

## Voices of Good Friday – April 7, 2023

Simon from Cyrene – Mark 15:21-22

*A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross. They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means The Place of the Skull).*

What a day! I had made the trip from northern Africa to Jerusalem for the Passover. The city was crawling with visitors, maybe a million of them, so I had to find lodging with some people I knew out in the country. We had a lot to catch up on so stayed up late. Because I got up a bit late I was hurrying to Jerusalem this Friday morning. At the outskirts of the city I met a crowd heading for Golgotha, the execution place outside the city. Quite a parade was on its way. What a time to die—during the festival week! All of a sudden the soldiers grabbed me, me, out of the whole crowd. I wondered what was going on. I hadn't done anything. This man named Jesus was carrying a cross as condemned criminals have to do, and he had collapsed along the way. They wanted me to carry the blamed thing. "Why me?" I wondered, of all the people here. I don't know if there was a why, just a case of wrong place, wrong time.

I looked at the man, bloody from whipping and other blows, and could understand why he couldn't handle any more. I've heard about those Roman methods. Their whips were torturous as the strands of the lash with sharp objects in the ends cut and tore out flesh. The loss of blood had to affect stamina. So I did as ordered, following him up the hill to the place of execution. Two others, not as bloody but also sentenced to be crucified, were on the way. The cross piece was heavy and rough. I think I still have some slivers in my shoulders from the wood. The sign that preceded us stated the charge: it called him the king of the Jews. That's a case of irony. He looked like anything but a king. He appeared despised, rejected, defeated.

But then I hung around a while. I wanted to see more of what it was all about. I saw him not grumble or cry out. A lot different from what I expected. He was like no other. He even spoke words of forgiveness. I've got to learn more about him.

A follow up note: Perhaps he did learn more. Mark identified his sons Alexander and Rufus. Why, unless they held some significance? As he closed his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul greeted several individuals in the congregation. One of them was named Rufus. Did the man's family come to faith? God has a reason for everything that he allows to happen. Was it carrying the cross of Jesus on Good Friday that led to further contact with the Savior's message?

The Weeping Women – Luke 23:27-31

*A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him. Jesus turned and said to them, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep*

*for yourselves and for your children. For the time will come when you will say, 'Blessed are the barren women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' Then "they will say to the mountains, "Fall on us!" and to the hills, "Cover us!" For if men do these things when the tree is green, what will they do when it is dry?"*

We had heard him preach. We witnessed his miracles. We greeted him gladly on Sunday when he came to Jerusalem riding on a donkey. Then we heard the crowd call for his death by the end of the week. When we learned of the death penalty, we went for one more look at this man Jesus. My friends and I lined the street. You couldn't help but feel sorry for him. He was so weak, so miserable. Anybody with a heart other than stone would feel the same. I know he heard us because he looked right at us and told us not to feel pity for him but for ourselves and for our families. I wonder what he expects. He spoke to us and quoted from the prophet Hosea. It sounds quite serious, asking mountains to fall on us and seeing a blessing in barrenness. Who wants to be childless? I know the joy of children. Why my friends and I especially hoped that we could be the mother of the Messiah our nation has awaited since at least the time of Abraham. If not having children is a good thing, there must be awful trouble ahead. If this horrible step for Jesus is the green tree, it doesn't bode well. Is he calling us dry, ripe for the fire? It sounds so ominous. I wonder what he is getting at.

Again, a follow up. The destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans came about four decades later. It was a horrible time for families. There was starvation as the city was barricaded, unable to obtain supplies. It got so bad that there is a report one woman killed and ate her own child. The words of Jesus were true, as always. And that was only a foretaste of the greater destruction to come at the end of the world. A warning for us as well!

#### The Penitent Thief – Luke 23:39-43

*One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus answered him "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."*

My death day brought a new beginning. For years I had led a life of crime along with my partner. It seemed so good—getting things for ourselves without having to work for them. Although we did use a good deal of brain power coming up with ideas and muscle power at those times when somebody got in our way.

But the saying goes, "All good things must come to an end," and finally we got caught, tried and convicted. The court sentenced us to death. There was someone else convicted that day, someone quite different. Oh, they made him sound like the worst of criminals,

charging him with pretending to be a king and rival to Caesar and encouraging a rebellion. As we three hung there, he certainly didn't look the part. My partner and I even made fun of him. If he thought himself so special, what's he doing here looking all battered and weak? Why, he wasn't even able to carry his cross out to the hill.

I was never much into religion so hadn't listened to him preach, but some of the bystanders mentioned his doing miracles and poking fun that after all those he couldn't (or didn't) lift a finger in self-defense. The more I watched and listened, the more I realized he was special, not like anyone else. The pain when the executioners drove the spikes into my hands and feet was so intense that I cursed a blue streak at the guys with the hammers. I wished they would have to experience what they were causing me to feel. But this man called Jesus, what's he do? Prays that they be forgiven! No angry words, no spiteful protests, just concern for his mother. I came to know he was a good man and even more than a man. So the next time my buddy spouted off, I told him to put a lid on it.

I realized this Jesus was what some others said he was: the promised Messiah. I remember my grandparents talking about the one to come to save the world. God had really kept his promise. Here was the Savior in person. Trusting his good will and character, I turned to him and asked him to think kindly of me when he entered fully into his kingdom. I couldn't presume to ask for more. And you know what he told me? That day I would be with him in paradise. Not in hell with its agony, not still hanging on a cross, gasping for breath, but in paradise, in heaven. How was that possible? I know I didn't deserve anything of the sort after my life of crime. What a wonderful being! What joy! What undeserved kindness he showed! That made this day a great one, a real Good Friday.

#### Mary – John 19:25-27

*Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Dear woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.*

In a way it was easier for me. He was such a good boy, never got into trouble, never talked back. Always considerate and helpful. But then there was nothing ordinary about him. It all went back to the beginning, when the angel Gabriel appeared to me with the startling news that I was to become the mother of Jesus. It was quite a shock since I was pledged to be married to Joseph and had not been intimate with him or anyone else. There were some rough times fielding the taunts that came from those who didn't know or believe the circumstances. But the Lord was with us as the birth occurred, even though it was out with the animals because there wasn't any place to lodge in Bethlehem.

We had a visit from shepherds and later from wise men from the east. Then there was our quick trip to Egypt to escape Herod's anger.

When Jesus was age 30 he left our home in Nazareth and began teaching and gathering disciples. I had the joy of being there for his first miracle when he turned water into wine at a wedding in Cana. There were reports of so much more: how he healed people, cast out demons and stilled storms. People were attracted to his clear and insightful teaching about the kingdom of God. Oh, yes, there were times when I worried like any mother, that he was overdoing and not getting enough rest, and there was opposition from the Pharisees and others, but he always handled matters on his own.

Then came this week. A celebration as he entered Jerusalem; a cleansing of the temple area on Monday. The next I heard he had been arrested, shuffled from one trial to another. The crowd shouted for his death, even picked that villain Barabbas to be released rather than my harmless son. The treatment Pilate's soldiers gave him was awful. I had to be here at the cross. It certainly brought to mind the words aged Simeon had spoken back when Jesus was a baby. "A sword will pierce your own soul too." Even in the midst of the awful pain he endured, he was thinking of others instead of himself. He looked at his friend John and me and spoke those words, "Here is your son," and, "Here is your mother." He wanted John to watch after me when he was gone. How kind!

I pondered many things over the years of his life—how I was told that he was the Son of the Most High, how he showed it in so many ways. But now he is dying. I cling to the words the prophet Isaiah said about his seeing the light of life and justifying many. Or how he pointed to Jonah's being three days in the belly of the great fish and emerging alive as a sign of himself. Oh, what can it all mean? Will I have him back? Will he truly return to life? I wish he wouldn't have to go through all this agony, but I know he will do what he was sent to do and will do it at the right time. He is my Savior as well as my son. But oh, how my heart is breaking now!

The Centurion – Matthew 27:54

*When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, "Surely he was the Son of God!"*

I've been at it quite a while, that is, on the death squad. It isn't the most prestigious assignment. Our job is to handle the crucifixions ordered by the court. I've lost count of how many we've done. It may seem cruel to march the criminals out to Golgotha and pound nails into their hands and feet and then hoist them upright, to hang there until their final breaths, but remember, these are the dregs of society, ones condemned for capital crimes. Our duties can take quite a long time. Some guys hang there for many hours; a few have lasted for days. But you get used to it eventually. A job is a job. Somebody has to do it. And our life isn't on the line like others in the military.

But then came this spring day. We had three men to crucify. A good-sized crowd was on hand. All the attention was focused on the one in the center. He was a Jewish man called Jesus, sometimes also called by the title "Christ." I wasn't into their religion enough to know the ins and outs. Some even called him a king. That's what governor Pilate put on the sign as his crime: the king of the Jews. I think he felt it was a good way to get back at their religious leaders for all the grief they gave him during the trial. I could tell Pilate wanted to let him go, but he gave in—even told us to whip him and play around with the king idea. We gave him a crown—of thorns—and bowed before him.

I digress. As I said, I've seen a lot in this business. Heard big, tough guys scream as we pounded in the spikes. And then the curses—of everybody from the judge to us soldiers to the gods on Mt. Olympus for letting it happen. Not this Jesus. Some of the Jewish church guys stood there mocking. Passersby poked fun. He took it all without complaint. He even spoke of forgiveness for them and for us, and about paradise for one of the thieves on the cross beside him. Seemed a bit odd, given the circumstances.

Then there was that pitch darkness that started around noon and lasted for three hours. Just when you would think he had about had it, he called out in loud voice to his God about forsaking him. He had a drink of vinegar and then calmly breathed his last, committing his spirit into his Father's hands. Usually there's a gasp, maybe a final whisper, as the person struggles for air. His death seemed so different than the others. Putting it all together I had to admit, "Surely he was the Son of God!" There just isn't a person like him. He had to come from somewhere else. I'm still in awe. I've got to learn more about this Jesus and what he did and taught. I've heard a few reports during my tour of duty in Palestine but didn't pay all that much attention. He wasn't popular with the leaders but he seemed to connect with a lot of common folk. And he had a band of disciples. On my day off I'll see if I can find one.

#### Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus – John 19:38-42

*Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jews. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away. He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in the strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid. Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.*

I'm going first because John mentioned me first—and it was my tomb. The Lord has blessed me with lots of this world's goods. I had used part of it to have a tomb dug into the hillside near the place where crucifixions take place outside Jerusalem. It was a

peaceful spot, with a nice garden around it. I thought I was providing well for my family. But before any of us needed to use it, I found another purpose, a more important one: for Jesus. You see, I was one of his followers, although it was a difficult situation because of my place in life. As a member of the Jewish high court I was surrounded by guys who hated Jesus. They were constantly sending emissaries to challenge him and try to trap him in his words. I wanted nothing to do with that, but when I tried to speak up, I thought they would turn on me. So I avoided the topic of Jesus, much to my chagrin. I kept my views to myself. But when our leaders railroaded through our court the verdict of death for Jesus and sent him to Pilate, I couldn't bear to see all the mocking and mistreatment he endured. And then came the horrors of the crucifixion. I couldn't let Jesus be shamed after his death. I went to Pilate and obtained permission to bury him in my new tomb. I did have an ally, Nicodemus, who helped. I'll let him take over the narrative.

Hi! Remember me? I was much like Joseph, too scared to take a public stand for Jesus during much of my life. I came to him one night and heard wonderful words about being born again of water and the Spirit. At that time the Teacher also told me he would be lifted up like the bronze snake Moses made during the desert journey of our ancestors from Egypt to the Promised Land. I didn't know exactly what he meant by being lifted up, but it all made sense when they put him on the cross. And there was also that wonderful statement about loving the world and giving eternal life. He truly was the one we were waiting for. Why can't more people see the truth?

So when Joseph asked me to help with the burial of Jesus, I couldn't say no. After taking the body down from the cross we put a lot of spices between the layers of linen cloth that we wrapped it in. Some of the women who believed in Jesus were watching from a distance. I suppose they didn't think we did a very thorough job, but time was of the essence as the 6 p.m. start of the Sabbath was fast approaching and we dare not work then. After we were finished we rolled a huge stone over the entrance of Joseph's tomb for security purposes. I heard the enemies of Jesus even had it sealed and guarded. I wonder what the weekend will bring. I feel so ashamed that I wasn't more open about my faith sooner. May God have mercy! I cling to that hope because Jesus always spoke words full of love and forgiveness.