

Matthew 27:45-54; 28:1-10 (NRSV)

⁴⁵From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. ⁴⁶And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" ⁴⁷When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "This man is calling for Elijah." ⁴⁸At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. ⁴⁹But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him." ⁵⁰Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. ⁵¹At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. ⁵²The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. ⁵³After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. ⁵⁴Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ²And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. ⁵But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. ⁷Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you." ⁸So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. ¹⁰Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

Now we come to the greatest comeback story of all. But there is more here than even a comeback from death, this is the story of our own coming back to God.

I find that Christians often have a difficult time understanding the relationship of Good Friday to Easter. For example, I'm often asked, "What is good about 'Good Friday' anyway? Jesus was killed!" And when I ask my classes to tell me the climax of the biblical story, the answer is often the resurrection, when it is really the cross. So . . . since we are talking about Good Friday and Easter when it is not the time for either, it's a good occasion to seek a deeper understanding of this "comeback story."

A crucified Messiah

We have to begin the story on the Sunday before the crucifixion, the day we call Palm Sunday. When Jesus rides into Jerusalem, it is as Israel's Messiah. The words, the symbols, the crowds . . . it all means one thing. Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah, the one sent by God who would cleanse the temple and usher in the Kingdom of God. Alleluia! But by Friday afternoon, Jesus is a *crucified Messiah*.

Because we know that Jesus was the Messiah and was also crucified, it is hard for us to grasp that for any first-century Jew, *crucified Messiah* was an oxymoron, i.e., a combination of contradictory words. So far as the Jews were concerned, there was simply no way that God's Messiah could end up on a Roman cross. Such an idea was absurd, foolish, crazy. The fact that Jesus ended up dead on a cross could mean only one thing – that he wasn't the Messiah, that once again the hopes of Israel had been dashed upon the rocks of Roman reality. On that dark Friday afternoon, anything that we might call a "Jesus movement" collapsed. The disciples are in hiding, fearful that they too will be picked by the Jewish leadership or the Romans . . . but just ahead lies Sunday.

Not Just the Biggest Miracle Ever

We can see the true significance of the resurrection best when we look at it through the eyes of a first-century Jew, for whom "crucified Messiah" was an impossible notion. When Jesus is raised to new life by God, it is the *proof* that although Jesus was crucified by the

Romans he was, nonetheless, God's Messiah. It is the resurrection that turned the phrase *crucified Messiah* from an absurdity into a revelation of God's love and faithfulness.

We shouldn't be surprised that the apostles met so much resistance as they worked to carry this Good News. As Paul put it, "we proclaim Messiah crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Greeks [meaning simply, non-Jews]" (1 Cor.1:23).

The resurrection of Jesus was his vindication, the proof that he was right all along and that the salvation of Israel and hence the whole world had been won through his journey of suffering, shame, and death. The resurrection is the reason why there are Christians at all. Had Jesus' death been the end of the story, there would be no Christians, no teachings preserved, no stories told.

Yet, for all that, the resurrection is not the climax of the story; it was not the place of God's victory over sin and death. That place was the cross. Here again is Paul: "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor. 1:18).

The Good in Good Friday

But how could that be? How could God's victory be won via Jesus' death? How could it be that our reconciliation with God is accomplished on that cross?

These questions and many more swirl around the word, "atonement." You can think of it as "at-one ment," putting us "at-one" with God, i.e., putting our relationship right. It is a relational idea and speaks to our relationship with God.

Though the NT writers are clear that this atonement has been accomplished via the cross, they do not offer any single theory of how it works. Instead, we get various images. For example, one image is grounded in the courtroom: Jesus stands in our place and takes the punishment that is our due. Another image is taken from the slave-market: God redeems us from our bondage. Yet another image is that of a pardon, taken from the language of kings. None of these images tell the whole story by themselves; together, they provide a rich picture of how it is that Jesus put us right with God.

Here is a way to tell the story that I think is faithful to the biblical writings and puts the credit for our salvation where it belongs, not on us but upon God:

God had made a promise to Abraham that the world would be put right and that it would be done through his own family, indeed, that all the families of the earth would be blessed through them. And God had rescued Abraham's family from slavery in Egypt, making a covenant with them, teaching them how to live in right relationship with God and one another. He would be their God, they would be his people, and one day the world would be put right, justice and mercy would remake the planet.

God's teaching boiled down to two things: love God and love neighbor. Yet, tragically, this love-filled life proved impossible for God's people. They chased after other gods and they failed to love their neighbors every day. They even lost sight of who their neighbors were. They forgot that all the families of the earth were to be blessed through them. They imagined that they had some sort of exclusive claim on God.

It became sadly evident that God's promise to restore and renew the cosmos could not be kept, for his people could not keep their end of the bargain. So what did that mean, would God's promise stay an unfulfilled promise forever?

In a word, no. God would provide one Jew who would be utterly faithful to the covenant, loving God and loving neighbor every day and in every way. God, in the person of Jesus, would do and be for Israel what Israel was unable to do and be for herself.

Of course, such love put Jesus on a collision course with the powers of this world, who had long forgotten God's ways. Jesus' path would take him to that cross. It had to, for the only way off that path was for Jesus to abandon the vocation given him by God. But, instead, Jesus was faithful all the way to the cross. The covenant had been kept by this one faithful Jew and the restored relationship of this kept covenant can be ours, if we only trust Jesus and embrace him as our representative Messiah, the one whose faithfulness revealed that God is not only the great promise-maker but the great promise-keeper.

And how do we know that this is a true story? By virtue of the fact that God raised Jesus to new life and gave him dominion over the heavens and the earth. Alleluia, indeed!

“The Royalty of Suffering”

There is no theological problem more challenging to Christians than the problem of suffering. The following are the reflections of Michael Green from his book, *The Message of Matthew*. These thoughts may be helpful to you. I've modified this a bit.

“There is a good deal of emphasis in this account on the kingship of Jesus. And Jesus is royal in his suffering. Matthew is showing that Jesus is innocent in his suffering. He has done nothing to deserve it, yet he suffers death in excruciating agony. Why does God allow the innocent to suffer? Why does he allow such pain and agony in his world? That general question is focused with almost unbearable clarity in the specific question: why does he allow his beloved Son Jesus to suffer in unsurpassed horror on that cross?”

In the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:3–11), Jesus had said that suffering could be a path to blessing, and he was now demonstrating it in the manner of his dying. It was hell to suffer like that. There was *darkness over all the land*, and darkness in his soul (v. 45–46). Out of that darkness he cried, ‘*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani*’, a mixture of his native Aramaic and the Hebrew of Psalm 22. ‘*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*’ He felt God-forsaken. He was God-forsaken.

Yet this passage is suggesting that though we can never experience what Jesus underwent, we too must suffer. Like Simon of Cyrene (27:32), a Jewish proselyte who had come up for the feast from North Africa and was conscripted by the soldiers to carry Jesus’ cross when its intended victim collapsed under its weight, we too are called to carry his cross and share his pain and ignominy. Suffering is the inevitable fate of all people, and Christianity is no insurance policy against it.

What, then, is there to hang on to in times of terrible trouble?

First, there is *an answer to suffering*. There is no answer in words. Jesus remains the almost silent sufferer throughout the ghastly proceedings. The answer is that in Jesus God has come to share our pain. God is no absent academic who writes a book on the problem of pain. He is the caring doctor who comes alongside us as we lie in anguish. He has got involved. He has allowed pain at its most severe to strike him. We worship a suffering God: that is the best answer to the problem of undeserved suffering.

Secondly, there is *a fellowship in suffering*. There is some sort of fellowship with all fellow-sufferers, of course: Jesus had it with the rebels crucified alongside him. But I refer to the fellowship with Christ in suffering which has meant so much to believers down the ages and has nerved them to great endurance. Jesus understands. He has been through it, and he will not desert us. Suffering need not separate us from the awareness of God’s love and presence. In fact, Jesus endured that separation from the Father as an element in his suffering which need never be necessary for his followers. When our hearts cry out, ‘Why does God allow it? Why has God turned his back on me?’, the cross of Jesus tells us that God has not turned his back on us. We are sharing in the sufferings of Christ, and will share, too, in his glory.

Thirdly, there is *a future to suffering*. Suffering is not blind, wanton and senseless. It is purposeful. It has a clear goal. Look what Calvary produced. Look what benefits flowed from that awesome suffering gladly undertaken. It is the same with the suffering of the Messiah’s followers. That is not senseless and useless either. Many good things flow from it, mystery though it is. Character is formed by it. Inventions are stimulated by it. Compassion and care are evoked by it. Warnings emerge from it. And at the end, when this life is over, ‘our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all’.

Fourthly, there is *a royalty in suffering*. Jesus showed that it is possible to reign from a gallows. His royalty is not, so to speak, a reward after his suffering. It is part of his suffering, and it shines out through his suffering. He was regal on that cross. There is a royalty in suffering both for the Messiah and for his people when they follow him in innocent hardship and persecution. That was demonstrated very powerfully during the twentieth century, when there were more martyrs for the gospel than during all the preceding centuries put together.

The King has come to Israel, and even the cross cannot mask his grandeur.”

READING WITH HEART & MIND

Next week, we’ll consider God’s Law and the covenant it expresses.

Monday, Exodus 20:1-17 The Ten Commandments. How would you summarize them?

Tuesday, Deuteronomy 5:6-21 How does this differ from the version in Exodus?

Wednesday, Deuteronomy 6 The requirement of loyalty to God

Thursday, Leviticus 19:1-18 Love your neighbor!

Friday, Matthew 22:34-40 Jesus on the commandments

Saturday, Matthew 5:17-20 Jesus didn’t come to get rid of the Law but to fulfill it.

Sermon Notes

Reading The Good Book Better

This *Something Else* series concludes this week

Our series on creation and evolution revealed that the way we read the Bible shapes our understanding of evolution and other topics. Indeed, it shapes the way we see the world.

In this series, we'll look at various interpretational issues, as well as some keys to understanding the many translations that are available now.

Today: "It's 10pm. Do You Know Where Your *Sitz-im-Leben* Is?"

Growing Up Jesus

A look at the lives, beliefs, and practices of Jews in Jesus' day

A new *Something Else* series that begins July 20

Learning to be better readers of the Bible means learning to read it in full, living color.

And that means coming to Scripture with a better appreciation of the historical and cultural context. In the case of the gospels, we need a better handle of what it was like to be a Jew in Jesus' day. In this series, we'll look at a full range of questions that swirl around the lives, beliefs, and practices of first-century Jews. You'll be surprised at how much your understanding of the gospels will be enhanced. There will be plenty of surprises along the way!

Taught by Scott Engle at 11:00 in Festival Hall on Sunday morning

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

My experience is that we tend to have a lot of pat phrases that we fall back when it comes to talking about the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection. "Jesus paid for my sins." "We are washed in the blood of the lamb." Such phrases have their purpose but they can blind us to other ways, biblical ways, of thinking about God's work in Jesus.

What are some phrases that you've used or heard others use? What do you think they mean? If you are talking about this as part of a group, you might make a list of them. You might even try categorizing them. Which phrases are you most comfortable with? Which ones make you uncomfortable? Why? Which ones surprise?

You might go on to discuss the story of Jesus as I told it at the end of the background study. How well do you think this story fits with what you've heard or been taught over the years? How well does it fit with your own reading of Scripture? What do you think it highlights? What do you think it leaves out? Do you think it would be helpful to someone trying to make sense of Jesus' death? It helps me understand that Jesus' death was not arbitrary, but the unavoidable consequence of Jesus' faithfulness to God. Do you see this too?

Finally, the story as I told it requires us to embrace Jesus as our representative, the one who has done for us what we cannot do for ourselves. How do you think Jesus can be our representative? We are human after all and Jesus is God. Your answer will reveal why the Christians have always held fast to the claim that Jesus is fully and completely human, just as he is fully and completely God.