

Sermon for Sunday, April 1, 2012
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The Death of Jesus
Mark 15:33-47

15:33 At the sixth hour darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour. 34 And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"—which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" 35 When some of those standing near heard this, they said, "Listen, he's calling Elijah." 36 One man ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to take him down," he said. 37 With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. 38 The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. 39 And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard his cry and saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!"

40 Some women were watching from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. 41 In Galilee these women had followed him and cared for his needs. Many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem were also there. 42 It was Preparation Day (that is, the day before the Sabbath). So as evening approached, 43 Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Council, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body. 44 Pilate was surprised to hear that he was already dead. Summoning the centurion, he asked him if Jesus had already died. 45 When he learned from the centurion that it was so, he gave the body to Joseph. 46 So Joseph bought some linen cloth, took down the body, wrapped it in the linen, and placed it in a tomb cut out of rock. Then he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. 47 Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where he was laid.

Today we consider Jesus' death and burial. We may wonder how Jesus' life ended this way, with such suffering. He seemed so promising. People loved his teaching, miracles. Perhaps chaos and evil power rule this world after all. Terrible as Jesus' crucifixion and death are, the Bible returns to the theme again and again.

Religions often choose a dominant symbol. Buddhists chose the lotus flower. Its wheel shape suggests the cycle of life and death and the emergence of beauty from chaos. Judaism uses a hexagram, the star of David. Islam has the crescent. Marxism used the hammer and sickle to signify manufacturing and agriculture as labor. Christians use the cross. Why?

There were other options: a manger for the Incarnation, a throne for his sovereignty, a dove for the Holy Spirit. But the symbol of Christian faith is the empty cross of Christ. The cross originally signified pain, shame, criminality, and death. Naturally, it was hard for his disciples to comprehend. Like most, they preferred deliverance from pain. Jesus gives deliverance through pain.

1. The death of Jesus misunderstood by witnesses (15:33)

In recent hours, Jesus has been betrayed by Judas, condemned by Jewish and Roman authorities, beaten, flogged, and mocked. Then three hours after they crucified Jesus, "darkness came over all the land" from noon to 3:00 p.m. (15:33).

The darkness had to be supernatural. No one mentions a storm or an eclipse. An eclipse is measured in minutes, not hours. Unnatural darkness was considered a sign or omen in that day – a sign of God's judgment. God sent Egypt a plague of darkness and the sun will go dark on the last day (Ex 10:21-23, Isa 13:10-11, Mt 24:29).

During those hours, Jesus cried out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (15:34). Jesus wasn't simply emoting or quoting Scripture as he said this, his cry of anguish was true. He was forsaken, separated from the Father. In his pain, Jesus reached up to heaven. Yet he felt his Father's distance, so he said, "My God" not "My Father." Why?

Isaiah told Israel, "Your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear" (59:2). In his holiness, God separates himself from sin. So as Jesus bore and paid for our sin he *was* forsaken.

Sources say that victims of crucifixion cursed and scream in pain, anger, and despair before they passed out and died. But Jesus quoted Scripture. Then, Mark says, "With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last" (15:37).

The crucifixion forces us to face something: Suffering is essential to God's plan – both for Jesus and for us. After all, Jesus says, "Take up your cross and follow me." Paul says he wants to fill up the sufferings of Christ.

What's your life narrative? Soak up the sun? Hit the lottery? Move to New York City or Austin? Make it big? Live for the weekend, the payday, retirement? The culture of marketing wants you to think there's a solution for every problem.

But sometimes our narrative doesn't look like that at all. In fact, everyone's story looks bad at times, and for some it looks bad most of the time. The Romantic in us might like the idea of taking a bold stand – like Bonhoeffer or Luther. Face death, or at least exile. But the idea is more glamorous than the exile. It's more like pounding away at graduate school.

The gospel offers us comfort *in trouble, not protection from trouble*. We need to get our expectations right. Peter walked toward trouble, confident, resolute, boasting, head high, and he left on his knees. Jesus passed his test not because he started on his knees. And collapsed and died before he finally held his head high.

This can be disorienting, hard to grasp. God's plan often causes dismay. We think, "This is not what I expected!" Life isn't unfolding according to the plan. Yet we can't judge how things are going by outer circumstances. Paul says we should please God, not ourselves, "For this is the will of God, even your sanctification" (1 Ths 4:3). Not your happiness, but your holiness. Not your ease, but your maturity. I hate it!

We think that if we do things God's way, all will go well. Jesus did everything God's way and we see where it got him. We live in a broken world. Beyond individual sinners, we have institutionalized sin.

Let's suppose you have a noble desire to solve one of them. Pick one: Our stunning national debt and trade deficit, the vast prison population, the skyrocketing cost of college, racism, the growing gap between rich and poor, political corruption, broken schools. Whatever your cause, there are lots of people who want things to stay just as they are and they will oppose your reforms, thwart them, and they may try to poke you in the eye, too.

Clearly, God's plan for his Son included suffering. Why should it be different for you? So make your plans, but the Lord will establish your steps (Prov. 16:9). Yet if the cross warns of suffering, the death of Jesus – the way he died – gives hope.

Luke says Jesus cried out with a loud voice, then said "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Lk 23:46). This comes from Psalm 31, by David. Foes lay traps for him and idolaters vex his soul, but he takes refuge in God, his fortress, redeemer, and guide. He says "I trust in you, O LORD" (Ps 31:14). "Into your hand I commit my spirit" (31:5). That became a common evening prayer as Jewish believers commended themselves to God's care for the night of sleep. So Jesus entrusts himself to the Father as he dies.

Matthew says Jesus gave up or "released" *aphigmi* his spirit. Even at the moment of death, Jesus retained self-control. He chose to die just then. It was the ninth hour, 3 p.m., when the priests made their sacrifices in the temple. Jesus gave up his life as a sacrifice. He laid down his life for us (John 10:17-18). So Jesus died with a cry, but not in anguish.

John 19 makes the same point. There, just before Jesus dies, he says, "It is finished" (John 19:30). "It is finished" can be a commercial term for a debt or bill that is "paid" or "it is fully paid" - finished. That is, Jesus fully paid the debt of sin.

"It is finished" can also mean a task or project is complete - finished. That fits too. On the cross Jesus fulfilled the task, finished the work, the Father gave him to do. As he said, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to finish his work" (John 4:34, cf. 5:36, 17:4, 19:28).

So the gospels describe three hours of shame, followed by minutes of glory that redefine all human life. After Jesus said, "Why have you forsaken me?" he also said, "It is finished." That changes the course of human history. If we trust Jesus, whatever our past or future, we are no longer alienated from God. We are his friends, his children. "It is finished" means our separation from God is finished.

When Jesus called out the priests, elders, and crowds didn't hear it because they weren't paying attention. They heard "Eloi, Eloi." That sounds vaguely like "Elijah." So they thought, "He's calling Elijah" (Mk 15:35). One tradition said that a rabbi in distress could look to Elijah for help, from heaven. Would Elijah answer?

One man at the scene ran to get something to wet Jesus' tongue. He got a sponge, filled it "with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink" – possibly to moisten his tongue and refresh him (15:36). (Wine vinegar is a refreshing drink in Num. 6:13, Ruth 2:14)

Most said, "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to take him down" (15:36). These mockers didn't think Elijah will rescue Jesus. Yet they are right: Elijah will not come for Jesus, because Jesus came for Elijah. Elijah will not deliver Jesus, but Jesus will deliver Elijah, for Elijah is like us. He needs a redeemer.

2. The death of Jesus explained by a sign (15:38)

The crowd missed the point of Jesus' death, but God gave a sign. When Jesus died, "The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom" (15:38). There were two temple curtains. One separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple. No one except the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies, and that once a year with a sacrifice. A second curtain separated the courts of Jews from the courts of Gentiles. The phrase, "from top to bottom" means no human tore the curtain. A man would tear from the bottom up; God tore it from the top down.

In principle, the death of Jesus destroyed both curtains. It tore the "curtain" that separates Jew from Gentile. It ends racial and ethnic divisions, the walls between Europeans, Africans, Asians and Americans. Jesus unites all humanity. More important, Jesus tore the curtain that separated the Holy God from his people (Heb 6:19, 9:3, 10:20). For all we know, God tore both curtains. Surely God could have: the inner would be more logical, but hardly anyone would see that. The outer is less central, but this was a public sign and it would be the more visible curtain.

Above all, God tore the curtain, top to bottom, when Jesus died. That means the work of Jesus on the cross ends the separation of God and mankind. In the past, no one dared enter or push into his presence. But the cross ends separation from God.

The torn curtain means the temple system - structured to keep sinners away from God's presence – became obsolete. Formerly sinners had no right to enter God's presence. But now, those who believe in Jesus may walk into the Holy of Holies. So approach God directly and confidently.

I think of times I've somehow been in the presence of famous people: On a plane next to Bob Gibson. In seminary, age 24, standing beside a world famous theologian. At a political event, after a prayer, five feet from the president. In some cases I felt panicked – with the theologian, of course. Sometimes I felt awed, but fine. I bought a ticket and they put me next to Gibson. So, wait a while, say something funny. If he laughs, off we go. But if I'm near a great thinker, I worry. What if I say something foolish, uninformed, banal?

So we worry about standing the presence of a great person unprepared. We should be more concerned about entering the presence of God unprepared. The temple system instilled and fortified that concern. But Jesus' work on the cross atones for sin and so tears down the curtain that separates us from God.

Romans says, "Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand" (Rom 5:1-2).

Hebrews says, "We have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus... Since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith" (10:22). Jesus has done everything necessary to reconcile us to God. We can do nothing more; we now receive and enter God's presence with confidence.

This doesn't mean we can sin, knowing God has accepted us (Rom 6:1-2). If we offend someone, we still ask forgiveness and make amends, if possible. If we offend God, we must still repent. But these actions don't earn or obtain the right to approach God. That comes through Christ alone, received by faith alone.

Since Jesus has torn down the curtain, we now have access to God, without fear. How do we use that access? We make use of our access first by private prayer and second, by public worship. We come without rituals, merits or mediators, because none, other than Jesus, is necessary. But let's not think "I can come as I please without preparation."

We prepare for sales meetings, committee meetings, planning meetings. We may even prepare topics for a semi-casual lunch. Surely we should prepare to meet with God in prayer or worship.

Pause to appreciate what Jesus did when he gave himself as a ransom for sin. In the Old Testament, priests had to offer sacrifices over and over. "Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices." The very repetition proves that the work was never finished. But when Jesus came, he "offered *for all time one sacrifice for sins*." When he was done, "he sat down at the right hand of God" (Heb 10:11-12). Jesus was finished. There are no more sacrifices for sin. Consider...

Domestic labor isn't painful because it's hard or complex. It's painful because we have to wash clothes and dishes and floors day after day. The pain of cleaning is that nothing stays clean; the dirt returns. Adults would dance and sing if they could wash dishes, clothes and floors one time and be done. Let's call it definitive washing. For dishes, floors and shirts, that's a fantasy. But that is precisely what Jesus did. He offered one sacrifice to remove the stain of sin forever.

3. The call of Jesus understood by the witnesses (15:39-47)

The death of Jesus meant different things to the various observers. Remember the range of witnesses: mockers, soldiers, women and Joseph of Arimathea. The mockers and blasphemers felt grim satisfaction. Jesus is dead. Most soldiers were oblivious. They saw nothing but another day's work.

But God sent signs: Darkness at noon and the tearing of the temple curtain. And the ways Jesus died! He cried out, yet he was confident, in control. The Roman centurion noticed. He stood in front of Jesus and when he heard Jesus cry "and saw how he died, he said, 'Surely this man was the Son of God!'" (15:39). What caused all Jesus' self-control? The darkness? Something told him Jesus was innocent – and a great man, a son of God (Luke 23:47).

We can't assume that he knew exactly who Jesus was. But the centurion was doing what open-minded people should do. Perhaps you are open-minded, seeking. If so, please look at Jesus' life. Don't rush. Don't get distracted. Read the gospels, talk to friends who know.

Notice that Jesus is recognized as he dies. The first line in Mark says it presents the "gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (1:1). The apostle Peter says it in the middle 8:29, but no one else sees until now. As Jesus fulfills his mission, people begin to see his transcendent dignity. And there is more than a centurion who knew.

Beside the centurion, Mark mentions faithful women from Galilee "were watching Jesus from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and Salome" (15:40-41). Luke says Jesus had healed them. Some had resources and had the privilege of supporting Jesus' ministry. People say they were women, so the authorities didn't see them as a threat, but I think it took great courage to be there and to watch Jesus suffer!

What do we know about them? They were faithful. They mourned and watched. So they represent us and all the people who are devoted to Jesus. What about you? Do you stand with Jesus? Even if you have to suffer? Even if no one knows much about you?

Beside the centurion and the women, Joseph of Arimathea also great faith. The law said the crucified should not be buried. To shame their name, their bodies were left to spoil. Still, the authorities sometimes let the family take the body and give it an honorable burial. The family and the disciples did not come, so Joseph "went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body" (15:43).

Boldness indeed! The Council was a cross between our Senate and Supreme Court. Joseph had a high rank in the body that condemned Jesus to death. His act shouted, "You were wrong! And I am his disciple!" John says he feared their reaction (John 19:38, Mark 15:43). But he stepped forward, though he risked loss of his status and position in Israel. He dares to identify himself as the friend of a condemned man. But Joseph couldn't bear the thought that Jesus' body would suffer, devoured by carrion, or tossed in a common grave. So he arranged for a proper burial: He wrapped the body in a linen cloth, "and placed it in a [new] tomb cut out of the rock" (15:46).

Why did he do it? Mark says he "was waiting for the kingdom of God" (15:43). He followed the evidence, searched Scripture, watched Jesus, decided he was indeed the king, Lord of the Kingdom, and he believed.

Joseph stood before Pilate – two powerful men, but what a contrast between them. Pilate knew Jesus was innocent and he told Jesus "I have power to release you." But he did nothing because he was afraid that bold action might make him lose his power. His power was his god and it paralyzed him.

Joseph is just the opposite. He has power but because he seeks God, he is free to be bold. He is free to take a risk and to put it to use.

What about you? Let me ask you consider this question: Where might you show boldness for Jesus? For your faith? Where might you risk loss for the sake of Jesus? Because you believe he is king of all? Perhaps you've been playing the part of Pilate. Living in safety. Show godly boldness. Use your powers for the King.

When Mark tells us that Joseph buried and that the women saw it, we know it sets up the resurrection. Jesus is dead; the women saw the tomb. When they found an empty tomb on Easter morning, they were in the right place. The burial of Jesus is sad, but there is hope. Joseph places him "in the realm of the dead, in hewn rock" but as a prophet, he said the grave will not hold him.¹

In the faces at Golgotha, we see how people respond to Jesus even today. A few mockers hate God. Many are indifferent, like most soldiers. Joseph and the women show that true faith, motivated by love of God, perseveres. Even in the darkest hours, they remain loyal to Jesus, whom they love. So the women mourn Jesus' death and Joseph takes a great risk by taking charge of Jesus' body. Their courage echoes Jesus' courage, even as their love echoes his love.

I once received an urgent call from two of my children. A car suddenly pulled out of a side street and collided with them. "The car is smashed, but we're OK – I think. Come and get us." I hopped into the car and starting driving to the spot, just four miles away. Hoping to hurry, I was dismayed when I came upon a traffic jam, half a mile from the site. "What a time for a traffic jam," I muttered. No one was moving, so I pulled my car to the shoulder of the road and started to run. Only in the last few yards did it hit me - this was the traffic jam caused by my children's accident. The worry, the urgency, had clouded my thinking. But I kept going.

¹ (Garland, Matthew, 262)

We must imagine that the women at the cross and Joseph were far more frightened and confused. But they remained faithful. They risked everything for the Lord. Their story inspires us to do the same. To show loyalty at that hour was dangerous but they didn't let that stop them. We take great risks for people we love.

Our passage is another story of Jesus' love for us. His death, in our place, spells the end of death and wins our resurrection from the dead. If we believe in him, it ends our separation from God. So let our love answer his love. Let us stay with him, as the women did, and take risks and defend his honor, as Joseph did. Let us ask how our love can answer his, all through life.