One of the ironies of life is that we often experience great joy very soon before or after we are to experience pain – we welcome a newborn into the world and then two days later watch another loved one transition to their eternal home. Of course, nothing we’ve ever experienced can match what Jesus must have felt during this Holy Week that we begin today. But, if we’ve had some experiences like this, we have a starting point from which to walk with Jesus on this weeklong journey that goes from Glory, Laud and Honor to a painful, tortured death.

Jesus begins the week being welcomed into the city. I wonder how Jesus felt about this welcome, knowing the rest of the story. I hope that he took from it at last a little comfort, some positive energy as the week propelled forward.

We know from reading other Gospel passages that Jesus cleared the Temple during this week and that it was this act that so infuriated the Pharisees. Pilgrims would have poured into Jerusalem that week seeking animals to sacrifice and those selling animals at the Temple would have hiked up the prices knowing these animals were a religious necessity for the pilgrims. Jesus experiences righteous anger, reacting against this system when he cleared the Temple.

Thursday would have been, perhaps, the most tumultuous day. Jesus has quiet time alone with his disciples before making his final journey across the Kidron Valley. From what I know about those who are about to die, time with family and friends just before the transition is important, so perhaps we can understand how this time would have been important to Jesus. Throughout the meal, however, Jesus has reminders of what is to come. Perhaps every time he looks at Judas, he knows Judas will betray him. Every time he looks at Peter, he knows Peter will lack the courage to stand with him. Perhaps some of us have felt the disappointment and pain of being betrayed or denied by someone we love. For one who loves perfectly as Jesus does, the emotions associated with knowing this betrayal would come would be particularly keen. Perhaps Jesus might also have been sad about the one who would be lost, Judas, who would never repent.

The Passover Lamb, itself, would have been a reminder to Jesus that He, himself, would soon be the Passover Lamb to save the people from their sins once and for all. Jesus makes this traditional Passover meal now a feast to remember his death, resurrection and promise to return, instituting the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. The cup of wine and the bread would have been yet another reminder to Jesus of what was to come.

Then Jesus crosses the Kidron Valley to go to the Garden of Gethsemane on the east side of the valley at the base of the Mount of Olives to pray. That valley itself, upon which he must have looked as he prayed, would be a constant reminder of what was to come. Priests would have been ritually cleansing themselves and sacrificing lambs all day in the Temple. In fact about 250,000 lambs would be slain that day. The water and the blood from the sacrifices drained from the altar and was carried away to the Kidron Valley, where it filled the valley and stained it. Kidron means black brook or gloomy brook, a reference to the dark stain that filled it during Passover. The blood and water in the valley from those sacrifices reminded Christ that soon the blood and water from His one complete sacrifice for the whole world would also soon fill that valley.

Jesus is in such inner turmoil and under such stress as he prays that he sweats drops of blood. This sweating blood is actually a scientific and medical phenomen. Around the sweat glands, there are multiple blood vessels in a net-like form, which constrict under the pressure of great stress. Then, as the anxiety passes, the bloodvessels dilate to the point of rupture and goes into the sweat glands. A visible sign of the emotional turmoil Jesus faces. As Jesus submits to God’s plan, he sweats blood.

Then we move to what is essentially a kangaroo court in which the only people invited to participate are those the religious leaders know will testify falsely against Jesus and to Pilate, who knows what he is doing is wrong but lacks the moral conviction to refuse. Perhaps we have also experienced situations in which we were falsely accused or something by people we felt should have known better.

Jesus is mocked (not an insignificant emotional moment, as any of us who’ve ever been bullied or teased can attest) and beaten, and then paraded through town under the weight of a heavy piece of wood, seeing his mother and friends along the way. Then he is hung on that cross, hanging for hours with his flesh pulling, his heart and lungs closing up, suffocating and thirsting, being abandoned by the very God from whom He draw existence.

We know the story doesn’t end here, but we’ll save the ending for another day.

For now, and throughout this week, I invite us to walk with Jesus, a human being just like us, but perhaps one with perfectly tuned emotions, as he goes through the high of the Hosannas to the cries of “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.”

Amen