

**April 14, 2019**

**Passion Sunday**

**Luke 23: 32-46**

**Prayer:** Dear Lord, We come before you today humbled by the thought of Passion Sunday.

This central tenet of our belief is that you suffered and died as a common criminal, suffered and died that you might more fully enter our experience, suffered and died that we might be forgiven. In the name you wore while here on earth, we pray. Amen.

### **Save Yourself**

When I met Tonda Vial, she was already unsteady on her feet, halting in her speech. She and her husband Craig sat right over there on many, many Sundays.

They lived all the way down in Gray Court but they had attended Tandy's church on Woodruff Road for over a decade and wanted to join her here.

Though Tonda was only in her late 60s, it turned out that she had a serious disorder that caused multi-system failure. She died in March at age 70. Tandy officiated at her funeral at their former church on Woodruff Road.

During that service I learned who Tonda truly was. How she'd been a mother who created a loving family with three adult children. How she'd been a beloved middle school teacher who explored nature and promoted recycling. How when a young girl had to move away the year she was in Tonda's class, Tonda slipped a ring from her finger and gave it to the girl. That former student treasured the ring so much that 40 years later, she drove hundreds of miles to Tonda's memorial service.

Tandy gave the Vial family a gift that day in March. She gave them the opportunity to look past Tonda's declining years and remember the beautiful, vibrant, caring woman she'd been.

That's what a good memorial service does. So often at the time of death, a family is worn completely out. All they can see is those last months, last weeks, last days, last hours. It's hard to see past their exhaustion.

A caring pastor who draws out a family's memories and reflects a personality can begin to restore some of those good memories. Can remind the family of who she really was.

I find some of those same impulses at work in the gospel writers' depictions of Jesus' last days and last hours. Fully a quarter to a third of our gospels are taken up with the events of the last week of his life. They begin with a triumphant ride into Jerusalem on a donkey colt. *Ride on, King Jesus.*

Then they quickly descend into a tale of betrayal and terror surrounding his last hours. But some of the narratives are told in ways that remind us of all that came before, all the teaching and healing and ideas that made his death matter.

And so out of all the Passion narratives that we could focus on this morning, we're going to turn to one found only in the gospel of Luke. I love it because it reflects, it sums up, it encapsulates whom Jesus was.

Last week, we talked about the Passover meal Jesus shared with his disciples, a meal we call the Last Supper. Afterward, Jesus was arrested by the temple guard. He endured a long night being mocked and blindfolded and beaten. During that time, his beloved Peter denied him.

At daybreak, Jesus was taken before the Jewish Council. The council condemned him and brought him before the Roman governor Pilate.

Pilate found that Jesus had done nothing wrong. But since Jesus was from Galilee, Pilate took the opportunity to send him to Herod. Herod governed Galilee, and conveniently, was in Jerusalem for the Passover.

Herod and his soldiers mocked Jesus some more, then sent him back to Pilate. Though Pilate still found no wrongdoing, he bowed to the requests of the religious leaders, and handed Jesus over for crucifixion.

A man named Simon of Cyrene was conscripted to carry Jesus's cross. A weary, aching Jesus followed Simon to a place called The Skull.

That's where we'll start reading this morning. **Luke 23: 32-46.**

<sup>32</sup> Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with (Jesus). <sup>33</sup> When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.

[[ <sup>34</sup> Then Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.']] *(Those brackets indicate that verse 34 was not included in all ancient manuscripts. It may have been added later.)*

And they cast lots to divide his clothing.

<sup>35</sup> And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!'

<sup>36</sup> The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, <sup>37</sup> and saying, 'If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!' <sup>38</sup> There was also an inscription over him, 'This is the King of the Jews.'

39 One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, 'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!'

<sup>40</sup>But the other rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?' <sup>41</sup>And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.'

<sup>42</sup>Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.'

<sup>43</sup>He replied, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'

44 It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, <sup>45</sup>while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two.

<sup>46</sup>Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.' Having said this, he breathed his last.

I filled in for a couple of our Sunday afternoon Bible studies recently. A woman asked if I still had the experience of finding something new when I read the Scriptures.

Absolutely! And this passage is a good example.

It was years and years after seminary that I saw something Luke did with this scene on the cross that I had never noticed before.

As Jesus hung there, people challenged him three times to *save himself*. Whether in ridicule or irony or mockery, three different people or groups of people challenged him to save

himself. When a writer includes something three times in such a short space, we are supposed to take notice.

The first time, the *religious leaders* scoffed at Jesus, saying, “**He saved others; let him save himself ....**”

The second time, the *soldiers* mocked him. “**If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!**”

Lastly, one of the *criminals* crucified beside him, said, “**Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!**”

*Save yourself!* Something is going on here. Luke doesn't construct this story by chance. He is carefully laying out a theology that he has been hammering throughout Jesus's life story, a theology that Jesus hasn't come to save himself. Hasn't come to set himself up as a military ruler. Hasn't come to overthrow Rome and restore Israel to its glory days, as his disciples and so many expected.

If you recall, this story began with three similar temptations for Jesus to save himself. Back in chapter 4, just before Jesus' public ministry began, Luke tells about his 40 days in the wilderness.

First, the devil tempted a famished Jesus to turn stones into bread.

Second, the devil offered him kingdoms and glory and authority if he would worship him.

And third, the devil placed Jesus on the temple's pinnacle and suggested he hurl himself off to prove that God would protect him.

Like bookends, these three temptations at the beginning and at the end of the story show what kind of Savior he would be.

*Save yourself*, everyone tempted Jesus as he hung on the cross. And what did he do? He reached out to one of the criminals hanging beside him. He did exactly what he'd been doing for the past three years.

What an encapsulation of Christian belief in this one little scene! What an encapsulation of Luke's gospel in this one little scene!

At this moment of excruciating pain, when he might be forgiven to wallow in a little self-pity, Christ reached out ... to one of the most marginalized citizens of his day.

**“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”**

I've had people ask about that word, *paradise*. In some writings, it seems to indicate a special part of heaven for the righteous dead.

But I don't think that's anything to get hung up on. In this case, it's pretty much a synonym for heaven.

*You will be with me.*

With his dying breath, Jesus looked into the heart of a criminal on Calvary. And he forgave him for everything he had done.

The point of this passage is the point of so many of Luke's passages – to show that none of us is beyond God's reach, God's salvation. None of the people we have met in this gospel story

– not shepherds, not women, not tax collectors, not prostitutes, not criminals hung by the Roman Empire – is beyond God’s reach, God’s salvation.

*This is why I call Luke ... the gospel writer for Triune.*

Very often, by the time people arrive at Triune, there are terrible things in their pasts. Assault and battery. Criminal domestic violence. Sex offenses. Stealing. Drug dealing. Prostitution. Murder. Can God forgive those things? Yes, when one honestly repents.

But do you know how to tell if the repentance is real?

Those actions stop. They stop cold.

For while there is no sin beyond God’s forgiveness, there is also no forgiveness when one does not honestly seek it.

It’s grace that we’re talking about as Jesus died on that cross, isn’t it?

Grace that allowed him to worry about a convicted criminal moments before his death.

It is not surprising, that if anyone would tell this story of a criminal in the last moments of Jesus’s life, it would be Luke. Luke was always the gospel writer most interested in the outcast, the underdog, the forgotten, the despised.

And so Luke felt it important to report this story about a criminal who hung by Jesus’s side and was forgiven.

And he felt it important to reiterate that Jesus didn’t come to save himself.

Now you might say this is stating the obvious: Of course Jesus didn't come to save himself. He came to live among humankind, to show us another way to live, perhaps, even, to save humankind.

But I don't think we can let ourselves off the hook so easily. I think Luke might be challenging us in this passage as well. Do we look only to save ourselves?

Do we look at Christian faith only as a means of personal salvation? You wouldn't have to travel far this morning to hear that message preached.

*Are you saved? Are you saved? Are you saved?*

Do we close our eyes and clench our teeth and make ourselves believe some doctrine as insurance against a miserable afterlife?

*Or could the Christian life require something more?*

*Save yourself!* When we hear that phrase, we think of jumping in the life boat ahead of everyone else. Or George Costanza shoving children aside when he thought an apartment was on fire.

We reward people who overcome the natural inclination for self-preservation and sacrifice themselves for others. We give them Carnegie Medals and Congressional Medals of Honor and all sorts of heroes' awards. And rightly so. It is an amazing thing to overcome that tendency toward self-protection and put another first.



But I'm talking about something a little different this morning. I'm talking about taking a more mature view of our Christian faith. I'm talking about refusing to look at Christian faith as only a means to save ourselves for an afterlife.

Then what else is there?

There's living as Jesus showed us on the cross. *Save yourself!* shouted the religious leaders and the soldiers and the criminal. *And he didn't even bother to answer.*

Instead, he focused on the criminal by his side, the one who repented, then said, **“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”**

That was the thing worth hearing, the words that cut through all the worldly clamor for Jesus to save himself. And he replied, **“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”**

That's not a promise to scoff at, this promise that we will dwell with God the Father and Jesus the Son in the afterlife. Like Tandy did at Tonda's service, I speak of it at every funeral I preach.

But when we believe in Jesus only to save ourselves from a fearful hereafter, we miss the richness of living for him here and now.

Of trying to live *like him* here and now.

This is the week we look at Jesus's last words, his final moments on earth. This is the week we conduct his memorial service.

And like a good pastor who celebrates a life, Luke shows him doing exactly what he's done on every page of the gospel: Reaching out. Forgiving. Showing his amazing grace.

Amen.