

Day 6: The Cross

Mark 15:21-32

We are on day 6 of Christ's Passion Week. Last Sunday, which was day 5, was Christ's moments in Gethsemane. His prayers, his struggles, and his betrayal by Judas and the kiss of death...and our text today brings us to his crucifixion and death. As I worked through this text I felt that the best way for us to grasp all that Mark tells us would be to work through the sequence of events.

We'll begin with Simon, the man who helps Jesus carry the cross.

The gospels tell us that he was from Cyrene, and he's the father of Alexander and Rufus – and those two names don't really mean much for US but they did for the gospel hearers then. Mark puts their names in here to give reference to his listeners. They would have heard that and said, "Rufus' dad!?! That's the guy who helped Jesus? I like that guy!" And this is a detail that only Mark gives us – but Paul mentions Rufus in **Rom 16:13** and so the belief is that Rufus and Alexander were disciples of Christ and known to the readers in Rome. Men who were from the coastal city of Cyrene off of Northern Africa...which in **Acts 2:10** tells us has a large Jewish colony.

Being a good Jewish man that he is, Simon is most likely coming through the city for Passover, and falls upon the crowds, the taunts, the spectacle of a parade that it had become and unfortunately being at the wrong place at the wrong time, he gets pulled into this moment to carry this 100lb crossbeam from the city gate to the Place of the Skull: Golgotha.

Now let's pause here.

Custom had it that you did NOT have someone else carry that crossbeam – but one has to have the strength and stamina to carry that load to begin with. And remember, at this point Christ has been beaten to near death and excruciating pain. The original sentence given by Pilot was for him to be flogged and beaten – and not just with a rod and staff but his body so ripped open that severe blood-loss affected every ounce of strength he had. It's no wonder Jesus was too weak to carry this beam through the city streets, out the city gate, and up to Golgotha. The flogging he received removed all strength, stamina, and ability to continue on with this sentence – and Pilot simply wanted this done. Do not drag this on, do not allow the crowd to become bigger...noiser...and more ruthless.

So with the inability to take another step while carrying this heavy wooden beam...he collapses. So the Roman guards seize a passerby and forces HIM to carry the load. This is not a long journey – roughly 650 yards or so – but carrying a beam that weighed that much and going uphill...even for Simon who hadn't been beaten, this would have been a challenge.

Moving from the gates, and up the hill, Simon...carrying the cross, and Jesus, barely moving...with the crowds and the Roman soldiers leading and following and taunting, they come upon Golgotha.

Golgotha was a round and rocky “knoll” or small hill – most of the time you wouldn't even consider it a hill it's more of a mound than anything else but this knoll vaguely looked like the shape of a human skull and it is this place that the Roman soldiers used for crucifixion. But it was more than a knoll or small hill...it was a place of suffering. It was a place of torment and torture – a place of execution.

Once they get to this knoll, this mound, and before they torture Christ even more, he is offered wine and myrrh. A concoction drink that has anesthetic properties. While this drink would NOT take all the pain away...it would help some. But Christ doesn't take it. Feeling the full weight of pain and death – all of his senses will remain awake. And I cannot imagine the pain. The pain from the flogging was bad enough...but the finality of the death sentence was something quite different.

To humiliate this man even more, and by tradition, they strip him of nearly all his clothes and those personal belongings became property of those carrying out the execution.

Death by crucifixion was one of the cruelest forms of capital punishment ever given. And Mark is restrained on his words of all that happened and that's because his readers knew all about this torture because this crucifixion of Christ was nothing new to them. They knew what would happen in the details that aren't said. They would know that Jesus was laid down on that very beam he tried to carry. They know that he would have had his hands and arms outstretched on that beam and a jagged metal 5-7 inch spikes would be driven into his wrists – about an inch below the palms. A place and location that would not only hold the weight of the victim but is beyond painful as well (*“hands” and “wrists” and that general area of the body all use the same form of word*).

I don't have to explain to you how painful this would have been – our imaginations can do that for us.

Once nailed to that cross beam he would have been lifted up and attached to the vertical beam, which was already set in the ground...and now his feet would be held together and another 7 inch jagged and pointy nail would be driven through them and secured to that bottom vertical beam. It is here that nothing else holds Christ to the cross but nails and flesh. And written above and nailed to the cross as well is a sign that reads, "King of the Jews" – a custom of nailing the name and charges above the condemned.

We read in verse 24 that as Christ is hanging on the cross his executioners divide up his things and cast lots for them. Who gets his sandals, his belt, the outer bloody garment...things they can sell or keep... Things that may or may not be of any value but since he won't need them anymore, and they definitely will not be given to the family, they go to the executioners themselves.

All the while fulfilling **Psalm 22:18** – "*They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment.*"

But Christ isn't alone up on the hill and cross. Mark writes in verse 27 that next to him are two rebels – one on his right and one on his left. The Greek word used for these men is *lestes*. NT Wright points out that these men weren't highway robbers or people who used violence...but were revolutionaries. Men who created havoc in the system, disrupted the already tippy un-balanced way of life. Crucifixion...was the punishment for such people.

And now, beaten and torn to shreds, stripped nearly naked and nailed to a cross, the vocal abuse picks up. There was a crowd of people that surrounded this death-knoll and their mocking insults now began to *lift up* to Jesus. Shaking their heads at him, taunting him, using his own words that should they destroy this temple that in 3 days he would raise it up again (**John 2:19**)? "*Jesus, you have saved others by your miracles and your work...do it for yourself now! Save yourself! Come down from that cross and show us how great you are...THEN we will believe!*"

All of these people surrounding Christ...and where is his support? Where is his love? Where are the very people he fought with and for? Why did nobody push through the crowd to save him? Why did nobody make a case for him during this time of need. Pilate

comes some-what close. We see in verse **14 (Mark 15:14)** that he asks the crowd for the charges and all he gets is “crucify him” shouted back at him...so he finds no charges against Jesus but he doesn’t want chaos in the streets – so he gives them what they want. We get the centurion who was near and comes to the reality of Christ’s sonship - but only after his death (**38-39**) and then Mary and some other women who watched from a distance (**40-41**) but of all those other people – we get nothing. Nothing but anger, hatred, mockery, indifference, and even joy. We get from the other Gospel writers that one of the *lestes*, the bandits, next to him eventually comes around...and really even those that wanted to – couldn’t. What good can Mary and the other people who are watching so far away, do? What can this man on the cross next to him do for Christ?

The abandonment felt the night before, in the garden of Gethsemane, has carried over into this day of pain and death.

We have a word, that we use, “excruciating”. It an adjective and it means “extremely painful, causing intense suffering; unbearable distress; or torture.” And it’s a word that we first have recorded in the history books back in 1655...but the word comes from, or its origin, comes from the actions taken upon the cross. It came from the pain of being crucified and all that goes with it. The torment, the pain, the suffering, the torture, the abuse. Think about that for a second. The pain and abuse was so horrific that there wasn’t even a word to describe it...t so they had to make up with a new one.

The cross has become an enigma of sorts – something that is puzzling and difficult for us. And I say that because on the one hand we see it as an implementation of excruciatingly painful death and yet on the other we see it as hope. How something so horrific could be so full of hope is a puzzling mystery...and yet every ounce of it makes absolute sense. Jesus told the crowd and his disciples that “whoever wants to save their life will lose it” (**Mark 8:35**) and that is exactly what Christ is doing here...because to lose your life for the sake of what God is doing actually means that your life is saved. And while Christ is unable to save his life in this moment – what he actually is doing is living out his Servant heart and saving the lives of those very people that are unable to help him.

So how can this implementation of death become the displayer of grace?

First off, the cross becomes this clear reminder that all of this *had* to happen – and so the cross becomes the fulfillment of not only prophecy but promise. We have **Isaiah 53:3** and **7; Psalm 34:20; Zechariah 12:10** – prophecies given so long ago that come to

fruition upon the cross – telling us of this very moment. This cross, this pain, this torturous death becomes the centerpiece of God’s plan of redemption for you. Peter writes that Christ was foreknown before the foundation the world and that he appeared as an unblemished and spotless lamb...and had his blood shed...for you. (**1 Peter 1:19-20**)

Secondly, the cross becomes grace as the death becomes the payment of life. A death in payment for the forgiveness of sins. Again, coming back to prophecy, **Isaiah 53:5-6, 8** and **12** state

- He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. By oppression and judgment he was taken away. Yet he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was punished. Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors

But not only prophecy but we see it fulfilled throughout other texts during Jesus’ time, as well as beyond. **John 1:29** has John seeing Jesus walking and making this statement that “*here comes the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*” Luke writes in **Acts 10:43** that Christ is the very one all the prophets testified about and that anyone who believes in Him will have their sins forgiven through HIS name. **Acts 13:38-39** as well as **1 Corinthians 15:3-4; Ephes 1:7; 1 Peter 2:24** and **Revelation 1:5**...declare that without the cross, without the death, without the horrific and excruciating means by which Christ dies...there is no forgiveness.

The cross becomes our understanding of the physical and mental pain it cost for *our* lives...and yet the cross becomes a very real struggle for many people. The resurrection is easier to understand because we know Christ is fully God and that it is by his power that he overcomes death, and even dying itself is easy for most people to get to... and see through... because dying is dying...that’s something that will happen to all humans...but the pain endured before that? – that’s much harder. I avoided a lot of the details of what this would have looked like (from a historical, medical, and physical standpoint) and I avoided it for a reason: because it is painful. That term “excruciating” doesn’t even begin to describe the suffering...but that suffering was real. But we cannot avoid Christ’s suffering...it’s a packaged deal. It’s a packaged deal that Christ knew was his fate...and

maybe that there is part of the difficulty *we* have with the crucifixion. But let us not dismiss the atrociousness of the floggings, the carrying of the cross beam, the ripping of the flesh from the back and the massive nails driven into the wrists and feet – nor the verbal abuse and agonizing abandonment – none of it, let us not avoid it ... because it is in that uncomfortable time and suffering that we truly begin to understand not only what Christ took upon, willingly, but as well we begin to fully comprehend the VALUE God has on *your* life. He took upon all of that... for us. That...should be your death, my death...our suffering...our punishment – but it's not anymore.

To get to the joyful and bright resurrection of Easter, we have to go through the somber and darkened death of Good Friday...but in order to get to the darkened death we also have to experience the painful and bloody cross. All of which was done...for you.