



WESTLAKE HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Tragedy and Triumph”

Sermon Series: “The Way of Jesus”

Mark 15:21-39

By: Dr. Peter B. Barnes

April 1, 2010 – Maundy Thursday, 7:30 p.m. in the Sanctuary

Mark 15:21-39

(NIV)

The Crucifixion

²¹A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross. ²²They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means The Place of the Skull). ²³Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. ²⁴And they crucified him. Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get.

²⁵It was the third hour when they crucified him. ²⁶The written notice of the charge against him read: THE KING OF THE JEWS. ²⁷They crucified two robbers with him, one on his right and one on his left.^[a] ²⁹Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, "So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, ³⁰come down from the cross and save yourself!"

³¹In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself! ³²Let this Christ,^[b] this King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe." Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him.

The Death of Jesus

³³At the sixth hour darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour. ³⁴And 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?"^[c]

³⁵When some of those standing near heard this, they said, "Listen, he's calling Elijah."

³⁶One 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.

³⁷With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last.

³⁸The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. ³⁹And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard his cry and^[d] saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son^[e] of God!"

Footnotes:

- a. [Mark 15:27](#) Some manuscripts left, 28 and the scripture was fulfilled which says, "He was counted with the lawless ones" (Isaiah 53:12)
- b. [Mark 15:32](#) Or Messiah
- c. [Mark 15:34](#) Psalm 22:1
- d. [Mark 15:39](#) Some manuscripts do not have heard his cry and.
- e. [Mark 15:39](#) Or a son

In our society today the cross has come to be a rather prevalent fixture. Many people wear crosses around their necks and on their ears as jewelry, and some even have crosses tattooed on their bodies. My wife has a pair of reversible matching cross earrings that are particularly beautiful. They have black onyx on one side and silver filigree on the other.



Crosses come in all shapes and sizes and in every color of the rainbow. There are gold crosses, silver crosses, red crosses, blue crosses, the Celtic cross, the Greek cross, the Latin cross, the anchor cross, the Jerusalem cross, St. Andrew's cross, the Trinity cross, the budded cross, and the list goes on.

And in every city and town across this country one will find a church with a cross perched atop its steeple, and some even glow at night as neon lights. I recall that on the top of the steeple of my seminary, Gordon-Conwell, there was a lit yellow cross which the pilots actually used to guide them to Logan airport in Boston. All in all, it is safe to say the cross has become the central focus of worship in the Christian Church. Just look at what dominates the front of our sanctuary and what stands on the hill of our property by Bee Caves Road.

However, it is fascinating to me that the cross should come to have this position of respectability, for back in the first century AD the cross was anything but respectable. The cross brought fear into the hearts of millions as it was the cruelest form of capital punishment known to humankind. People looked with contempt upon those who were executed by crucifixion, for the cross was degrading and humiliating, and it was a cause of fear. In the first century, wearing a cross as jewelry would be like wearing little electric chairs as earrings today. You might see someone wearing earrings like that on the Drag in downtown Austin, but for most of us it would be considered in poor taste.

How is it, then, that the cross has come to hold such a position of acceptance in our day and time? It is because Jesus' death is the cornerstone of the Christian faith and the most important fact of His coming. Jesus' birth, teaching, and all the miracles He performed pale in comparison with the centrality of the cross in the Christian faith. It was the reason for the incarnation.

The apostle Paul said the cross a stumbling block to belief for people (1 Cor. 1). To the Jews it was an embarrassment. To the Greeks it was foolishness. But to those of us who believe in Jesus the cross is the power of God and the wisdom of God. As Paul writes, "*God chose the foolish things of this world to shame the wise, and He chose the weak things of this world the shame the strong*" (1 Cor. 1:27).

The main point of the gospel is that in some mysterious way God came to earth and died. He was not "up there" watching the tragic events down here. Rather, God was in Christ, as the apostle Paul says, reconciling the world to Himself.

Martin Luther said it another way. He said the cross showed "God struggling with God." If Jesus was a mere man, His death would prove God's cruelty. But the fact that He was God's Son proves instead that God fully identifies with suffering humanity, and on the cross God absorbed the awful pain of this whole world. The cross, a stumbling block to some, became the cornerstone of the Christian faith, and any discussion about how pain and suffering fit into God's greater plan ultimately leads back to the cross.

Author Philip Yancey has written, "When Jesus died, even a gruff Roman Soldier was moved to exclaim, 'Surely this man was the Son of God!' He saw the contrast all too clearly between his brutish colleagues and their victim, who forgave them in His



dying gasp. The pale figure nailed to a crossbeam revealed the ruling powers of the world as false gods who broke their lofty promises of piety and justice. Religion, not irreligion, accused Jesus; the law, not lawlessness, had Him executed. By their rigged trials, their scourging, their violent opposition to Jesus, the political and religious authorities of that day exposed themselves for what they were: upholders of the status quo, defenders of their own power only. Each assault on Jesus laid bare their illegitimacy.”ⁱ

In a memoir of the years before World War II, Pierre Van Paassen tells of an act of humiliation by Nazi storm troopers who had seized an elderly Jewish rabbi and dragged him to headquarters. In the far end of the same room, two colleagues were beating another Jew to death. They stripped the rabbi and commanded that he preach the sermon he had prepared for the coming Sabbath. The rabbi asked if he could wear his yarmulke, and the Nazis all laughed and agreed because they thought it added to the joke. The trembling rabbi proceeded to deliver in a raspy voice his sermon on what it means to walk humbly before God, all the while being poked and prodded by the hooting Nazis, and all the while hearing the last cries of his neighbor at the end of the room.

Yancey says whenever he reads the Gospel accounts of the crucifixion of Jesus, he thinks of that naked rabbi standing humiliated in a police station. The indignity, the shame, the humiliation of it all. God showed amazing restraint that day. With every lash of the whip, every blow on Jesus’ cheek, our Lord must have mentally replayed the temptation in the wilderness and Gethsemane. Legions of angels awaited His command. One word, and the ordeal would end. But it didn’t, and you and I are the beneficiaries. Christ’s death on our behalf paid the penalty we deserve, and by His wounds we are healed.

Thanks be to God for the tragedy and the triumph of the cross, and may we grow in our appreciation of what it cost God to provide a ransom for our souls. Amen.

ⁱ Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, pp. 202,203.

