

Bellaire Community United Methodist Church

March 20, 2016

## **“The Crucifixion”**

*“24 Hours That Changed the World” part 6*

Mark 15:22-41

(Hymn, then Intro Video)

Good morning. It's a beautiful day to be together in God's house. Take a moment and look around you. Make eye contact with someone. I want you to realize something: you are not alone this morning. Whether you are struggling or rejoicing, you are surrounded by people who care about you and will support you and pray for you. There is a reason that the word “Community” is part of our name. We believe God has created us for each other, and as we worship Jesus Christ together, we are made stronger.

The past few weeks we have been talking about the Easter story, based on Adam Hamilton's book, “The 24 Hours that Changed the World.” I admit, these have been difficult topics to cover. Betrayal, abandonment, torture, abuse, death...these are not comfortable thoughts. So remember today, you are not alone. God is here with you, and we are here with you. Would you pray with me?

Almighty God, Ruler of heaven and earth, You sent Your very own Son to be our Savior, to be God in the flesh. We worship you and adore you. We invite your Holy Spirit into our hearts right now. We know you have something important to tell us today, and we are ready to receive your grace. Move among us this morning, God. We need you. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Two years ago I was an intern for the Indian River United Methodist Church, not too far north of here. While I was there, I visited the Roman Catholic Church, “The Cross in the Woods Shrine.” If you've never been to see it, put it on

your bucket list. It is really amazing. It's the largest crucifix in the world. The cross is made from a single redwood tree, 55 feet tall, with a bronze figure of Jesus over thirty feet tall hanging on it. The sculptor visualized Jesus seconds before he died – at peace and ready to give up his spirit.

The crucifix is enormous. They don't even have one inside the sanctuary, they just have a wall of glass so you can look outside and take in the view. It's amazing; it's inspirational. And, as beautiful as it is, it is not historically accurate.

Sometimes we have a "polished" view of the cross. We might hang crucifixes on our walls and buy crosses as jewelry. We might have pictures of Jesus in our homes, like the one I had growing up – a beautiful wood carving from Germany, of Jesus with a crown of thorns. It's not that the artwork is wrong, it just feels sanitized to me. Distant. I think by surrounding ourselves with so many "pretty" images, we lose the impact of what the cross truly means.

The truth is, the cross was an instrument of torture and death. I don't mean to be morbid, but for us to understand the meaning of the cross, we have to realize the true purpose of this device. It makes a huge difference in our faith. Every one of us has to answer this question: "What does it mean to me that the Savior, Jesus Christ, died on a cross?"

The cross was a brutal way for the Roman authorities to prove who was in control. Like all forms of capital punishment, crucifixion was supposed to be a deterrent. The cross said, "This is what will happen to anyone who defies Rome." Signs proclaiming the crimes of the condemned were posted on the top of their crosses. People often hung for days before they died, weak from blood loss, barely able to breathe. Because of the way they were stretched out, they could not exhale without pushing up against the nails holding them to the cross.

Archaeology has given us some insight into how the cross worked. In fact, the cross was not as tall as we might think. Watch this video as Adam Hamilton explains.

(VIDEO)

It was a terrible, painful death, and there is probably much more we could say about it. But today I am not so focused on the physical details as I am the spiritual details. What does it mean that Jesus died on the cross? To begin to understand that, we have to talk about the Trinity. You may have heard of it. The doctrine of the Trinity is this: We believe in one God, who is revealed in three persons. One substance, three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. As an analogy, think of three gold coins. The substance, gold, is the same in all three, yet there are three coins. Honestly, this is a mystery to us, but it is something the church has affirmed for thousands of years. And even if we don't completely understand it, we have to acknowledge the Trinity to make sense of Jesus' crucifixion.

The Trinity is crucial because of what it tells us about Christ. Basically, there are two paradoxical statements we believe: Jesus, a part of the Trinity, was fully God. Jesus also was fully man. Fully divine and fully human at the same time.

Those concepts are not easy to grasp, and I don't intend to explain them here today. I struggle with the idea, myself. On the one hand, it was critical that Jesus was fully human. This means that his death was real. His suffering was real. Like all humans, Jesus was mortal, in the sense that he breathed, he ate, he slept, he bled, and he died. I get that. But the fact that Jesus Christ is God means that

Jesus is eternal. He is divine. Christianity, then, is the only religion in the world that says God died.

How can we make sense of that? It begins with the idea of sacrificial atonement. Let me ask you, have you ever wronged someone? Maybe you had to apologize for hurting them. Did you ever give them flowers or some other gift? Then you know what a sacrificial offering is. Sacrificial offerings show sorrow and repentance. We can be forgiven without them, but, as Hamilton says in his book, “there are moments when the giving of a token to express one’s regret makes a difference.”

God’s people were required to give lots of sacrifices. But there was one particular sacrifice that happened on the highest holiday, Yom Kippur. Once a year, the high priest, after a series of purification rites, would enter a special room in the temple called the Holy of Holies, an inner chamber hidden behind a curtain, and sacrifice a lamb or goat to remove the people’s sin. The people would indicate their remorse and the priest would intercede for them. After that sacrifice, the priest would lay his hands on a second goat, known as the scapegoat, symbolically placing the sins of the nation on this animal, and then they would drive the goat out into the wilderness to die. It was never seen again – the sins were carried away and were no more.

The trouble is, this system was only temporary. The sacrifices had to be repeated again and again. Goats and lambs aren’t perfect. People aren’t perfect. So this offering only temporarily covered the people. It wasn’t a permanent solution to the problem of sin.

So what does sacrificing have to do with Jesus? The Bible calls Jesus the Lamb of God. Jesus lived a perfect, sinless life, so he alone could be the perfect

sacrifice, the only one who could take the sins of the world away, permanently. And on Good Friday, he was taken outside the city to die, just like the scapegoat. But because he was God, he also could act as the priest and intercede for us. He could freely offer himself to atone for us.

I want us to focus for a moment on one of the statements Jesus made from the cross. “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabbachthani?” “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). Some people say at this moment that God the Father abandoned Jesus the Son. I disagree. For one, the doctrine of the Trinity teaches us that Jesus is always in relationship with the Father, and that Jesus is God. So God could not abandon himself, so to speak. But here’s what the people mocking Jesus forgot. Those words are the beginning of Psalm 22. Modern scholars have called it the psalm of the crucifixion. Read it for yourself, and you will be amazed how closely it reflects the emotional and physical situation that Jesus was in. Just listen to verse 24:

“For he did not despise or abhor  
the affliction of the afflicted;  
he did not hide his face from me,  
but heard when I cried to him.” (Psalm 22:24)

Jesus was crying out to the Father in faith while hanging for six hours on a torturous cross. I can think of a lots of things I say when I am in pain...quoting scripture really is not one of them.

So we have this picture of Jesus, dying, at eye level with his mockers, his killers, even his family. And we understand that somehow, God is interceding for his creation, is sacrificing himself for our salvation, for our freedom.

Did you ever think about the temptation Jesus faced to come down off the cross? The Jews mocked him, they said they would believe in him if he just came down. Do you ever wonder why he didn't? If Jesus had come down, we would not have been saved. Jesus was obedient to the Father's plan, right to the very end. He was the perfect Lamb of God.

Jesus willingly chose the cross. He chose the moment he died. Most people would pass out, hanging on the cross for days before dying. Jesus chose his moment, he uttered the words, "It is finished." He died with dignity, although they did everything they could to try and strip it away.

So what does this mean for you and me? Well, look at what the scripture says. The curtain in the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. (Mark 15:38) Why? Because God was breaking out. God would no longer be hidden from his people. The sacrifices were done. The price was paid, and it was paid by God, not people. That's why the curtain was torn from the top first.

This means that a relationship with God is possible for everyone. We have the ability at any moment to accept what Jesus has done for us and enter into a life-giving relationship with God. A loving relationship.

But there is more. You see, when I look at the cross, I am overwhelmed that God loved me so much that he would die for me. The cross proves that God loves me, that I am not forgotten. Every sin of mine is forgiven. And because Jesus is part of the Trinity, he is in heaven constantly interceding for me before the Father. There is nothing now that can separate me from God.

This truth can be yours as well. All it takes is a word from your heart that says, "Jesus, I believe in you. I trust you. I accept what you did to forgive me, and my life is yours. Teach me to follow you."

The cross tells me that my life is worth saving. Your life is worth saving. I want my response to be gratitude. I want to live my life showing Jesus how thankful I am. Honestly, I want him to be proud of me. Because Jesus died for me, I have purpose: to glorify him with my life. I belong to the one who redeemed me with his blood.

So what does the cross mean to you? Is it just another story? A pretty piece of artwork? Or do you realize that God has gone to extraordinary lengths to save you? What will your response be? I pray that you answer his invitation. Show him how your life was worth saving. Serve him out of love, serve him out of gratitude. Tell others about this saving grace.

I invite you to take a moment and meditate on this slide as we enter into a time of prayer. (“I asked Jesus how much he loved me.” “This much,” he said, and he stretched out his arms and died.)

*Next week's schedule:*

- Thursday – Laundromat Outreach: 2:00-6:00 PM (show up anytime, stay as long as you wish)
- Thursday – Communion Service, 7:00 PM at BCUMC
- Friday – Community Good Friday Service at St. Luke's, 7:00 PM
- Easter Sunday – Early Service, 9:30 AM
- Easter Sunday – Late Service, 11:00 AM
- Breakfast – 10:30-11:30 AM (come early or stay late, depending which service you attend)

### Memory verse

Psalm 22:24 “He did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him.”

### Reflection questions

1. Think about someone you love deeply. What would you do for them?
2. Is there any cause that you could imagine dying for? What?
3. Read Psalm 22. Why do you think Jesus quoted this passage on the cross?
4. What would it have been like to stand near Jesus at the cross and look him in the eye? What do you think he would have said to you?
5. The Christian Church affirms that Jesus was God, part of the Trinity. So what does it mean to you that God died?
6. We also affirm that Jesus was fully human. He loved you enough to die for you. How does that make you feel about Jesus?