knowledge that our work isn't done until the world is changed or we die trying just end up isolated in more fear. *In following Jesus we might risk suffering or even dying, but when we flee in fear we risk never really living.*

And while I've never seen any disciple follow Jesus 100 percent of the time, I've seen some make that choice when it seemed to count. The child survivors of Parkland and their March for Our Lives allies fearless in their calls for action. The protesters in Sacramento unafraid to demand that we all face the truth of our racial bias, the danger it poses to Black people, the inequality it breeds standing in the way of true community. Malala — a little girl — shot in the head by adults, refusing to stop her struggle for justice for girls and women in Pakistan and across the world, returning home this week in spite of more threats. "I told myself," she said in her book, "Malala, you have already faced death. This is your second life. Don't be afraid — if you are afraid, you can't move forward." Dr. King, on the night before he died 50 years ago, roused from his rest in a Memphis hotel room, speaking off the cuff to a congregation of Jesus' followers: "I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. So I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything, *I'm not fearing any man*. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord." They made the choice to reject their fear or at least not to be held captive by it.

And if belief is useful to Mark at all, it's here at this critical decision point that we face in big and small ways each day. Can you trust Jesus enough to risk following him instead of your fear? When you know that the life that God is promising to you and to the world is not without risk, is not without danger, may not come without suffering, can you trust Jesus enough to risk following?

> When you know that the life that God is promising to you and to the world is not without risk, is not without danger, may not come without suffering, can you trust Jesus enough to risk following?

Mark doesn't tell us what happens to the disciples — the men who flee the cross, the women who flee the tomb. Mark doesn't finish their story and I think that's intentional. This is our story now. We can't remain outside of it. We have to decide whether to flee Jesus or follow him.

We don't have to wonder where to find him. Mark tells us. Not in a tomb. Not in some distant heaven, according to Mark. But back in Galilee. Back at the healing. Back announcing a different way. Back with the poor. Back agitating the rich to leave behind their fear. Back with the outsiders. Back offending the keepers of the status quo. Always with an invitation to come and join him there. Join him in real loving, real hoping, real living freed from fear. ⌖

Andrew Foster Connors is Senior Pastor of Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church in Baltimore, Maryland. He preached this sermon on Easter Sunday, April 1, 2018. Andrew and his wife, Kate Foster Connors, were volunteers at the Open Door during their years as students at Columbia Theological Seminary. (andrew@browndowntown.org)

2 Corinthians 13:11

Adapted by Murphy Davis

Sisters and Brothers, Grow Up!
Get your lives in order;
find common ground with one another;
live in peace seeking justice.
And the God of Love, Justice and Peace
Will be with you.

Diverging Roads *continued from page 1*

white people to call ourselves Christians and hold people as slaves. It is what enables us to allow our children to be shot down in schools because what we truly worship as a community is not the God of Jesus Christ, but the gun-god Molech, who demands child sacrifice. Though Graham did not lay the foundation of this individualistic religion — it has deep roots in American history — he did add some strong floors to it. He thus became a tool for presidents to trot out, especially Richard Nixon. As far as I am aware, in contrast to the One he claimed as Lord and Savior, Graham never opposed the unjust and senseless war in Vietnam. Graham's refusal to engage communal issues of justice and equity in his approach to Jesus and even American history made him a beloved icon in American religious history. It also helped to build the current religious right that is such a mean and powerful machine in our time.

As I listened to the accolades pour in for Graham after his death, I was struck by a clip of a TV interview in which Graham was asked whom he'd like to preach at his funeral. He replied that he'd like to do it, that he'd like to have a tape of one of his sermons played for his eulogy. I thought that this stood in stark contrast to King's words from one of his best sermons, "Drum Major Instinct," given two months to the day before he was assassinated. In it, he asked that whoever preached his funeral not take too long, but he would ask that they say that he did try to be right on the war question, that he did try to feed the hungry, that he did try to love and serve humanity.

I began with irony, and I'll end with it here. Many people spoke at Graham's funeral, but for Dr. King's funeral in Atlanta, after Ralph Abernathy gave a powerful sermon, Coretta Scott King chose to have "The Drum Major Instinct" played as the final eulogy for the life of a great man. ⌖

Nibs Stroupe is a longtime friend of the Open Door, retired pastor and author of the recently published Deeper Waters: Sermons for a New Vision. *He writes a weekly blog at www.nibsnotes.blogspot.com. (nibs.stroupe@gmail.com.)*