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“History Revealed”

Part III of the Sermon Series “Lift High the Cross”

Mark 15:1-15

Rev. Elizabeth N.H. Link

Mark 15:1-15. As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate. ²Pilate asked him, ‘Are you the King of the Jews?’ He answered him, ‘You say so.’ ³Then the chief priests accused him of many things. ⁴Pilate asked him again, ‘Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you.’ ⁵But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed.

⁶ Now at the festival he used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked. ⁷Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection. ⁸So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom. ⁹Then he answered them, ‘Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?’ ¹⁰For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over. ¹¹But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. ¹²Pilate spoke to them again, ‘Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?’ ¹³They shouted back, ‘Crucify him!’ ¹⁴Pilate asked them, ‘Why, what evil has he done?’ But they shouted all the more, ‘Crucify him!’ ¹⁵So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

As most of you are aware, George is in balmy Israel this week. I traveled there a number of years ago for a May-term class in seminary. What struck me on my visit was the sheer volume of



people from all over the world who flocked there to see for themselves religious sites and relics. It was incredible to notice all the nationalities and languages represented, to see stone thresholds and walkways worn down by simple foot traffic across millennia. But one of the strangest experiences for me was visiting Calvary, or Golgotha—the place of the skull—the rise of rock on which Jesus and two other convicted criminals were crucified.

Today, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher sits on top of the site. And travelers like you and me wait in line with our fanny packs and bottles of water or Diet Coke to place a hand on the spot where Jesus’ cross supposedly stood. It’s a strange dichotomy: tourists with backpacks in gilded rooms waiting for a turn to touch an ancient place of humiliation and execution.

Accounts of Jesus’ crucifixion are largely found in the Gospels themselves, but there are also non-biblical accounts of the story. Ancient historians from the era tell it as history, and they corroborate a few details from the New Testament, like first century Jewish historian Josephus, who wrote in 93CE, speaking of Jesus:

He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. He was the Christ. And when, upon the accusation of the principal men among us, Pilate had condemned him to a cross, those who had first come to love him did not cease. He appeared to them spending a third day restored to life, for the prophets of God had foretold these things and a thousand other marvels about him. And the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared.ⁱ

Another, Roman historian of the time, Cornelius Tacitus, was disdainful toward Christians, and yet he wrote in *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, “Christus, the founder of the [followers], was put to death by Pontius Pilate, procurator of Judea in the reign of Tiberius.”ⁱⁱ

For these men, like everyone else at first, Jesus’ death held no religious meaning. For Jesus’ first followers, the cross was a state instrument of torture and death. Imagine if the central symbol of our faith nowadays were not a cross but an electric chair, or a lethal injection syringe, or a lynching tree.

Historians tell us that it was not uncommon for the road to Jerusalem to be lined with crosses in Jesus’ day, each of them bearing a body. People had no choice but to pass by those grim instruments of capital punishment on a regular basis. Imagine what life was like for these people, living under the shadow of the cross, under the constant threat and terror. That is, of course, exactly what they were meant to do – to terrorize and intimidate. They were, as Debie Thomas describes it “the Roman Empire’s illustrated sermons, and the message of those sermons was crystal clear: ‘You can have your religion. You can worship whatever you want. But don’t forget, even for a minute, who really holds sway over your life. Go to your temple if it suits you, call on your God if it makes you feel good, but never, ever mess with the power structures that actually control your world. Don’t even think about resisting. If you do, we’ll hang you up [on a cross], too.’”ⁱⁱⁱ



The disciples were counting on Jesus to change all of that. Their great hope was that Jesus would lead them in a military revolution and overthrow the oppressive empire. He was supposed to pull down the crosses, not die on one of them.

Since that Friday we now call “Good,” Christians have been trying to make sense of the cross. Faithful and doubtful people alike have been wrestling with what it means. That’s what we’re doing here, right? We are asking whether the theories and equations Christians have devised actually hold up when we compare them with what we know of a loving and generous and gracious God.

Marcus Borg writes that “if we ask the historical question, ‘Why was [Jesus] killed?’ the historical answer is because he was a social prophet and movement initiator, a passionate advocate of God’s justice, and radical critic of the dominating system who had attracted a following. If Jesus had been only a mystic, a healer, and a wisdom teacher, he almost certainly would not have been executed.”^{iv} In other words, Jesus’ death was the consequence of what he was doing, but not his purpose. Jesus was a healer, teacher, prophet, Messiah, and he courageously kept doing what he was doing even though he knew it could have fatal consequences.

Whether we agree with Borg on this, and I tend to, the cross was an historical event, and yet it isn’t *only* an historical event. It isn’t only about one moment in history. As Reinhold Niebuhr describes it, the cross symbolizes both an historic *and* a cosmic truth.

Martin Luther made famous the phrase *Crux probat omnia*, “The cross proves everything.” That line may sound like an overstatement or Christian triumphalism, but many great truths become obvious and even overwhelming in light of the cross.

In the cross, Jesus takes away the sin of the world by exposing what is the real sin of the world (violence, prejudice, hate, not our worldly purity codes and denominational judgment), by refusing the pattern of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth (Matthew 5:38-39), but instead “returning their curses with blessings” (Luke 6:27), and commanding us to do the same.

As Richard Rohr explains, in the cross, Jesus isn’t working some magic in the sky that saves the world from sin and death—but, rather, Jesus is working some magic in history that redefines its direction forever. “Jesus is not changing his Father’s mind about us; he is changing our mind about what is real and what is not.”^v

Rohr goes on to share that when he was a boy, his family had one of those familiar statuettes of the three monkeys, and his mother told him that it meant, “See no evil, hear no evil, and speak no evil,” with each monkey covering the appropriate body part. And, as a child, he thought it was his job to try and be just like that—see no evil, hear no evil, and speak no evil.

But indeed, this is not God’s plan for overcoming evil. Jesus did not come to offer merely willpower and upstanding moral education. In Jesus Christ, God came with eyes wide open, ears



wide open, and the conviction to speak against evil. The cross is a trustworthy disclosure of the evil of domination systems, and the revelation God's great love for us.

Consider the image from Numbers (21:8-9) of Moses and the bronze serpent in the desert that became the symbol for doctors and healers the world over. God tells Moses to place a bronze serpent up on a pole, then when anyone who has been bitten by a poisonous serpent looks on it, they will be healed. The very thing that was killing them became the very thing that would heal them.

Think of the cross like those medicines that give you just enough of the disease so you can develop a resistance and be healed from it. The cross dramatically reveals the problem of ignorant killing, to inoculate us against doing the same thing.^{vi} The cross is not an image of divine transaction, but of human transformation—a transformation the world so desperately needs.

The cross is very clearly saying that evil is to be opposed. And in the same breath, we must realize how overwhelming and pervasive that evil is.

When truly considered, the cross is revealing our own complicity and cooperation with evil.

The mystery of the cross teaches us how to stand against hate without becoming hate, how to oppose evil without becoming evil. We are pulled in two directions—toward God's goodness and also toward the evils that tempt us. We hang in between, our very lives a paradox.^{vii} And the cross is holding the middle.

The longer I practice my faith, the more I ponder this image of two directions—the more I feel pulled in the direction of the cruciform—the cross-shaped, the cross-centered. Which is to say, I am drawn to a God who suffers before he conquers, a bruised God who accompanies as well as saves. I am increasingly reliant on the painful mystery and paradox of the cross and the empty tomb: it is in dying that we will live. It is in surrendering that we might triumph. It is in the shape of a lonely, jagged cross that we'll find the salvation of intimacy with God.

In many ways, the cross holds within it our entire human story—all of the hope, tragedy, love, and joy that shapes us. It reveals to us the horrors of injustice, but it also shows us the deepest love the world has ever seen. To live a cruciform life is to be willing to encounter the world's pain. It means recognizing Christ crucified in every suffering person we meet. It means accepting that we *will* die; that God died.

Jesus willingly took the conviction of the regime. He didn't fight against Pontius Pilate. He didn't contradict the crowd when they called for Barabbas. He didn't scold his disciples when they fled. Instead, he took an instrument of torture and turned it into a vehicle for love and welcome for all people, everywhere. Jesus loved—and he loved and he loved and he loved—all the way to the cross, all the way to the tomb.



In the cross, we have hope. Despite our brokenness, despite our history—within our history—the cross of Jesus gives us hope. It shows us that love never ends. It shows us that love goes beyond death. It shows us the truth and glory of resurrection, and the resurrection life we are called to live.

ⁱ Flavius Josephus: *Antiquities of the Jews*, [Book 18, Chapter 3, 3](#).

ⁱⁱ Cornelius Tacitus: *Annals of Imperial Rome*, <https://www.history.com/news/was-jesus-real-historical-evidence>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Debie Thomas, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/3362-cruciform>

^{iv} Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith*, Toronto: HarperCollins e-book, 2003, p116.

^v Richard Rohr, “The Mystery of the Cross,” Spirit Catholic Community: <http://spiritofstephens.org/resources/prayers-and-theme-readings/1380-the-mystery-of-the-cross-richard-rohr-ch-9-things-hidden-scripture-as-spirituality>

^{vi} *Ibid.*

^{vii} *Ibid.*

