

The Place Where Jesus Died

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It's quiet here in the sanctuary as we gather for this Good Friday service. Our present need for social distancing and self-isolation in the face of the pandemic has made it necessary – a very few of us here making a recording and you in your home. Of course, it's always somewhat this way. Even when we are free to gather, it's Easter and not Good Friday that draws the real crowds.

That will likely be true even for our videoed services: the larger “viewing audience,” as they call it, will certainly be here for Easter, and it is good that they should be. We *want* them to be here. We have great news to share! Yet for many, Easter is just another popular holiday – one that involves a bit of church on a day when the music is bound to be good and the message upbeat. Resurrection – a nice theme. Few like to think about the death of Christ; suffering and death are things we'd just as soon ignore – certainly this year.

Yet to appreciate Easter – to really understand and experience it – you and I know we can't just dodge around Good Friday. Oh, it is done, of course. Even the church, in recent years, has in many places thrown up its hands and given in, recognizing that many skip the crucial events of Holy Week. At best, folks show up only on Palm Sunday and then Easter – two days of celebration with no cross in sight.

As a result, Palm Sunday often disappears and, in resignation, pastors replace it with “Passion Sunday” – a Sunday on which the whole story from Palm Sunday through Good Friday is packaged together like bundled software and presented in a single short hour – sort of the Holy Week equivalent of fast food. “Better than nothing” many will say, and I suppose that's true. Yet only when we give Good Friday and the Cross their due – only when we realize that we brought about the death of God's only Son – only then do we begin to grasp the profound cost of

the words, “My son, my daughter, your sins are forgiven.” And so we are here.

And then there’s the Cross, itself. We so often abstract it; we certainly tend to beautify it, rendering it in fine woods, in gold and silver. But the original Cross was a ghastly thing – perhaps the cruelest form of execution we of the human race ever contrived. And yet, knowing all this, you and I are here – because we sense, deep down inside, that we *should* be here – that we *must* be here – that there is no other place that we would be on such a day than a place like this.

And what *about* “place”? – in particular, “the place” where Jesus was crucified? Not just on the Cross, but the *place* where that cross was raised. One year, our Lenten journey explored the contours of the question “Why Did Jesus Have to Die?” Today, we could ask a slightly different question: “*Where* Did Jesus Have to Die?”

That may seem an odd question: Where did Jesus have to die? When you think about it, your first answer might well be, “Why, the best place would have been in the in the Temple area, of course. Upon the altar. That was the center of everything; that’s where the sacrifices were made.” The most appropriate thing in the world, one would think, would have been for Jesus to have died on the Temple’s altar – that focal point of sacrificial activity throughout the Old Testament.

But in our second lesson, from the letter to the Hebrews, some careful, watchful follower of Jesus has noticed something – something about how the Temple sacrifices were actually done. Most of them *were* burned on the altar – peace offerings, cereal offerings, and so on – but not the sin offering. Rather, as we read in our second lesson:

The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. [Ref Lev 16:20-28]

Early followers of the crucified Jesus had noticed one of the many pointers buried in the Old Testament – pointers ahead to the day when God the Father would send his Son to bear the sins of the world. In

seven places, the law of Moses said that the body of the animal sacrificed in the *sin* offering was to be taken “outside the camp” – in later years outside the wall of Jerusalem – and burned there. Only the sin offering; because it was considered too sinful to burn on the altar or in the Temple area.

And so it was for Jesus. Our first thought would be that nothing would be more appropriate than for Jesus – the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world – to be put to death in the Jerusalem Temple area. But no; like the “sin offering” – because he *was* the ultimate sin offering – Jesus was taken “outside the camp,” outside the walls of Jerusalem, and there he was put to death for you and for me.

Think of it, my friends. At that point, when Jesus was bearing your sin and mine, he was too sin-stained, too unclean, even to be put to death within the walls of Jerusalem, much less in the Temple or upon its altar.

And there is more. When God the Father pushed the sacrifice of his Son outside the Temple precincts, pushed the cross outside even the walls of Jerusalem, out to a common area, secular and trampled by Gentiles like you and like me, he made it clear that Jesus’ death was not merely for the people of Israel but for you and for me, as well. For the sins of the whole world.

George MacLeod, founder and leader of the Iona Community, writes:

I simply argue that the Cross be raised again at the centre of the market-place as well as on the steeple of the church. I am recovering the claim that Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves; on the town garbage-heap; at a crossroad so cosmopolitan that they had to write his title in Hebrew and in Latin and in Greek; at the kind of place where cynics talk smut, and thieves curse, and soldiers gamble. Because that is where he died. And that is what He died about.

Where did Jesus have to die? Not in the Temple; not on the altar; not even in Jerusalem, that city which figured so centrally in God’s preparations prior to the sending of his Son. Rather, Jesus died

in a place that displayed to all the world the true cost of our sin and our alienation from God;

a place that showed the true unholiness of what we become when we turn in upon ourselves and away from God;

a place that shows God's commitment to redeeming not just Israel but you and me, too – the whole world of both Jew and Gentile.

And so we gather here, on this most reflective day of the whole Church Year, once again to examine ourselves and our priorities – to repent of many things – to come to grips with, and be gripped by, the fact that God himself entered the fray as Jesus, and suffered death on our behalf.

“What language shall I borrow to thank Thee, dearest friend, For this Thy dying sorrow, Thy pity without end?” What language, indeed?

And then – beyond the place itself – he died on a cross; that's where he died. Was it necessary that he die on a cross? So brutal, so shameful and humiliating. God being God, I suppose he could have brought us forgiveness and salvation in any way he chose – and yet he chose a crude, first century wooden cross. It's a troubling image. Because of us and our sin – because of our rebellion and our denial – the God who created us and all that exists was nailed to a crude wooden cross.

Perhaps our desire to soften the rough edges of the Cross and to polish it, reveals our discomfort, our repugnance, our desire to disown the fact that we are the ones who killed him. Take away the nails and the blood and the splinters – give the Cross a good sanding and a light buffing, perhaps rub in a bit of oil – and the answer to the question “Where did Jesus have to die?” becomes less awkward for us. But it's because of our sin that the Cross casts an ominous shadow over us. We aren't supposed to feel comfortable in its presence.

I still remember a disquieting cross-marked encounter from 40 years ago. I was a young pastor at that time, in my first call here in San Jose. The encounter was with a rather grotesque, 18th century crucifix. We had traveled north toward Fremont to visit the historic San Jose mission, founded by the hardy followers of Father Junipero Serra in 1797. As is so often the case, it took having a visit from friends in the Midwest

finally to get us out exploring the California countryside. And now we found ourselves, with our friends and our two-year-old daughter Naomi, wandering through the cool quiet rooms of the old mission, looking at artifacts and immersing ourselves in the history of an age gone by.

The crucifix jarred us out of our dispassionate musings. We Lutherans are not used to seeing the body of Christ displayed quite so vividly on the Cross. We gazed silently at the painted plaster form with its running wounds and agonized expression. And then the silence was broken by two-year-old Naomi's quiet, questioning voice: "Jesus looks tired," she said.

Oh, there was so much we wished to tell her at that point, but the words just wouldn't come. Then, with her two-year-old matter-of-factness, she said, "He needs to go to sleep." And again, our words couldn't force their way through tightened throats.

The Cross. How inclined we are to "sanitize" it; to remove, quietly and genteelly, any indelicate images of suffering and death. But by the time Jesus reached that desolate place known as Golgotha, he was indeed "tired." And he indeed "went to sleep," dying a death every bit as real as the death you and I will someday die.

Our hope lies not in sanitizing the cross, but rather in rejoicing in the empty tomb. Although our aesthetic preferences may turn us away from overly graphic depictions of the Crucifixion, there is yet a need for us to stand "beneath the Cross of Jesus" and to gaze upon "the very dying form of one who suffered there for me." For the path to Easter requires us to pass through the darkness of that Friday afternoon and to gaze upon the ugliness of the events that took place outside the wall – the place where the grim realities of sin and death were overcome – the place where Jesus had to die.

Let us pray. Father, we've come to a dark spot in the road – five days' remove from Jesus' uplifting entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. We would like to pass this spot quickly, and yet have paused to reflect – and to give you thanks. Thank you for sending your Son to bear the weight of all that separated us from you – our sin and the dark power of death looming over us. Be with us now, as we move through this dark hour and toward the hope we know lies before us – in this world and in the world to come. For we pray in Jesus' Name. Amen.

I invite you now to join in as we sing together our next hymn, "Beneath the Cross of Jesus."