

# Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA

The Fourth Sunday of Easter: April 30, 2023

“Emmett Till”

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Good morning and welcome to the fourth Sunday of Easter. Today after many days of pondering our scriptures, I come to you, not with high theology, but to explore the Peter reading as considered in today’s context.

As most of you who follow popular news know, Carol Bryant – Donham died this past week. And for as ancient as a letter to a community trying to live out their Christianity might seem to be out of touch, our reading today is, it seems to have been played out during our lifetime, and probably many more times than we know.

For those of you not familiar with Carol Bryant or the story, Emmett Louis Till was a fourteen year old African American male that went into a store in Mississippi during August of 1955. He had an interaction with a white 21 year old woman who ran the store. That woman was Carol Bryant.

No one really knows what kind of interaction the two of them had, but it was supposedly flirty and violated the unspoken, but well known Jim Crow laws of the time. So several days later, Carol’s husband and his brother abducted Emmett, tortured, killed him and then threw him in the river.

Now for as tragic as that is, and for as horrifying as it seems, the men who committed the murder were set free, only to admit to the crime a year later when the court could no longer bring another trial. But even that is not the part of the story I want to focus on today.

I really want to focus on our scripture.

*“It is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.”*

So, you can connect what I just presented about the murder of Emmett Till to that reading, but there is still a much better example of this scripture. Not in the murder, the trial, or the suffering but instead in how God let this terrible human sin make way for grace and healing. It is the story of Emmett's mother, that truly speaks of our scripture today.

Emmett's mother Mamie Till Brady, a survivor of domestic abuse, and a devout Christian, modeled the teachings of Jesus as she received the body of her son after being retrieved from the river, beaten, broken, and bloated.

Emmett's mother insisted on a public funeral service with an open casket which was held at Roberts Temple God of Christ. It was later said “that the open-coffin funeral held by Mamie Till Brady exposed the world to more than her son Emmett Till's bloated, mutilated body.” Her decision focused attention on not only systemic racism, the horrors of lynching and Jim Crow laws but also the limitations and vulnerabilities of American democracy.

Tens of thousands attended Emmett's funeral or viewed his open casket, and images of his mutilated body were published in black focused magazines and newspapers, rallying popular black support and white sympathy across the U.S. Emmett as we all know became the icon for the civil rights movement.

Mamie did not return abuse for abuse, she did not perpetuate the sin of retaliation, she did not return evil for evil. She did however, much like Jesus showing his wounds and scars openly to the disciples, show the world the truth. She bore the suffering of not having the morticians erase the ugly sins that her son endured, but instead, offered those scars to the world. This is living scripture. This is following Jesus.

It would have been a simpler answer to have a group of black men storm the accusing family, or maybe to stalk them one night and return murder for murder. It might for Mamie to have been better to harm herself or end it all, for having to endure listening to what went on at the trial only to find out the truth of abuse a year later. But she didn't.

In fact, she went on to encourage equality for all, to speak against violence, against Jim Crow. She helped others see through her suffering, the call to justice with God's approval. Our world is becoming one of fear and violence, but we need not lose our faith.

We often think of our faith, of following Jesus as some ethereal, spiritual mumbo jumbo, but for all the miracles, and visions, and Holy Spirit movements, our faith is based in reality, our scriptures living words that inspire us throughout time and space, and most of all, we are called to live out our faith in the real world.

Carol Bryant has died. To this day we will never know about her interaction with that 14 year old boy. We will never know if she lied, or goaded her brother to seek Emmett out. It is up to our Lord to deal with her soul, and we will never be privy to that.

But what we can see in this horrific story, is God working in the world, God working through each and every one of us when we decide to be real, show the truth, but not return evil for evil.

To have a strong enough faith to bear witness to the wrongs and injustices we see in the world, to call truth to power, all while being honest, compassionate, and forgiving. Jesus never promised our lives would be easy, as his certainly was not, nor was it easy for the disciples of the first century. But we are called to witness to a savior that sees beyond our human sins, we are called to live as Jesus would have us do. We are called to be inspired by people like Mamie Till.

And we must nourish our faith, knowing that God is there with us, even in our darkest times for:

Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I shall fear no evil;  
for you, God are with me;  
your rod and your staff, they will comfort me. Amen