

**ST. JOHN’S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA**

April 7, 2023 – GOOD FRIDAY, Yr. A

The Rev. Dr. Nina George–Hacker

Homily: “*The Cross Holds All Things Together*”*

Isaiah 52:13—53:12 (Isaiah’s prophecy of the Suffering Servant)
Psalm 22 (A prayer of lament foreshadowing Christ’s crucifixion)
Hebrews 10:16–25 (The blood of Christ cleanses us from sin)
St. John 18:1—19:42 (Jesus was crucified for our sins, and those of the whole world)

The Cross. It struck fear and trembling in the hearts of the ancient world. It was the Roman Empire’s means of controlling the people they oppressed. According to Roman custom, the penalty of crucifixion was always preceded by torture, such as whipping—or “scourging.” After this preliminary punishment, the condemned person was required to carry the cross, or at least its heavy transverse beam, to the place of execution, while being exposed to the mockery and curses of bystanders. On arrival at the place of execution, the cross was uplifted. Soon the victim, entirely naked, was bound to it with cords. He was then fastened to the wood of the cross as three spikes were driven through his hands and feet. Finally, a placard called the *titulus*, bearing the name of the condemned man and his sentence, was placed at the top of the cross.

Slaves were crucified outside of Rome, beyond the Esquiline Gate, on a hill to the east of the city. The Esquiline Hill served as Rome’s graveyard during the Republic.¹ Eventually this wretched locality became a forest of crosses, while the bodies of the victims upon which vultures and other rapacious birds preyed.

Often, the condemned man did not die quickly from hunger, thirst, or asphyxiation due to the downward pull of gravity crushing his organs. Instead, he lingered on the cross for several days. Therefore, to accelerate his punishment, the Romans would break the man’s legs. In this way, it would be possible to dispose of the corpse on the very evening of the execution. However, the body could not be taken down unless such removal had been specially authorized at the time of the death sentence. If permitted by the sentence, the body could be buried.

Although Jesus suffered and died on this instrument of torture, we could also say that He is responsible for the abolition of the cross as a means of capital punishment. In the early part of the fourth century, Emperor Constantine continued to inflict the penalty of the cross on slaves guilty of denouncing their masters. But after Constantine’s conversion to Christianity in 312 A.D., he abolished this infamous punishment, in memory and in honor of the Passion of the Christ. From then on, this chastisement was rarely inflicted, and finally, the custom faded altogether into history.²

The world may have forgotten the practice of crucifixion, yet we in the Church must never forget the suffering and death Our Lord endured for our sakes. Christ’s sacrifice for the sins of the world is not a popular message now, nor has it ever been. Saint Paul wrote in First Corinthians, chapter 1 (vv. 22-23, CEV), “Jews ask for miracles, the Greeks want something that sounds wise. But we preach that Christ was nailed to a cross. Most Jews have problems with this, and most Gentiles think it is foolish.” But, continues Paul, “Even when God [seems] foolish, He is wiser than everyone else.”

The cross is so supremely central to our salvation, our faith, and our Christian discipleship, that although crucifixion is a long-gone practice, Jesus said in Mark 8:34 (CEV): “If any of you want to be my followers, you must forget about yourself. You must take up your cross and follow me.”

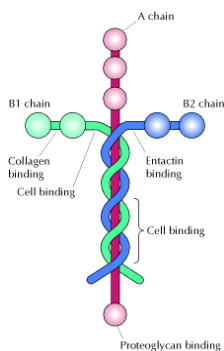
What might that mean in our world? Perhaps it will help us to reach a deeper understanding of the so-called “foolishness” of the Cross, by remembering a man who both understood and exemplified Jesus’ teaching on self-denial, cross-bearing, and following Him.

Some of you are familiar with the name Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was a Lutheran pastor who lived in Germany during World War II. Convinced that it was his Christian duty to work for the defeat of Adolf Hitler, Bonhoeffer became part of an underground resistance movement. Unfortunately, his involvement was discovered and he was sent to a prison camp, from which he never returned. In 1945, at the age of 39, he was executed by hanging, just as the War was ending. By most definitions, Bonhoeffer is a modern Christian martyr.

By the time of his death, he had already done quite a bit of writing. Perhaps his best-known work—still available today—is entitled, *The Cost of Discipleship*. In this book, he offers many thought-provoking statements on the Christian life. One of the phrases Bonhoeffer uses repeatedly, and which he accuses many contemporary Christians of buying into, is the concept of “cheap grace.” Listen to how he defines it: “Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our church. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross”³ Bonhoeffer taught as the Bible does, that there is no forgiveness, no mercy, no grace, without the Cross.

We could say the Cross of Jesus is what holds together everything in our Christian faith and life. So, is it any surprise that the Creator of the World also made a family of proteins that hold together the structure of every living thing—and are shaped like a cross? Yes, you heard me right. *A cross*. They are called laminins.

And here is how a Wikipedia entry describes them: “Laminins are ... a protein network [that is the] foundation for most cells and organs ... a family of glycoproteins that are an integral part of the structural scaffolding in almost every tissue of an organism. ... Laminin is vital for the maintenance and survival of tissues.”⁴ You see....laminins are what hold us together....literally! They are what joins one cell of our bodies to another cell. Without them, we would actually fall apart. And can you believe what the structure of laminin looks like... See the picture in your bulletin, and the handout that’s inserted at the back. *It’s the cross!*



What I’m saying is not Christian bias. Look it up in any scientific or medical literature. The glue that holds us together... all of us....is in the form of the cross. Immediately Colossians 1:15-17 comes to mind. “[Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created ... and *in him all things hold together.*” Think about it! Thousands of years before the world knew anything about laminin, Saint Paul penned those words. And now we see that, quite literally, *we are held together...one cell to another...by the cross.*⁵

How amazing is our God! And how awe-inspiring it is, as Saint Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:18, that “the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God!” *Amen.*

Let us pray: Almighty God, You have created all things, and in Your Son Jesus Christ, all things hold together. Bind us to You by the power of His cross, that we may be Yours forever. *Amen.*

^{*} Adapt. N. George Hacker, 2 April 2010, St. Christopher’s Episcopal Church, Cobleskill NY. Used with permission.

¹ “Porta Esquilina,” [Wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Porta_Esquilina), 6 February 2023 < https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Porta_Esquilina > 14 February 2023.

² Adapt. Sermons.com <Sermons@clergy.net> 1 April 2010.

³ Adapt. Joel Leyrer, eSermons.com <illustrations@MINISTERSMAIL.COM> 10 March 2003.

⁴ “Laminin,” [Wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laminin), 13 January 2023 < <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laminin> > 14 February 2023.

⁵ Adapt. Louie Giglio, “How Great is Our God!” via Nancy Coonrod <jncahoo@bellsouth.net> 30 March 2009.