

Easter Day Sermon
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After journeying through the events of holy week, this Easter day is an especially happy day. Because if we allow ourselves to truly and deeply enter into the story of Christ, much of what we commemorate during Holy Week, the week before Easter, is incredibly tragic. On Palm Sunday we welcomed Christ into Jerusalem with the crowds shouting “Hosanna! Save us!” only to betray Christ and yell out “crucify him!” at his trial. On Maundy Thursday we shared not only a delicious dinner, but the holy bread and wine of the Eucharist when we sat at supper with Christ and the disciples, only to learn that Jesus had been betrayed by one of his own. On Good Friday we walked the way of the cross with Christ, from his condemnation by Pontius Pilate, his journey to the cross, and his death by crucifixion. And last night at the Great Vigil of Easter, we heard the entire story of salvation history, from the beginning of creation to the culmination of God’s plan to rescue humanity through his death on the cross. Of all the days of Holy Week, the most heart-breaking day is likely Good Friday, when we retell the story of Christ being unjustly condemned to death by religious and political authorities—of Christ being beaten and mocked and humiliated, and then nailed to the hard wood of the cross.

Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, at the time of his death, had been abandoned by those closest to him, just as he had predicted. Judas had betrayed him into the hands of temple authorities. In spite of his insisting he would remain with Jesus, Peter denies Christ three times after Jesus is arrested. The crowds that had joyfully welcomed Christ into Jerusalem pleading with him to save them turned on him, and demanded his death at his trial in front of Pontius Pilate. Though Christ had taught his followers that all of these things would occur before his death, that doesn’t do much to lessen the shock when we hear of how these events actually played out. And the story becomes especially tragic when we think upon the way of the cross—when we consider the suffering that Christ went through to carry out God’s plan for salvation.

After Christ is condemned to death, he is abused and humiliated. He is beaten by the soldiers, mocked by bystanders, and a crown of thorns is pressed into his head while onlookers sarcastically shout “Hail, King of the Jews!” Most people who were condemned to death by crucifixion were charged with crimes against the empire—for inciting revolution against the authorities. The goal of Roman authorities when crucifying someone was not just to kill someone, but to humiliate them—to encourage onlookers to mock and spit upon the crucified person, to strip away any last bit of respect that person may have, to deny them even the dignity of having clothing to cover themselves. And then this person, beaten, mocked, and humiliated, would be forced to suffer through a painful death on the cross, which could take hours or even days. By doing these things the Romans were able to successfully wipe the crucified person out of existence and memory. By treating the crucified person as sub-human their followers would generally abandon them completely, and thus any threat to the order of the Roman empire would be extinguished.

And it turns out that this strategy was very effective for the Romans. Though thousands upon thousands were likely killed by crucifixion in the Roman empire, there is no evidence of a single name of someone who died by crucifixion being recorded, no semblance of the identities of any of the people who were killed in this way—with the exception of one person—God the Son incarnate come to earth in human form to achieve salvation for all—Christ Jesus. Though thousands who were crucified were completely forgotten, Christ was not forgotten. Though thousands who were crucified were abandoned by their followers forever, Christ’s disciples continued to carry out the mission Christ had given to them—to spread the Good News of the Gospel throughout the world.

But why is this? Why is it that only one man, out of the thousands who were crucified by the Romans, continued to have devoted followers willing to risk their own lives to further the work they had been called to accomplish? It is because of the event which we celebrate today—this Easter Sunday.

Though on Good Friday Christ had been beaten, humiliated, and abandoned before his death on the cross, his death was not the end. Just as Christ had taught his disciples, Christ did not remain dead. On the third day Mary Magdalene came to the tomb to properly prepare Christ's body for burial, as they had hurriedly laid him in the tomb because he died on the Sabbath day of the Jews. Yet when Mary arrives at the tomb, she notices that the heavy stone which blocked the entrance has been moved. She notifies Peter and the beloved disciples, who run to investigate, only to find the tomb empty, with only bandages laying around.

It was only then that Peter, who had abandoned Christ before his death, truly began to believe what Christ had taught—that he would rise from the dead. Yet Mary, fearing that an enemy of Jesus had removed the body to prevent a proper burial, began to weep. It is then that she encounters a man standing behind her, whom she thinks is the gardener. And she pleads with him to lead her to Christ's body. By now Christ was in his resurrected body, so that even those who knew and loved him would not immediately recognize who he was. But when Jesus shouts her name, "Mary!" she finally realizes who she is speaking to and she runs to tell the disciples that the risen Christ has appeared to her and told her he would be ascending into heaven.

The risen Christ would go on to appear to his other disciples as well, who, even though they had been skeptical of Christ's promise of resurrection, came to believe after meeting the risen Christ face-to-face. And so Christ's followers, though they had witnessed his abuse and humiliation, though they had witnessed his torturous death on the cross, though they had abandoned hope in Christ Jesus, came to truly believe—so much so that even though they had abandoned Christ before his death, their faith became so strong that they were willing to die in order to continue to spread the Good News of Christ. And in fact all but one of Jesus' twelve apostles were martyred because of their work spreading the Gospel.

It is because of these miraculous events that we are here today—that Christ alone, of all who were crucified by the Romans, was not only remembered, but was followed so devoutly even by those who had abandoned him, that his message was spread to the ends of the earth. It is because of the testimonies of those closest to him, of Mary Magdalene and the other disciples, that we are gathered to celebrate Christ's glorious resurrection, and are assured that God's promise of salvation and eternal life has been fulfilled, not only through Christ's death, but by his rising to life again. It is because of these events that we are assured that just as Christ fulfilled his promise to rise from the dead, so he will also fulfill his promise to come again to this earth to usher in the Kingdom of God. And it is because of these events that even after we hear of the pain and heartache of Holy Week, we can rejoice and be glad this Easter day. Just as his disciples did so long ago, let us take heart at the news of Christ's rising to life again, renewing our faith and re-committing ourselves to spreading the Good News of Christ throughout our community and the world—remembering always that Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again. Amen.