

What's good about it?

A sermon preached by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson, in Saint John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on Good Friday, April 2, 2010.

They gathered there on the hill. It had been an adventurous and exciting three years with Jesus. Now it was all over. There was nothing more to do or say, except to go home and try to pick up where they left off. Most of them had fled and returned to their homes in disillusionment before Jesus died. What went wrong? Jesus seemed to talk about his death as if it were inevitably all part of a plan. But in the end it didn't seem to accomplish anything. There seemed to be little or nothing to show for all their efforts.

The disciples most likely agreed to meet somewhere in secret to share their grief and bewilderment. Perhaps the authorities didn't care anyway, now that Jesus was dead. He had been a scapegoat for sure, but for what? They just couldn't get out of their minds why others were so threatened by him. They must not have understood. In their discouragement over what seemed to them to be the failure of their mission. They must have wondered if they missed something. There had been many hopes and aspirations for what could be accomplished, but either Jesus' plan went wrong or there was something in it they didn't understand. Little did they know what would be very dramatically revealed to them in just a few days.

After sunset, it was the Feast of Passover, but they didn't feel like celebrating. They were still pondering the events that had taken place. Jesus had already changed their lives and the old celebrations and rituals didn't have the same meaning for them. They had shared a last meal together and were inspired by Jesus asking them to share the bread and wine in remembrance of him. After that, events moved very quickly. There was the arrest in the garden followed by the mock trial in which Pontius Pilate was all too anxious to give in to the voices that prevailed in the mob. They mocked him and put a crown of thorns on him and spit on him. Worst of all, there was that awful cross on the hill with Jesus nailed to it. The sight of him hanging there in agony was so awful; they didn't want to stay.

For Christians, the cross and crown of thorns are as familiar as anything. Rarely do you find a crude wooden cross on church altars. Most of them are beautifully decorated in brass or gold. People wear crosses as ornaments around their necks and as earrings. More important than wearing a cross is to bear one. The cross is born high when we willing to take an unpopular stand. The cross is lifted up when we show compassion and concern for the disadvantaged and disabled. The cross is lifted up when people deal honestly and fairly in business and personal life. The cross is lifted high when we are willing to share what Christ really means to us in our lives. We lift high the cross when we see that this day is really *good* in terms of what it accomplishes for us. When I ask people why we are to be forgiving of others, they frequently say they are forgiving because they want others to forgive them. But the real reason is that we have already forgiven by God in the death of Jesus on the cross. He gives us the supreme example of sacrificial love and closes the gap with God forever. For that we are able to be forgiving of others.

Jesus' death did not capture the imaginations and hearts of everyone in Jerusalem that day. There were many who passed by the scene who had no idea who he was and could have cared less. They went about their business as usual. There were no news reports about him, no descriptions of his repenting or being converted. They went against him for being a troublemaker

who threatened their way of life and were just as glad to be rid of him. The disciples were trying to piece together the meaning of it all and what they would do next.

Much of salvation history takes place in a garden. Gardens are places of life and beauty, meditation and wonderment. They are places that affect all the sense with their great variety of fragrances and colors. The story of good and evil takes place in the Garden of Eden in which Adam and Eve live in a state of grace. When they defy God, they are compelled to leave the garden to live in a world of sin and shame. By humanity came sin and by humanity is our salvation.

Before his arrest and trial, Jesus as the second Adam prayed in another garden, the garden of Gethsemane. Here we see the very human and very plaintive cry of the Christ to be delivered from the awful death that he was about to face. But he knew he had to go through with it in order to accomplish our salvation. So he was compelled to leave his garden.

Jesus hung on a cross between two thieves. The one railed at him to save them and himself. The other was penitent and asked Jesus to remember him when he came into the kingdom. Jesus assures him that today he will be with him in paradise. In Persian mythology, paradise refers to the garden of the king. To be asked to walk in the king's garden is the greatest privilege. The penitent thief was being given the privilege of walking with the king of kings in his garden.

After his crucifixion, the body of Jesus was taken down from the cross and buried in a borrowed tomb in a garden. That sad place in a short space of time became a glorious place of beauty. The resurrection would take place amidst beautiful colors and fragrances. The barrenness of this church will soon be converted into a garden of flowers with the paschal candle, a sign of the resurrected Christ placed in the midst of fragrance and beauty.

Today is a time to look at the condition of our spiritual garden. It is cared for and well kept, or has it been neglected and gone to seed? You decide. Your spiritual garden is never too far gone that you can't weed out the bad growths, rake out the things you should not have done, turn up the life giving soil, trim the shrubs of things long neglected and add some new plantings. You set the stage and let God do the rest. Take time each day to do some work in the garden of your life and get in touch with the things of the spirit. Reflect on how God is acting in your life and what it really means to you to be a child of God and a member of Christ.

Christ died not just for other people out there somewhere, but for you and me, personally. Think about that. It is the greatest gift we could ever be given to have our sins forgiven and to know that we are loved and valued as human beings. We all need affirmation, no matter how confident we might feel. Christ's sacrifice of himself on the cross is an act of affirmation for us personally. It makes the difference between life being merely a meaningless cycle of events and one in which God has a purpose for us.

The worst response to Jesus' death is indifference. The English poet G.A. Studdert-Kennedy wrote these lines:

When Jesus came to Golgotha they hanged him on a tree,
 They drove great nails through hands and feet, and made a Calvary;
 They crowned him with a crown of thorns, red were his wounds and deep,
 For those were crude and cruel days, and human flesh was cheap.
 When Jesus came to Birmingham, they simply passed him by,
 They never hurt a hair of him, they only let him die;
 For men had grown more tender, and they would not give him pain,

They only just passed down the street, and left him in the rain.
Still Jesus cried, "Forgive them for they know not what they do,"
And still it rained the winter rain that drenched him through and through;
The crowds went home and left the streets without a soul to see,
And Jesus crouched against a wall and cried for Calvary.

Think about it. We are to take it all this for granted or be indifferent. All that was accomplished on this day so long ago is for our good. That's why we call it *Good Friday*.

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