

What's most stunning about this painting is how far van der Weyden has been able to take the new realism; and how brilliant he is at using the new oil paints that have enabled this new movement in art. Because it's the oils that allow him to depict the emotion on the faces of the characters as impressively, and movingly, as he does.



**ALWAYS HOPE**

One of the things I most cherish about this painting, which is one of my all-time favourite works, is the way van der Weyden has echoed Christ's dead face in his mother's fainting one; Mary's grief is as central to the scene as her son's death, and I love that acknowledgement of the depth of a mother's loss. She has died with him. Van der Weyden understands her pain; he understands the pain of the others ranged around; and no artist has ever more comprehensively conveyed that pain to his viewer. In front of this painting, we are in the depths of despair, and it is hard to believe there will ever be a flicker of joy on these faces (or ours) again. And yet... and yet... in just three days' time, the landscape is going to be altered, totally and for ever. And the faces in this painting are so incredibly real that, when you look at them for a long time, you can imagine how they'll light up, when the moment comes and the tomb is found to be empty. The work is a reminder to us all that, however terrible our grief, however desperate our sorrow, there is always hope – and not merely the hope of something a little better, but the hope of something totally transformative, and utterly life-changing.

**Mass text**

**ENTRANCE ANTIPHON**

**The merciful love of the Lord fills the earth; by the word of the Lord the heavens were made, alleluia.**

**FIRST READING** Acts 2:14. 36-41

**PSALM** Psalm 22

**RESPONSE** **The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.**

Or **Alleluia!**

1. The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want. Fresh and green are the pastures where he gives me repose. Near restful waters he leads me, to revive my drooping spirit. **R.**
2. He guides me along the right path; he is true to his name. If I should walk in the valley of darkness no evil would I fear. You are there with your crook and your staff; with these you give me comfort. **R.**
3. You have prepared a banquet for me in the sight of my foes. My head you have anointed with oil; my cup is overflowing. **R.**

4. Surely goodness and kindness shall follow me all the days of my life. In the Lord's own house shall I dwell for ever and ever. **R.**

**SECOND READING** 1 Peter 2:20-25

**GOSPEL ACCLAMATION**

**Alleluia, alleluia! I am the good shepherd, says the Lord; I know my own sheep and my own know me. Alleluia!**

**GOSPEL** John 10:1-10

**COMMUNION ANTIPHON**

**The Good Shepherd has risen, who laid down his life for his sheep and willingly died for his flock, alleluia.**

**Next Sunday's Readings:**

Acts 6:1-7  
1 Peter 2:4-9  
John 14:1-12

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**ROGIER VAN DER WEYDEN, THE DESCENT FROM THE CROSS**

No painting sums up grief as brutally, as devastatingly, as Rogier van der Weyden's extraordinary masterpiece *The Descent from the Cross*. To me it always seems shocking that it was painted in the fifteenth century: the faces are so real, the tears on the faces are so fresh – still glistening, even – that they take you into the heart of the tragedy, as though it happened yesterday rather than two thousand years ago.

The moment van der Weyden chooses to paint is surely the saddest moment, the most desperate moment, in human history. Christ is dead; the centre of the cross-shaped painting is taken up with his body, which is being carefully lowered down from the cross. His family and friends, huddled at the foot of the cross, are in agony; Mary Magdalene, at the right of the painting, is so distraught that her body is twisting and curling with the pain. The other Mary, Christ's mother, has fainted, and is being tended to on the ground.

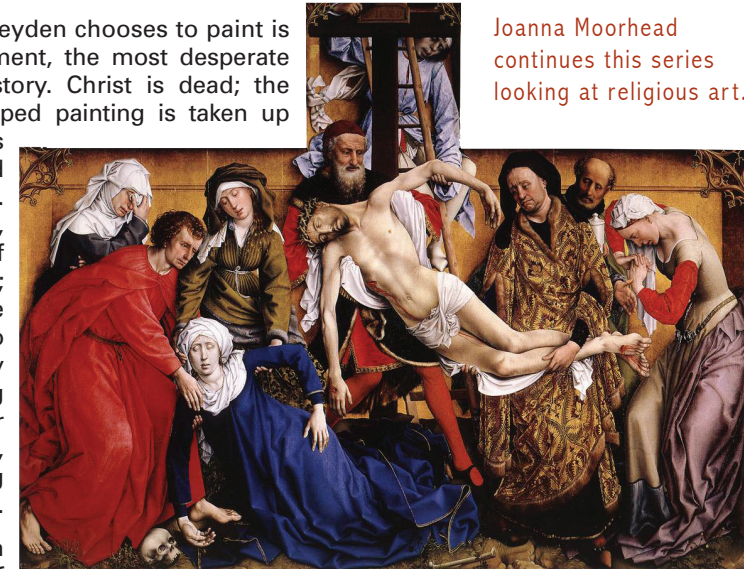
But this is more than merely a moment of personal loss. It is the lowest point of the Christian story; the moment when everything hung in the balance. Jesus was dead, as he had said he would be; but would he, could he, rise from being dead? The future looked grim: for the apostles and disciples, hope was at its lowest point. Christ was about to be laid in his tomb – and who, really, can have believed that he really was going to rise out of it?

The painting hangs on a black (what else?) wall at the Prado in Madrid; having been painted when the Flemish van der Weyden was the official painter in Brussels, it later became part of the collection of the Royal Family of Spain, and is today one of its jewels. Originally commissioned by a Belgian crossbow guild, the artist has cleverly shaped Christ's body into a crossbow; there are also, if you look carefully, tiny crossbows in the corners of the work.

**Divine images**



Joanna Moorhead continues this series looking at religious art.



**3 MAY 2020**

4TH SUNDAY OF EASTER

YEAR A

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK IV