

And They Crucified Him

Mark 15:21-24

John Breon

A pastor I know was telling about one time when the youth at her church were acting out scenes from Holy Week. All the kids wanted to be Jesus for the re-enactment of overturning the money-changers' tables. I wondered how many would be as eager to be nailed to a cross as they were to drive out the money-changers.

We like Palm Sunday. It's fun to see the children bring in the palm branches. Hearing the crowds acclaim Jesus inspires us. Most of us enjoy seeing him overturn the tables and drive out the merchants from the Temple. We appreciate his teaching during the days that followed.

And we like Easter. We're enthused about all the joy and new life and celebration. But I wonder if we jump too quickly from Palm Sunday to Easter. Really to get to the joy of Easter we have to follow Jesus' path through anguish, betrayal, rejection, suffering and death.

Mark's Gospel is action-packed and fast-paced. But when he gets to the suffering and death of Jesus, he slows down. He doesn't interpret much of what he shows us here, but he gives us a variety of pictures of what happens to Jesus. We don't have to linger over every detail and see close-ups of all the gore and suffering. But we do need to recognize what Jesus suffered.

Mark simply says, "And they crucified him." He doesn't describe the crucifixion in great detail. He didn't have to. He was writing for a Roman congregation. And Romans knew what crucifixion involved. The cross was a political symbol before it was a religious symbol. It was the symbol of Roman power that said, "We're in charge here, and this is what happens to people who get in our way." Crucifixion was a torturous form of capital punishment for slaves and enemies and the worst criminals. Polite Romans didn't even mention the words "crucifixion" or "cross" because the reality was so brutal, ugly and repellent (N. T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone*).

So when Mark simply says that Jesus was crucified, most people in that world would have been shocked. For Romans, crucifixion meant

someone was at the bottom of society and certainly wasn't anyone to listen to and follow. For Jews, crucifixion meant a person was cursed, not that that person was the Messiah. But six times in chapter 15 Mark says that Jesus is "King"—the "King of the Jews" or "King of Israel." He suffers and dies as Israel's Messiah. And somehow, as Jesus dies, a gentile, a Roman centurion, sees something of who Jesus really is and declares that he is "the Son of God" (15:39). This recalls the opening line of Mark: "The gospel of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God" (1:1).

John Stott was an English pastor and author. Reflecting on the cross, he describes miserable conditions of millions of people who live in shanty towns of Africa and Asia or the slums of Latin and South America.

Stott imagines a poor man from the slums of Brazil who climbs more than 2000 feet up the mountain to the colossal statue of Christ that towers above Rio de Janeiro. It's called "The Christ of Corcovado." After the difficult climb, the poor man finally reaches Jesus and we imagine him saying, "I have climbed to meet you, Christ, from the filthy, confined quarters down there ... to put before you most respectfully, these considerations: there are 900,000 of us down there in the slums of that splendid city. ... And you ... do you remain here at Corcovado surrounded by divine glory? Go down there to the slums. ... Don't stay away from us; live among us and give us new faith in you and in the Father. Amen."

What would Jesus say in response to such a request? Wouldn't he say that in the suffering of the cross "I did come down to live among you, and I live among you still"? Stott concludes,

We have to learn to climb the hill called Calvary, and from that vantage-ground survey all life's tragedies. The cross does not solve the problem of suffering, but it supplies the essential perspective from which to look at it... Sometimes we picture [God] lounging, perhaps dozing, in some celestial deck-chair, while the hungry millions starve to death... It is this terrible caricature of God which the cross smashes to smithereens.

www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2011/april/7041811.html

Several times in this chapter Mark refers to Jesus being crucified. Let's see what this tells us about Jesus and what he's done for us.

Crucifixion was what the crowd demanded (verses 13, 14). Urged on by the chief priests, the crowd demanded that Pilate release the rebel and murderer Barabbas and crucify Jesus. Though Jesus was clearly innocent, the guilty one was released and the innocent one was condemned and handed over to be crucified (v 15).

Crucifixion was what the soldiers did. Jesus was charged with being "King of the Jews." That is, they said he claimed to be a rival king, in competition with the king the Romans had appointed or even with the Emperor himself. Jesus certainly was King of the Jews, but he was a king who was a suffering servant. He was taking on himself the judgment, the disaster, that he saw hanging over Jerusalem. As Israel's representative, he was taking on himself the sin of the people. But the soldiers didn't see that. They just saw an opportunity to play their grim game of mockery. They dressed Jesus up like a king, with a purple robe and a crown of thorns. They beat him, mocked him and humiliated him. Then they led him out to crucify him (v 20).

A year ago, when the pandemic was starting to explode, Timothy Tennent, president of Asbury Seminary, wrote a blog post about COVID-19. He pointed out that it was during Lent that the coronavirus was spreading. Then he made this interesting observation:

One of the central symbols of Lent is the thorny crown. It reminds us of sacrifice and self-denial. It is a symbol of the price Jesus paid. The term "corona" in "coronavirus" is a word meaning "crown." It is because the virus, under extreme magnification, actually looks like a thorny crown; therefore, it is—quite literally—the thorny crown virus. The coronavirus reminds us that as Christians we always—even when there is no virus in our midst—embody the sufferings of the world. (<https://timothytennent.com/2020/03/18/the-crown-in-the-coronavirus-a-theological-reflection-on-the-covid-19-pandemic>)

We see that crucifixion is the way of discipleship. The soldiers compelled a man named Simon to carry the crossbeam for Jesus. Mark mentions that this Simon was the father of Rufus and Alexander. We don't know who those two were, but when Paul writes to the Roman church he greets a man named Rufus and his mother (Romans 16:13). Could it be the same person? Were Rufus and Alexander followers of Jesus who were known in Rome so Mark could identify their father by mentioning them? If so, then the family of a man who carried the cross of Jesus became followers of Jesus.

Jesus had said, "If you want to be my follower, deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me" (8:34). Simon didn't choose to take up the cross, but he becomes a picture of those who follow Jesus—denying ourselves, carrying the cross, going with him to the place of execution.

A woman started attending worship at a church that taught that there's a difference between the gospel—salvation by grace—and religion—salvation by moral effort. She had gone to church growing up but had never heard this distinction. All she had heard was that God accepts us only if we're good enough. She said this message she was now hearing was scary and then explained:

If I was saved by my good works then there would be a limit to what God could ask of me or put me through. I would be like a taxpayer with "rights"—I would have done my duty and now I would deserve a certain quality of life. But if I am a sinner saved by sheer grace—then there's nothing [God] cannot ask of me. (Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God* 189)

"And they crucified him" (v 24). The gospel is packed into that brief phrase. This healer and teacher and worker of miracles. The Son of David. The King of the Jews. The one who was ushering in the kingdom of God. They crucified him. And we see just how the kingdom of God comes into this world.

Crucifixion identifies Jesus with sinners. Two rebels were crucified with him. As in his life, so in his death, Jesus is with sinners and outcasts. And

some see him as a sinner himself. Those who pass by the cross distort and mock what Jesus had said about the Temple. Still, there's some truth even in the derision—he really is the King of the Jews. By his dying he brings to fulfillment what the Temple was for. He does save others because he refuses to save himself. The religious leaders say they'll believe if they see him come down from the cross. But the Roman centurion believes because he sees how Jesus dies on the cross.

Mark doesn't explain much of what he describes here. He simply tells the story. But earlier in the Gospel, Jesus had interpreted his dying. He said that he came "to give his life as a ransom for many" (10:45). At his last supper with the disciples, he called the cup of wine "my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many" (14:24). The word "many" in those verses doesn't limit who Jesus died for. "Many" is a way of expanding and making his death inclusive. As a ransom, Jesus sets us free. The blood of the covenant creates relationship with God. He invites us to receive those gifts today. He offers us freedom from sin and death. He offers us a new relationship with the living God.

Do you remember the movie *Saving Private Ryan*? Some time after it came out, I read a story by a man named Tom Allen, who was a former Army Ranger. Allen said that he'd finally seen the movie and talked about his reaction to it. He says as the movie began, he was proud watching the Rangers take Omaha Beach. Then the main story gets under way when a unit receives a mission to go deep into enemy territory to save Private Ryan. Encountering the enemy and engaging in several battles, some of the men are killed along the way.

They finally get to where Private Ryan is holed up, and they say, "Come with us. We've come to save you." But Ryan says, "I'm not going. I have to stay here because there's a big battle coming up. I'm going to stay and fight." The Rangers say, "We'll stay and fight with you."

The battle is gory and hard and almost everyone dies except Private Ryan. At the end, one of the main characters—Captain Miller, played by Tom Hanks—is sitting on the ground. He's been shot and he's dying. The battle's been won.

Private Ryan leans over him and Captain Miller whispers something to him. Everyone in the theater was crying because Tom Hanks' character was shot. Tom Allen, the Army Ranger watching the movie, says he was crying because of what Captain Miller said. Private Ryan bent down and Captain Miller said, "Earn this." Allen says he was so angry because no Ranger would ever say, "Earn this." For more than 200 years the Ranger motto has been *Sua Sponte*, "I chose this." I volunteered for this. So when Private Ryan bent down, if Captain Miller was really a Ranger, he would have said, "*Sua sponte*, I chose this. I do it of my own accord. This is free. You don't pay anything for this. I give my life for you. That's my job." Jesus on the cross doesn't say, "Earn this." He says, "*Sua sponte*. I chose this. I volunteered for this" (www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2000/april/12382.html).

Jesus doesn't say, "Look at what I suffered and how I died—now earn it, live up to it on your own." Instead, he says, "I chose it. I did it for you because I love you. I did it so you could be set free from sin and death and so you could have a new relationship with God." Jesus gives his life for us. When we receive that gift, he gives his life to us. He gives us the Holy Spirit so we can truly take up our cross and follow him every day.