

Mark 16:1-8 – The Cross of Life

Three crosses were planted in the earth on Good Friday. Three crosses bearing three broken bodies. It was a scene of terrible suffering. Two were eating the bitter fruit of justice. All three crosses were instruments of punishment and death. The soldiers came to break the legs of the victims as if their suffering was not enough. But it was not. Justice is not easily satisfied and its cost is more than we bargained for. We say we want justice from God but the two crosses of the thieves show us the cruel face of fairness. Their crosses were ugly and brutal with no future, only an end.

None of us wants to look there. We don't want to see the broken body of the bitter thief who lashed out at Jesus. We don't even want to see the body of the repentant thief. Yes, he was sorry but what difference did his regret make? He suffered and he died. It is the same for us. No matter how sorry we are, sorry does not fix it. It cannot prevent suffering or ward off death or make for happy endings to our sins.

But there was another cross there. For all His words, Jesus lay as dead as the thieves crucified on either side of Him. He died before His legs could be broken. His death was as curious as His life.

Unlike the thieves whose suffering turned people away, the cross of Christ compels people to look and even find hope in the wounds of Jesus. Joseph of Arimathea asked for the body. A few quick preparations and an unpretentious burial in a borrowed grave was all the clock had time for before the Sabbath began.

They told themselves they would return and do better by Jesus. They knew Jesus deserved more. So in the midst of their hopes and dreams dashed in bloody sweat, a big sigh, and "It is finished," they consoled themselves with thoughts of Sunday.

Now here we are picking up the story three days later. The Sabbath is over. Nobody knows what happened to the bodies of the two thieves, but everyone knows what happened to Jesus. Very early on the first day of the week, at sunrise, they went to the tomb. Loaded down with burial spices, they went for closure and comfort. Even with their broken hearts and sorrows they also wondered. Why didn't Jesus fight His betrayal? Why didn't He defend Himself in the trial? Why didn't He plead for Himself and for His life?

The stone stood in their way. But when they got there the grave was open. Where Jesus had lain, a young man and the burial cloths were left. **"Don't be afraid! You seek Jesus the Nazarene. He is risen. He is not here. Go, tell Peter and His disciples. He has gone before you into Galilee; he will meet you."**

No one had ever gone to finish a burial to find an empty grave, an angelic greeting, and the promise of the resurrection. The women did what we all would have done. They ran for their lives – literally. In shock they realized that Jesus had kept every promise He made. In place of their terror of death came the greater terror of life – of sins forgiven, of death overcome, of liars, fornicators, murderers, thieves, and all kinds of people given new and everlasting life!

Could it be that of those three ugly crosses, one which was planted in death could become a tree of life? Could this life planted in death bear the fruit of everlasting life for you and me? Could Jesus taste the poisoned fruit of death that came by Adam to give us the fruit of life to eat? Can sinners hope for forgiveness? Can the dying hope for life?

And who could the women tell? Who would believe them? How would they explain it? What did this mean for the future? Isn't that why we are here today? We have the same fear and trepidation about Easter. We hate death but we get it. We don't know what to expect of life, of empty graves, and of a future death cannot touch. We cannot explain Easter. It asks us to trust in what our eyes can't see, our hands can't touch, and our minds can't fathom. We are as fearful as those women who came to that grave so long ago.

If Easter is true, then life today also changes. What is important and what is not important changes. What matters and what does not matter is transformed. People have had issues with Mark's Gospel because it ends so weird. It ends exactly right. Life is easier to get with the predictable death we hate but we have made our peace with that.

Christ is risen! The cross was supposed to be about death but now it is a tree of life. The life that Jesus surrendered on the cross became the life in which we now hope. The grave that once said "the end" now has become "the beginning." It is good news – wonderful news and yet it challenges everything we have come to know and believe about life and death.

Christ lives – not for Himself but for guilty sinners, shameful people with pasts and secrets, wounded people with no hope of healing, and sorrowful people who long for consolation. He is risen for dying people who carry in their bodies heart disease, cancer, Alzheimer's, diabetes, aids, emphysema, coronavirus, and every other illness of these mortal bodies. He sets free the immoral, the evil, the addict, and the guilty from their sins.

The miracle is not simply that Christ lives for you but that He died for you – the Good Shepherd for His sheep, He who walks through the valley of the shadow of death shines the light of life. He who feeds us on the rich green pastures and gives us to drink of the still quiet waters. Christ died for you and lives for you.

It is outrageous, confusing, confounding, and it seems too good to be true. He has crushed our fears and vanquished our enemies. And here we are to feast upon the bread of heaven and to drink the cup of salvation and to praise the Crucified One who rose to grant us new life. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.