

Weekend of Sunday, March 18, 2018
5th Sunday in Lent/Lectionary X/Proper X/Year B
Primary Text: Mark 15:33-47
Sermon Title: “Death and Burial”

Theme

Text

Jesus dies on the cross (Mark 15:33-41)

³³When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. ³⁴At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

³⁵When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "Listen, he is calling for Elijah." ³⁶And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down." ³⁷Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. ³⁸And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.

³⁹Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

⁴⁰There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. ⁴¹These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem.

Jesus' body is laid in the tomb (Mark 15:42-47)

⁴²When evening had come, and since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the sabbath, ⁴³Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. ⁴⁴Then Pilate wondered if he were already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he had been dead for some time. ⁴⁵When he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the body to Joseph. ⁴⁶Then Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. ⁴⁷Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where the body was laid.

Sermon

This Lent, as you know by now, we are journeying with Jesus along the Scriptural Stations of the Cross that began four weeks ago, our time, in the Garden of Gethsemane on the infamous night of his betrayal, and it will end shortly when his broken and lifeless body is hastily laid to rest in a borrowed tomb.

Traditionally, the Stations of the Cross are supposed to be a meditative spiritual exercise, so if you would like to and it would be helpful to you, I invite you to relax and close your eyes and allow the narrative and my commentary to play out in the theater of your mind. However, if you are one of those people who close your eyes and then fall asleep, you might want to focus your attention on the picture on the screen.

When we concluded last week with yet another awkward and uncomfortable suspension of the story, Jesus was nailed to the cross as angry and jealous onlookers continued his humiliation by mocking him and deriding him. “You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, ³⁰save yourself, and come down from the cross!”

The chief priests and the scribes also mocked him. “He saved others; he cannot save himself. ³²Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe.”

Even one of the other two crucified with him on that day joined in. “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”

I have two things to say about that:

- 1) With our 21st Century knowledge of the story, the answer to their questions has proven to be, yes! The temple of his body was destroyed and in three days rebuilt. And, he is not only God’s Messiah and the King of Israel, but by the vindication of his resurrection, he is the king of the whole universe!
- 2) And the second thing is, he has saved us, and it was not by coming down off the cross, which he obviously had the power to do, but by staying on the cross and being the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world – God’s once and done perfect sacrifice for the sins of the whole world.

But I am getting ahead of myself aren't I.

Let us enter into this final chapter of his Passion.

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Do you remember what time it was when Jesus was actually nailed to the cross? According to Mark, it was 9:00 in the morning. Where we picked up today, it was noon. He finally died at 3:00 in the afternoon. For six hours he was nailed to the cross. I don't think I need to remind you how painful that was.

Mark wrote that from noon on, "darkness came over the whole land." In that primitive day, daytime darkness was seen as a divine sign of judgement.

From the cross and in great agony Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This expression of Jesus is often understood as his own feeling of being abandoned by God, and we can see how he would have felt that way – death by crucifixion is lonely business. But what the casual reader might not know is that Jesus was quoting Psalm 22, a psalm inspired by God but written by human hands hundreds of years before his crucifixion. Jesus may have indeed felt abandoned by God – God certainly was not going to change his mind about the salvation of the world, but I think another way of hearing Jesus' cry is to hear him identify with all who suffer. And isn't that just like the Jesus we have come to know?

When he cried out, some in the crowd misinterpreted this as an attempt for yet one more miracle. "Maybe Elijah will rescue him!" they wondered out loud.

Someone offered him a drink of sour wine, probably spoiled wine, a common drink of peasants. Mark doesn't record whether he drank it. Little matter at that point. What he did write was, "Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last."

Pause

I am sure the crowd thought the drama was over. But we know differently.

Mark wrote that "³⁸the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom."

Let me remind you that the curtain of the Temple separated the people from the Holy of Holies for their own protection. You might recall that no one could gaze upon the glory of God and live and so when God gave Moses the instructions for the Tabernacle, the predecessor of the Temple, God instructed that a curtain be installed separating the people from Ark of the Covenant, said to be the footstool of God in the presence of his people. And though the Ark of the Covenant had been lost hundreds of years before then, the curtain remained and only the Chief High Priest could go behind it and that was only once a year on the Day of Atonement.

So when Mark recorded that the curtain of the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom, this was an apocalyptic demonstration that God is no longer just present there and then. And furthermore, it was a dramatic revelation of the emptiness of the Jewish religion. They worshiped a God whom they thought was located there in the Temple and could be placated by worship dominated by their sacrificial system. But now, by virtue of the tearing of the curtain, all people have access to God who is not located behind a curtain but wherever we are.

Meanwhile back at Golgotha, a strange thing happened. One soldier in the party guarding the scene observed much of this; the darkening sky; the cry of Jesus; perhaps what he interpreted as a merciful response of God with his death, and came to the conclusion that they, the Jews and the Romans and for that matter the whole world had messed up. Watching, he said, "Truly this man *was God's Son!*"

What did he see that made him come to that conclusion? Wouldn't you like to know? I mean, just several hours before he was among those who mocked and beat Jesus. Maybe he drove the nails! Whatever it was, the first one to get it right, was one who had active role in his crucifixion.

Mark concluded this passage by recording who among his followers were there at the end. Apparently, according to Mark, the disciple John had taken Mary, the mother of Jesus away at this point, meaning that then, at that critical moment, only the women were left. The final witnesses to his death will become very important in a few days.

Jesus' body is laid in the tomb (Mark 15:42-47)

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The worst was over. All that was left was to tidy up some details – both then and now.

Studies have been done on the step-by-step effects of crucifixion on the human body. I have read them and frankly, they are too visceral to go through with you in this setting. But this I want you to know. Execution by crucifixion was deliberately long and slow. It could take several days for a fit person to finally succumb to death by exhaustion and asphyxiation.

It was Friday, the Day of Preparation for the Passover, and in John's gospel it was mentioned that the Jews asked Pilate to hasten the crucifixions so that there would be no crucifixions going on at sundown, the start of the Festival of the Passover.

And so, in a nod to his subjects, Pilate ordered the soldiers to break the legs of those being crucified while they were still alive and on the cross. By breaking their legs they could no longer extend their legs and prevent the collapse of their chest and lungs and would therefore die quicker.

But when the centurions got to Jesus, he was already dead. No doubt this detail is testimony to how badly beaten and half-dead he was before he ever got to Golgotha and was nailed to the cross.

And what happened next is the only part of the story I can at least appreciate. A man by the name of Joseph of Arimathea, “a respected member of the council” wrote Mark, “boldly” wrote Mark, went to Pilate and asked if he could take responsibility for the body of Jesus.

Joseph of Arimathea, do you remember that name? Earlier in Jesus’ ministry, Joseph went to him in the night to question him. You may remember the conversation. Joseph began by saying, “Rabbi, we know you are from God because no one could perform the signs and miracles you do apart from God. I want to know for myself, who are you? Are you the one we have been waiting for, the Messiah of God?” Jesus told him he nor anyone else would be able to grasp his true identity unless they were born anew.

Joseph couldn’t get his head around that concept then, but there was something about his personal encounter with Jesus that made him risk all and go to Pilate. I am certain he had some explaining to do with the Sanhedrin too. But knowing Jesus and watching him die, he lost his timidity and for whatever good it would do, he wanted to at least see to it that this man he admired was buried with dignity.

Pilate granted his request and securing a tomb from someone else, he took Jesus’ bloody and broken body and placed it there.

Some of the women who had been with him through it all followed at a distance so that they knew where it had been taken.

A stone was rolled over its entrance.

At last it was over.

Peace for their Lord Jesus.

But I can’t help wondering what these witnesses must have been thinking. “So this is it?” This is the end of the story? His story? Our story?”