

Three Empty Crosses...Which One is Yours

Three Empty Crosses – Which One is Yours?

Happy Resurrection Day also known the English-speaking world over as Easter. I want to thank you for joining us this morning. And while we celebrate with great joy the greatest event in the His-story of mankind, we are all very mindful of the difficult and challenging time in which we live. So before I get into our message, I want to pause and pray for those directly affected and infected by this menacing and, at times, deadly virus AND those on the front lines serving so unselfishly.

Today culminates Holy Week! This weekend we moved from Good Friday—the day they crucified our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (His redeeming work on the Cross) to Holy Saturday the day Jesus “rested” if you will (it was a Sabbath after all) to His glorious resurrection that Sunday morning almost 2,000 years ago.

The title of our message, **Three Empty Crosses, which one is yours**, is, I admit, a bit foreboding. But I promise that if you stay with me, on the other side, we will find **help, healing, and hope** we need in such a time as this.

Before we get into the specifics of these three crosses, some may be asking why a cross, where did it come from, and for what purpose? History credits the Persians with beginning the use of crosses to punish people, but not always to death. The Greeks and Alexander the Great were known to use crosses for crucifixion to death in conquered cities.

The Romans are said to have “perfected” the act of crucifixion. It became so torturous a means of death, some of their own historians spoke of how heinous and despicable a

means it was for putting a man to death. So in the time of Jesus, when people saw a cross, they knew it meant one thing—death. Someone was going to die a very painful, public death.

Two kinds of men received the death penalty of crucifixion. Extreme criminals and political enemies—those considered treasonous. We will revisit this point.

#1. The Cross in the Middle

We begin with the Cross in the middle for this was the Cross of Christ. How do we know that? We read in the Bible Jesus was crucified between two criminals (Matthew 27: 38) I want to begin this part of our lesson by giving you an overview of the background leading up to these crosses—especially this one.

Passover fell on Thursday of what we refer to as Holy Week, and Jesus celebrated it with His disciples. We refer to that as the “Last Supper”. It was during that meal, Judas left and betrayed Jesus to the Jewish religious leaders. Later that night, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed so agonizingly, He sweat drops of blood while His three best friends slept nearby.

In a while, Judas showed up in the garden with Jewish religious leaders and Roman soldiers. He betrayed Jesus with a kiss, so the soldiers knew which man to arrest. A brief scuffle ensued in which Peter drew his sword and cut off the right ear of one of the men. (John 18: 10) Jesus rebuked Peter for that act, then calmly reached over and healed the man’s ear. Jesus said again to all who were present that He must be arrested and killed for the OT prophets to be fulfilled and His mission completed. He was arrested and taken away.

We read in Matthew and Mark’s gospels, “...*then all the disciples forsook Him and fled.*” Matthew was one of them.

Mark was probably, himself, the young man to whom he referred that the soldiers grabbed by the sheet he was wearing. He managed to pull away, leaving the sheet behind, and ran away naked into the night. (Matthew 26: 56; Mark 14: 51-52)

Throughout Thursday night and into the wee hours of Friday morning, Jesus was tried six times. The first three trials were by Jewish religious leaders who wanted Him dead for the crime of blasphemy, saying He claimed to be God. They had no power to execute Jesus, so they turned Him over to the Romans. There Jesus was tried three times. They found no guilt in Him.

Some consider this next part a “seventh trial” as the coward Pilate allowed Jesus’ own people, the Jews, to make his decision. Pilate’s wife warned him, saying she had a dream about this “righteous” man, so have nothing to do with Him.

Pilate gave them a chance to release Jesus, but they cried out louder, Crucify Him, Crucify Him! So they did. (Matthew 27: 19-26)

After being scourged and beaten nearly to death and mocked by the soldiers, like all capital criminals, Jesus was forced to carry His own cross to the crucifixion site outside the city walls. Today it is called the Via Dolorosa—the way of suffering.

Jesus was so beaten and weak, He could not continue to carry His cross. A man named Simon was chosen to complete the task. The place for crucifixions was on or near a hill call Calvary (Latin) or Golgotha (Aramaic). Both mean “skull”. This was along a public road so passersby and people from the city could witness. The Romans believed public crucifixion was a great deterrent to crime and anarchy.

Upon arrival, the soldiers nailed Jesus to the cross, amid jeers and cheers of some who only five days before hailed Him as King and Messiah when He rode into Jerusalem on a donkey.

People have a way of quickly turning their allegiances to be part of the crowd or avoid causing trouble for themselves. Happens a lot today as well.

The crucifixion of Christ began around 9 a.m. and lasted six hours. From noon until 3 pm, the world was covered in a shroud of darkness. Then around 3 p.m. just before He died, the worst punishment of all occurred. Jesus the Christ, perfect Lamb of God, became sin – meaning He bore all the guilt and shame of our sins so that by His blood we could be saved from them. At that instant, His Holy Father God turned away *“because His eyes are too pure to look upon evil.”* Then Jesus cried out those famous words,

My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27: 46;
Psalm 22:1)

The Apostle Paul said it this way, *“For our sake (God) made (Jesus) to be sin Who knew no sin, so that in (Jesus) we might become the righteousness of God.* (2 Corinthians 5: 21)

Only the Apostle John, who was also the only disciple near the scene, recorded Jesus’ final words, *“It is finished.”* (John 19:30) Jesus gave up His spirit and died. The great atonement for sin had been made, our debt of sin, so great, was paid in full.

So, my friends and brothers and sisters in Christ, this cross was not ours to bear for we could never have taken sin upon us. God demanded perfection from the beginning as He does to the end of the world.

Throughout the OT, sin was covered by the blood of unblemished (perfect) animals—from Adam and Eve until the temple was destroyed. But, throughout God, promised from Noah to Malachi, that He would send a Messiah – a Savior – Who would redeem His people by His blood—not that of animals. One would come as final, perfect sacrifice once for all sin of those who receive Christ as Savior.

#2 The Repentant Criminal

We turn our attention to the other two crosses between which Jesus was crucified. The Bible does not tell us which criminal was the right or left of Jesus. To help differentiate, we will refer to them, as many do, as the repentant and unrepentant criminals.

After we are told these two men were crucified on either side of Jesus, the Gospels of Matthew and Mark go further telling us that as the soldiers and crowd mocked and insulted Jesus, so too did both of these criminals. (Matthew 27: 44; Mark 15: 32)

We do not know why the Holy Spirit chose Luke to reveal this most amazing story of redemption and conversion ever told. After all, Matthew and John were disciples, and John an eyewitness to these proceedings. As their stories unfold, remember Jesus was on His cross at least six hours during which He said seven different things but not all recorded in each Gospel account.

The first of these sayings occurred as Jesus continued to be mocked and insulted by all and the soldiers gambled for His obviously blood-soaked tattered garment. In the most amazing demonstration of love, grace, and forgiveness, Jesus said,

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” (Luke 23: 34)

Although we cannot say exactly when this salvation experience began, we can say with assurance it did so some time after those amazing words of Jesus and before the criminal died. Here is the exchange between the two criminals—both of which had been insulting Jesus along with the crowd.

*“One of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at Him, saying, **“Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!”** But the other answered, and rebuking him*

said, "Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? "And we indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." And he (said), "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!" And He said to him, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise." (Luke 23: 39 – 43)

The words of a hardened criminal sentenced to death now changed from insults to humility and repentance. The example of Jesus and His words broke the man's heart as he came to the realization that Jesus was Who He had been saying He was, that He was his only hope, and he wanted in. So he asked Jesus to remember him once Jesus ascended into Heaven.

This is the classic example Christians refer to as "deathbed conversion". That repentant criminal was justified and saved as those of us saved in our childhood or at some point many years ago. Those born-again in Christ will see him in Glory and hear his testimony. Perhaps he will share deep profound regret at having rejected Jesus so long. Perhaps not. But he will there – counted among all saints and not as one who slipped in late or by the skin of his teeth.

That brings us to the third and final cross. This one we dare not bare. For the one who chooses such a cross of death will live with eternal regrets in a place Jesus taught hard to prevent.

#3 The Unrepentant Criminal

"Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!"

Based on what the Gospel writers told us, we know of no more words from this unrepentant man who had continued his abusive attitude toward the only One Who could save him as he pleaded. Unlike the other criminal, who saw with his eyes and heard with his ears words that could only come from the Son of God, he apparently remained focused on his own precarious

situation and suffering all the way to his end.

Wherever you are listening to me today, I beg you consider which of these two crosses are yours? It is never too late to do as the first criminal did—repent of your sins and receive Jesus Christ as Savior. He alone is able to save us from our sins because of the cross of death He chose for you and me.

Closing Words of Encouragement and Hope

Today we celebrate the miraculous Resurrection of Jesus from the grave. He said He would die, and He did. But He also promised He would conquer death and come out of that grave. He did that as well. If Jesus was crucified and remained in the grave, He died for nothing and we worship a dead man. The Apostle Paul said it best,

“For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.” 1 Corinthians 15: 16-19

So today we proclaim as those who witnessed the empty tomb,

Jesus Christ is risen today!

To that we say, Hallelujah! If you are born-again in Christ, my encouragement to you is live with the eternal hope of His glory and joy unspeakable in a world desperate for both—desperate for Jesus whether they admit it or not.

For Christ's sake,

Walter