

Golgotha Fun Park
John 19:1-37
6 April 2012
By The Reverend Barkley Thompson

A few miles due east of Mammoth Cave National Park in southern Kentucky, just off of U.S. Highway 70, one finds the Golgotha Fun Park. Really. There, rather than the stark and terrifying hill called “the Skull” on which the Romans made a practice of crucifying their victims in acts of terror, Golgotha is a putt-putt golf course designed for children and families. Religious travelogue author Timothy Beal writes in his review, “Who *wouldn't* want to putt-putt away an afternoon at Golgotha Fun Park?”ⁱ

Adjacent to the putt-putt course, Golgotha Fun Park has a paintball range. Beal points out, “The Ten Commandments say ‘Thou shalt not kill,’ but apparently pretending with paintball is okay.”ⁱⁱ

Back at the course itself, Beal describes the seventeenth hole: “Taking a sharp turn between the central cross and the one for the thief to Jesus’ left, putters finally meet the risen Lord standing at the end of a relatively long fairway atop the empty tomb...The stone is rolled away, Jesus is out. In goes the ball.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Golgotha Fun Park is all-too-real, but Tim Beal’s review is tongue-in-cheek. He recognizes the surreal quality of what he sees. Beal ends his review by offering this:

“‘Golgotha, the place of the skull,’ doesn’t exactly go with ‘fun.’ The jarring association of skulls, Crucifixion, and fun is...uncommon in the world of miniature golf, let alone theology...‘Golgotha’ and ‘fun park’ create cognitive dissonance, combining lighthearted attraction with mortality and the death of God.”^{iv}

How is it that the Crucifixion was allowed to happen? How is it that the Son of God, who entered Jerusalem less than a week ago to fanfare and alleluias, was hoisted on a rough and wooden pole to asphyxiate, naked and alone, with the added humiliation of having his mother watch him die?

There is only one answer to that question. There is only one reason. Jesus the Christ died today—Jesus the Christ *dies* today—because we deny him.

Praising Jesus on Palm Sunday right up until the moment it matters, right up until the moment it entails risk, the crowd then shouts to Pilate, “Crucify him!” When given the chance to set Christ free, to have him returned to them, the crowd instead embraces another named Jesus Barabbas—Jesus *bar Abba*, which means “Jesus, son of God.” Catch that: the crowd looks away

from the Incarnate Christ in favor of a false son of God who requires nothing of them, who will not give them the discomfort and whiplash of mixing joy with sacrifice and sorrow.

Following Jesus right up until the moment that it matters, right up until the moment it entails risk, the Apostle Peter then denies him three times. “You’re one of his disciples, aren’t you?” asks the slave of the high priest. And Peter looks the man square in the eye and says, “I am not.”

Remembering Jesus right up until the moment it matters, right up until the moment it entails risk, only two hundred will mourn him in church today, when eight hundred sang hosanna on Palm Sunday and well over a thousand will celebrate with happy abandon on Easter Day.

We deny Jesus when it matters. And he dies naked and alone on the cross. The Son of God dies, because we deny him.

Calling upon Jesus in our need—when we seek material comfort, or equanimity of mind, or solace from our hurts—we deny him when following Jesus means releasing him, instead of the false gods of the world, to be the Lord of us.

We deny him when following Jesus means claiming, even in the most uncomfortable circumstances, “Yes, I know the man; yes, I am his disciple.”

We deny him when it matters most, when our real-life choices are on the line, when knowing Jesus means we actually must decide differently about the kinds of persons we will be and the choices we will make.

We can’t abide the reality of the Son of God come among us and laying claim to us. We won’t wrap our hearts around the risk and pain faith sometimes requires. We can’t fathom Golgotha. And so, too often we build in our hearts only fun park faith, in which a benign cartoon Jesus smiles warmly upon us as we putt-putt through life unchanged. The image we craft, and to which we give our assent, makes a macabre mockery of Jesus, not unlike the mockery of the soldiers who dress him in purple with a crown of thorns.

This is the lowest day of the year. It is the day of our denial. It is the day we kill the God of love.

Blessedly, there is more. Blessedly, the story does not end here. You see, even as the crowd yells “Crucify him”...even as Peter says, “I do not know the man”...even as we blithely tee off at the seventeenth hole and think of the Passion only long enough for it to be brief and darkened spot in an otherwise sunny faith, God is not inactive.

Tradition tells us that during the days between Good Friday and Easter Jesus travels even into the depths of hell to save those whose denial of God continues into the next life.

And at dawn on Easter we will discover again that death cannot hold God. Even our denial of him cannot drive him from us. It pains God too much to lose us, and so he will go to any cost to win us back. And on Easter, because we have acknowledged our denial and grieved for ourselves as we grieve for Jesus, the joy that comes will not be the superficial happiness of the amusement park but the joy that recognizes just how much we had to lose on this dark day.

Even now, we know what Peter and the crowd did not: Easter is coming, and it cannot come too soon.

ⁱ Beal, Timothy K. *Roadside Religion: In Search of the Sacred, the Strange, and the Substance of Faith*, 72.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 75.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 76.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 76-77.