



Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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March 21, 2008

Good Friday: Cross of Christ

Mark 15:37, 39

Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Isaiah 52:13-53:12

Second Lesson: John 18:1-19:42

The Cross of Christ

Maybe sometime in your life you have been driving some place and you got behind a bunch of slow moving vehicles. There was an accident up ahead or a detour and you tried to take a shortcut. You didn't know the area all that well. All of a sudden you were driving down the road and you missed the sign and you found yourself at the end of a dead end. It's kind of a frustrating, irritating event, isn't it?

Today is kind of like that in a way, isn't it? We've spent six weeks traveling with our Savior from crossroad to crossroad in that short span of time that we have been following him as he journeys to the cross and the empty tomb. But when you get here to the cross and you see everything that goes on, you are left shaking your head a little bit and wondering, "Is this a dead end?" It just doesn't seem right. The one they welcomed by saying "Hail, hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord;" the one that was hailed as a king is now condemned as a criminal. He is bitten and spit upon, mocked and ridiculed. He endures physical suffering that I don't even want to begin to imagine. It just doesn't quite look right. It maybe makes you scratch your head a little bit and ask the question, "Is it a dead end?"

This morning as we consider that and look at these words from Mark, one of the things I think we see is that for that Roman Centurion it wasn't a dead end, was it? He learned an incredible lesson from whatever he saw of Jesus that day. We don't know from Scripture exactly how long this Roman Centurion would have been with Jesus, but as concerned as Pilate was about an uprising during the Passover Festival and if he thought this might be the spark that ignited the fire, you almost wonder if that Centurion wouldn't have been there through a lot of this with a detachment of men at his command. If you watch the movie "The Passion," that's how the filmmaker depicted it. The Centurion is there when Jesus is questioned by Pilate. He is there as he hears the accusations of the people. In the movie, he is there as he goes to the cross. That well may be. We don't know that for certain. But think for a moment if that is the case, think of all the things that this man would have seen. Think of how completely out of the ordinary they would have been for a man that more than likely was accustomed to crucifying someone, a criminal. For you and me, the idea of crucifixion, we are repulsed by it. We have our stomach turned as we read about exactly what it entailed. And if you've seen the movie, it goes beyond things I think that we even begin to imagine at our bare reading of Scripture. But this Roman Centurion would have been trained over and over through his training to be a rock, to show no emotion, to carry out orders without question and without evaluation. If he rose to the rank of Centurion, he would have been good at doing that. Centurion is the man that is the head of 100 others. He

is a fairly high-ranking officer, especially in the garrison that would have been there in Jerusalem. Here is a man that is trained to show no emotion, to carry out his orders that the sight of the beating, the sight of the crown of thorns, the sound of the nails, the gasp that would have come out of Jesus' mouth as the nails were driven in; he would have been trained to have been a rock and not have any of it affect him.

Isn't it something how the Holy Spirit works? Or at least it appears how the Holy Spirit worked in this man, who would have seen things that were different, who would have heard Jesus pray "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing." You wonder how often people prayed for the Centurion and his soldiers for their forgiveness as they were being crucified. If he was there as Jesus went to the cross, he would have heard Jesus tell the women who were weeping and crying out to him, some of the few that seemed to be showing him mercy, "Don't weep for me. Weep for yourselves and weep for all of Jerusalem." That mini-sermon that Jesus would have preached there must have touched the Centurion's heart if he had been there to hear it—but to hear him cry out, "My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?" To hear him cry out, "I thirst." Then to see him at the end take that drink and then not apparently die because of what the soldiers had done, but to cry out "Father, into your hands I commit my Spirit." To hear the words "Father, come again," and then Jesus breathe his last apparently, calling his shots so to speak. His life wasn't taken that he gave his life. Then the earthquake that came and the other things that happened—the Spirit was working through these sermons that Jesus spoke in short words because the Centurion says, "Surely this man was the Son of God."

What for the Centurion would have seemed like any other day, this man who worshipped the emperor, this man who worshipped the Roman gods like Mars or Jupiter, was now left with the revelation that he had come into contact with the Son of God. It wasn't a dead end for him. The Spirit apparently turned it into a life-giving moment.

But what about for us?—as we come together today, it's not hard to see that this is a day unlike any other. It's a day of mourning. The black on the cross, the black on the paraments, the starkness of the front of the church all demands that we notice that this is a day unlike any other. We come together in mourning to mourn the death of Jesus. It's in a sense like coming to a funeral. However, it's different, isn't it? As you and I worship our God today and we reflect on his death, it's unlike any other funeral we've ever been to because there is this gnawing in the back of our minds that we caused this death. It was our sins that drove the hammer just as certainly as the Roman soldiers did. It was our sins that caused the thorns to pierce into his forehead. It was our sins that caused him to cry out, "My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?" We know that we should be the ones crying out because we have been forsaken by God. We know we should be the ones that endured the agony and the eternity that is separation from God. We know that this dead end should have been our dead end.

But there is also this sense of joy in our hearts in the midst of our mourning because we know that although we contributed to his death, we receive every single blessing of his death. That's why we call it "Good Friday." We know that he died because he did not want to see us die eternally separated from him. We know when we say "Is it a dead

end?”—we know it was dead. We know he was dead. He didn't fake his death. He didn't just go into a coma and then come back to life. We know that God's Son died. It's like the hymn writer said "Oh sorrow dread, God's Son is dead." God died. But what leads us to question "Is this a dead end" is that we know it's not the end. There still is that joy there for us. We see the Centurion gaze at Christ and we know that his death isn't the end. We know that he rose again, and we know what that means for us. Paul put it this way when he wrote to the Romans, "Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death. We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we die with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus." (See Romans 6:3-11.)

Christ is alive. It wasn't the end and it means for us we too shall live eternally. We remind ourselves of this truth with every prayer we use in church that ends with the phrase "who lives and reigns" when we speak of Jesus. "Who lives and reigns," he didn't remain dead. He rose again.

So, as we gather together today, the only thing that came to a dead end at Calvary, it wasn't Christ, it wasn't you and me; it was our fear of eternal death. Eternal death itself has been taken out of the picture for you and for me. The Spirit has given us the gift of faith and we are forgiven.

With the Centurion we can say "Surely this man was the Son of God." And we know everything that means for us.