

April 13, 2014 (Palm/Passion Sunday)

TEXT: Luke 23:1-5, 13-56

TITLE: Re-Telling the Story

In the old days, preachers only had one story to preach – telling over and over again how Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died on the cross to redeem a sinful world. No matter where their sermon began, it ended up at the cross – describing the sufferings of this man of Nazareth, the sacrifice of the Lamb of God. The Lectionary we now use guides preachers toward passages throughout the rest of the bible, which is good; but it tends to restrict the story of the passion of Christ to one week in the entire year. And if you don't attend a Maundy Thursday or Good Friday service, you might never hear about the crucifixion of Christ at all.

But the story of Jesus' death on the cross deserves to be heard frequently. We need to remember its details – the trial before Pilate, the angry crowds shouting "Crucify him," the sky growing dark as the innocent Savior died on a cross. We not only need to remember the details, we need to put ourselves in the midst of this story – to imagine what Jesus' disciples' thought, what Jesus' mother felt, what Jesus himself endured for us. In that day and age before cameras and photographs, the words describing the crucifixion – told over and over again – pulled in all who heard this story so that Jesus' story became part of their story. That way, Jesus' sufferings and death and then his resurrection became their good news as they traveled life's journey that included sufferings and death and the heavenly promise of resurrection.

The slaves who sang the spirituals were themselves no strangers to suffering. They saw many acts of cruelty and endured a racist national story that tried to deny their humanity – a story that continued through Reconstruction and Jim Crow and sadly continues for many people today. That's why some stories from the African American tradition are told over and over again – so people remember Medgar Evers, Emmett Till, Martin Luther King, Jr. And that's why when someone sings "Wasn't it a pity and a shame? He never said a mumbalin' word" or "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?", they are singing about much more than just the crucifixion of Christ. Much more.

Listen again as we re-tell the passion of Christ through spirituals and scripture. We do this so that we might remember the story of Jesus' death on the cross. We do this so that we might connect that story with all forms of suffering we've endured and others have endured during their earthly walk of life. And we do this so that we might draw close to the God who hears us when we sing, when we pray, and when we tell our children "Yes, our Lord died on the cross, but the story does not end there."

[Luke 23:1-5, 13-56]

Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus before Pilate. ²They began to accuse him, saying, 'We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king.'

³Then Pilate asked him, 'Are you the king of the Jews?' He answered, 'You say so.'⁴Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, 'I find no basis for an accusation against this man.'⁵But they were insistent and said, 'He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place.'

¹³Pilate then called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people, ¹⁴and said to them, 'You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people; and here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him. ¹⁵Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death. ¹⁶I will therefore have him flogged and release him.'

¹⁸Then they all shouted out together, 'Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!' ¹⁹(This was a man who had been put in prison for an insurrection that had taken place in the city, and for murder.) ²⁰Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again; ²¹but they kept shouting, 'Crucify, crucify him!' ²²A third time he said to them, 'Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death; I will therefore have him flogged and then release him.'²³But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified; and their voices prevailed. ²⁴So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted. ²⁵He released the man they asked for, the one who had been put in prison for insurrection and murder, and he handed Jesus over as they wished.

²⁶As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus. ²⁷A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. ²⁸But Jesus turned to them and said, 'Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. ²⁹For the days are surely coming when they will say, "Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed."³⁰Then they will begin to say to the mountains, "Fall on us"; and to the hills, "Cover us."³¹For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?'

³²Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. ³³When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. [[³⁴Then Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.']] And they cast lots to divide his clothing. ³⁵And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!' ³⁶The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, ³⁷and saying, 'If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!' ³⁸There was also an inscription over him, 'This is the King of the Jews.'

39 One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, 'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!' ⁴⁰But the other rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?' ⁴¹And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.' ⁴²Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' ⁴³He replied, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'

44 It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, ⁴⁵while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. ⁴⁶Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.' Having said this, he breathed his last. ⁴⁷When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, 'Certainly this man was innocent.' ⁴⁸And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts. ⁴⁹But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

50 Now there was a good and righteous man named Joseph, who, though a member of the council, ⁵¹had not agreed to their plan and action. He came from the Jewish town of Arimathea, and he was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God. ⁵²This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. ⁵³Then he took it down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid. ⁵⁴It was the day of Preparation, and the sabbath was beginning. ⁵⁵The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid. ⁵⁶Then they returned, and prepared spices and ointments.

On the sabbath they rested according to the commandment.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Today we have lit one candle after each scripture reading. Usually reading about Jesus' death on the cross involves putting out candles, such as at Good Friday Tenebrae services. But we light a candle to remember that the light of Christ has shown in the world's darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. We remember that Jesus is the light of the world and we are to go forth to walk in that light.

Today's service does not conclude with a closing hymn or a formal recessional of the choir and worship leaders. After the benediction, we will simply leave. Hearing the crucifixion story again changes us and gives us much to reflect on as our eyes readjust themselves to the world's light and activities. So remember the story you've heard – but also remember these lit candles. Remember the light of Christ that overcomes all darkness. Remember how soon will come the light of an Easter sunrise – and how today's story gives way to a brighter story of redemption, hope and eternal life.

Let us stand for the benediction:

The apostle Paul has said: Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. (Romans 6:3-5)

Friends, go forth into the world in peace;
be of good courage;
hold fast that which is good;
render to no one evil for evil;
strengthen the fainthearted;
support the weak;
help the afflicted;
honor everyone;
love and serve the Lord,
rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit;
and the blessing of God almighty,
the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit,
be with you always. **Amen.**