

Pastor Jim Lloyd

Date: April 3, 2016

Title: A Day Like No Other

Text: Luke 23:26-49

I may be doing this a bit backwards. Last Sunday we looked at the resurrection. We noted that you can't have a resurrection without a death. Today we are going to look at a few of the events that led up to Jesus' death. We'll close the service by going to the Lord's table and remembering His death 'til He comes again.

Memorable Deaths: I remember the day that John Kennedy died - November 22, 1963. I was in Mrs. Moreland's 3rd grade class. I was eight years old. Four and 1/2 years later, Martin Luther King, Jr. died. Two months later - that same year - Robert Kennedy died. It was just over 31 years ago when the Challenger astronauts died. I remember the day - now over ten years ago - when my father died. I wasn't present at the passing of any of these. I missed my dad's passing by a few minutes because we were detained in traffic. I remember the day when these people died because of the reports I had received from others who WERE there. Many of those reports were rather vivid. Some were front and center on the news. For some the pain felt as intense as though I was there. Another such report is in Luke's biography of Jesus, chapter 23. Luke was NOT an eyewitness to the death of Jesus Christ either. Some of the biographies of Jesus were written by eyewitnesses like John, but Luke's biography was that of a physician and a historian. (Read the text.) Although these events had been predicted for generations before, the day that Christ died was a day of surprises.

- 1. A Day of Surprises. A. It certainly was a surprise for SIMON.** He was from North Africa, from Cyrene, or as we would call it today, Tripoli. And he had come on the journey of a lifetime. He may have saved much of his life to take this trip. To be in Jerusalem for the Passover was a dream come true. So it was the surprise of a lifetime when he stumbled across a crucifixion parade on those unfamiliar streets. Normally it would have just been a brief delay as he watched the Roman soldiers conduct what was, for them, a routine task, for there were many crucifixions. The custom was that the accused man was tried, convicted, and condemned at the court. Then four Roman soldiers would escort him to the place of the execution. They would be preceded by someone with a placard on a stick listing the crimes the criminal had been convicted of committing. It was the general practice to take the longest route from the courtroom to the place of execution, hoping to cross the paths of as many people as possible. Crucifixion was considered to be a significant deterrent to future crime. It should have been only a brief delay for Simon, but a surprising thing happened. Jesus crumbled under the weight of the cross, right in front of Simon. Earlier in a garden called Gethsemane, Jesus agonized over the prospect of His own death and what it meant spiritually. Later He had been beaten almost to death. Now weakened, He stumbled and crumbled. He and the cross He was required to carry, fell to the ground. Jerusalem was an occupied city; Roman law gave the soldiers the right of conscription (compulsory enrollment of persons for service; draft). That is, they could draft anyone into their service instantly. The procedure was to take the flat part of the spear blade and put it on the shoulder of any person anywhere, and that person was immediately brought into the service of Rome. So, with Jesus and the cross on the ground, the Roman soldier took his spear and put the blade on the shoulder of the closest man, Simon from Tripoli. Now conscripted, he was obligated to pick up the cross and to carry it. It was thought that he must have been humiliated and embarrassed. Luke says nothing more about Simon. But Simon does appear directly and indirectly two more times in the New Testament. Once in Mark 15:21 and then in Romans 16:13. It is Mark who - in another biographical account of Jesus - explains the same story but says that it was Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus. It's an unusual thing for a father to be identified by his children, unless of course the children are quite famous. It may be assumed that, by the time Mark's gospel was circulated, two of the most famous Christians in all of the empire were Alexander and Rufus. Later, in Romans 16:13, you again find Rufus, this son of Simon, who is described as the son of a woman whom the Apostle Paul counted to be his surrogate mother. As you put the pieces together, it's obvious that when Simon returned home to Tripoli, he told the story of Christ and the crucifixion to his wife, who became not only a godly woman but a substitute mother to the famous apostle Paul. Simon told about Christ and the crucifixion to his sons Alexander and Rufus, who became two of the greatest Christians in the first-century church. So what started out as a surprise and an embarrassment turned out to be an incredible good for Simon and for his family. **B. It was a surprise for a GROUP OF WOMEN WHO WERE CRYING AND MOURNING.** As Jesus, now released from the weight of the cross, continued the journey to the place called in Latin "Calvary," or in English "the Skull," he passed a group of women who were crying and mourning. They were screaming out, but not

because they knew Jesus, because in all probability they had never met him. They were NOT those women later mentioned who came from Galilee. These were professional mourners. That doesn't mean they were unsympathetic. They were women who dared to come out when men were crucified, when the families wouldn't come and cry over their deaths. They carried with them a liquid narcotic, a drug offered to the crucified man so the edge could be taken off the horrific pain that accompanied crucifixion. These were women who had come there often before, and it was their job. They were surprised. Never before, in all their tears, in all their wailing, in all of their journeys to all of the crosses, had they ever had a man do what Jesus did. He turned and expressed sympathy FOR THEM. He anticipated difficult days for their future and for the future of their children. He told them He was sorry, that they ought to wail for themselves. I don't think they knew Jesus. But if they had, they would have quickly realized that this was just like Him. His concern wasn't about His own problems or His own pain, but He focused quickly and clearly on the problems and pain that others face. **C. But the biggest surprise that day came to the EXECUTIONERS** - these tough, veteran soldiers who so many times before had crucified other men by nailing them to wooden Roman crosses, and then watched them writhe in pain as they died. As those being crucified would scream and suffer, the soldiers were known to sit at the feet of the crosses and play games. They were desensitized to the curses, to the pleas, to the threats. They were men who were not known to be caught by surprise. Yet never before had any one of them heard what Jesus said. For soon after Jesus' hands were nailed to the cross and the nail was driven through His feet and the cross was lifted upright and dropped into its socket in the ground, Jesus prayed audibly for them saying, *"Father, forgive them, because they don't know what they're doing."* It was enough to shock the toughest of soldiers. It was enough to make a man think before he went to sleep that night about those words that re-echoed in his mind a thousand times. It was enough for even a soldier to remember. So, it's no wonder that when the centurion made his final inspection after Jesus' death, he paused long enough at the cross to say, "Now this one, this one was a righteous man." The FORGIVENESS OF JESUS was a surprise THEN, but it is still a surprise TODAY. I, too, am surprised by His forgiveness. He knows our worst sins so well - He who lives and who died for forgiveness. I'm surprised that no matter what we've done or what we do, Jesus' heart still seeks to forgive. The surprises on the day Jesus died were not just for those clustered around the cross. **D. The surprises that day were for EVERYONE.** For at noon, a most extraordinary thing happened. It became dark as if it were night. The sun disappeared behind the thickest clouds people had ever seen. There were some who thought it might have been an eclipse (although astronomically it could not have been because the moon is full at Passover time). But it makes sense that as Jesus, the creator of the universe, died, the world would become dark. People's plans were interrupted. Circumstances made this a day unlike any other EVER. It would be remembered for the rest of their lives. The people of Jerusalem knew when it became dark at noon that God was doing something different and special, that this was no longer an ordinary day. It was, after all, the DARKEST MOMENT in human history. In those three hours from noon until three o'clock in the afternoon, something happened. In the words of the Bible, *"Jesus, who knew no sin, was made sin for us."* I think it would have been horribly inappropriate for the sun to brightly shine in the face of such horror. **E. The fifth surprise on the day Christ died was witnessed by only a FEW ON DUTY IN THE TEMPLE,** but their surprise must have been profound. At the center of first-century Jewish worship was the temple. The temple was the place of GATHERING. It was the place of SACRIFICE. It was the RESIDENCE OF GOD on EARTH. The outer courts of the temple were open to just about everyone. Then they became increasingly exclusive as you moved toward the middle and toward the front - so much so, that eventually there was one small place called the MOST HOLY PLACE. It was accessible ONLY TO THE HIGH PRIEST and ONLY ONCE A YEAR on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. On that day, the high priest would go behind the curtain and see something no one else could ever see - that secret place, the residence of God on earth. Then he would offer God a sacrifice, seeking forgiveness for the entire nation of Israel. It was an awesome place, an awesome thing to be in the presence of God. So try to imagine the surprise of those few on duty in the temple that day, the sky so dark that they had to light all of the candles in order to see. Imagine the surprise when that thick curtain ripped apart from top to bottom and opened wide so they could see into where they never thought they would see. They realized that God had done something new. God had opened up His presence forever to everyone. Never again would there be a curtain that would keep God at a distance, AND never again would a priest, who would represent everyone, be necessary. Now ALL OF US have direct access to the Holy God. It was a day of surprises.

- 2. A Day of Stupidity.** Crucifixion was a terrible sight. Some say it is the worst form of human torture. You would think that people would wince at the sight of such horrible torture inflicted on a man. But that wasn't always so.

A. The RELIGIOUS & POLITICAL LEADERS of Jerusalem made a special effort to come out and watch Jesus as He was crucified. They mocked Him with carefully chosen words. They laughed at the high and the holy names of Jesus. There is a scene in the movie "Schindler's List" (1993 Academy Award for best picture). The scene shows people inside a cattle car, on their way to Auschwitz. They are peering through the cracks and seeing little boys running along side of the train, taking their fingers across their throats, saying, "You're going to die. You're going to die." Perhaps you might be able to excuse the insensitivity, the mockery of a child. But we're stunned by the stupidity of grown men, rulers mocking Jesus as He died. I've wondered when they realized what they did. Do you think it was THREE DAYS LATER when Jesus rose back to life again? OR do you think it was for each one on the day he died, WHEN AT HIS OWN MOMENT OF DEATH he realized that he was standing before the Judge of all the universe and humanity, and IT WAS NONE OTHER THAN THIS JESUS WHOM THEY HAD MOCKED? **B. The SOLDIERS weren't any better.** Spiritual stupidity is not limited to any ONE group or class of people. They actually took pleasure in teasing Jesus. They taunted Him with His claim to royalty, and they laughed at the thought that such a pathetic-looking figure, bleeding and gasping, could ever be considered a king. How stunningly stupid, for he WAS a king. He was the King OVER ALL KINGS. THEY thought THEY knew so much, when it was HE who knew everything. They thought they had such great power OVER HIM, when HE had ALL POWER OVER THEM. I shudder to think of anyone being so stupid as to speak with sarcasm and superiority to Jesus Christ, the King of Kings, the Son of God Himself. Where had they been? Hadn't they heard that He spoke as no other man had ever spoken? Didn't they know the news that traveled through the streets of Jerusalem, out into the villages of Israel: that He made the blind to see, the lame to walk, the deaf to hear, and the dumb to talk, He stilled the storm and brought the dead back to life? He was no ordinary man. And yet, they spoke as if He were nobody. How stupid! **C. Then ONE OF THE CRIMINALS joined in the chorus.** He was himself being crucified. He was dying. He was just hours (maybe less) away from death and eternity. You would think he would be consumed with concern about what was going to happen to him when he died. You would think that he would be scared speechless at the threat of death and of hell. You would think that he would save every word he could to plead that somehow God would give him help and hope. Instead, when he spoke, it was to INSULT his death-row partner. I can't think that it was because he was ignorant; this criminal was street savvy. His words reveal that he understood a lot about who this Jesus was. He asked the question, "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us." He knew the right title to use. He knew that Jesus had taught that He was the Savior of all of humanity. I just don't understand, but I've seen it. I have seen those who ought to know better, those who fully understand His teaching and His claim to be Savior, treat Him with insults, sarcasm, and mockery like that man on the cross who was dying. I know it's sin what he did, but it was really stupid. I'm so glad the story doesn't end here.

3. **A Day of Salvation.** On the day Christ died, the angels must have been struck speechless at the sacrifice of God, and at humanity's stupidity. But perhaps they were even more amazed that the day Christ died became the day of one man's salvation - A CRIMINAL! For the criminal on the other side of Jesus called across to the other criminal and said, "Don't you fear God?" Luke 23:40 - *"But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation?"* It was a good question because sooner or later it becomes everyone's question. We may live a lifetime thinking and behaving as if we have everything together and we have nothing whatsoever to fear. But eventually we close in on our own deaths, and we are forced to face - the reality of OUR OWN WEAKNESS, or our own SINFULNESS, and the REALITY OF GOD. And it is then that, keenly aware of our inadequacy and of God's holiness, we are struck with the realization that it is God who judges our eternal destiny. It is God who sets the rules and not us. And that is no time for clever argument. That is no time for self-righteous defense. It is time to fear God, to wonder about one's eternal destiny. Of course, it's far better to resolve such matters BEFORE the moment of death comes. For none of us knows when that moment will be. For the condemned man on the cross, time was running out. Regardless of what he had said or done before, in the end HE DID FEAR GOD. He realized that his judgment after death would be totally determined by God. It is a fear, I think, necessary for anyone who seeks God's salvation. Like the convict on the far side who insulted Jesus, this man must have come to the cross with some advance knowledge of who Jesus was and what He could do. For he understood that Jesus was NO criminal. He made the comparison. He realized that Jesus had done no wrong, that He was a good man. Luke 23:41 - *"And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong."* And he must have realized that Jesus was God's Son who was headed back home again to the paradise from which He had come. And so, HE BELIEVED. And so, having feared God and believed Jesus, he decided to ask. Luke 23:42 - *"Then he*

said to Jesus, 'Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.'" He ASKED JESUS TO SAVE HIM when he arrived back in heaven. What an interesting contrast between the criminal who mocked Jesus to save him physically and this man who sought Jesus to save him spiritually. And Jesus said, "YES!" Luke 23:43 - *"And Jesus said to him, 'Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.'*" Of course He said yes, because that's the very reason Jesus was there on that cross. He was being crucified for this very purpose - in order to SAVE SINNERS and to PROMISE HEAVEN to ALL THOSE WHO ASK. You know, all the ingredients are right there. He FEARED GOD. He BELIEVED JESUS. He SOUGHT SALVATION. Here are all the ingredients for every one of us to review as we reflect on the death of Jesus Christ. We must seriously ask if WE fear God, if WE believe Jesus, if WE seek His salvation. For those who do, Jesus' answer is STILL YES. For those who do, it is the DAY OF SALVATION.

- 4. Conclusion.** The criminals on either side of Jesus illustrate a number of contrasts: One mocked Jesus and the other received Jesus. One rejected Jesus and the other accepted Him. In essence, one said goodbye to Jesus forever and other went to be with Him forever. One was forever lost and one was forever found. One made his forever home in Hell and the other made his forever home in Paradise. Those two criminals picture each of us. Either we reject Christ OR we embrace Christ. Which are YOU? The day that Jesus died was the grandest of days - the BEST day ever! It was more than GOOD Friday - it was the ULTIMATE FRIDAY! It was THE DAY OF SALVATION. BUT death, the grave and Hell did not have the victory over Jesus! Wherein He paid the ultimate price, He also ROSE AGAIN, and HE EVER LIVETH TO MAKE INTERCESSION FOR US!