

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **The Guilty and the Innocent**

Luke 23:26-56

The daffodils around the edge of our building have been signaling the end of winter cold and the return of warmer days. They also give us a taste of Easter. But only a taste, not the full resurrection meal. We still need to make the journey through Holy Week before we get to that table. Until then, remember that some of those daffodils are blooming at the base of the cross. It's a strange convergence of the beautiful and the awful. The flowers point to what's ahead, risen life, but also remind us that what's ahead can't be separated from what we see and hear, right in front of us, in this morning's Scripture passage from Luke, namely, the agony of crucifixion.

Luke's account is fairly brief. He takes us to the place. It's called "The Skull," a name that probably reflects the shape or other features of the hill where the executions took place. The Roman authorities preferred that crucifixions take place in highly visible locations, as a deterrent to crime, especially crimes against Rome. Having the crucifixions in public also added to the pain, shame, and slow death of the executed. Those who witnessed the crucifixion, or were passing by, were thereby sent an unmistakable message about the power of Rome and its definition of justice.

Notice that Luke gives us no details about the size or shape of the cross, or how Jesus was affixed to it. He doesn't specify whether Jesus was crucified naked or with a loin cloth out of deference to Jewish sensitivities. These aspects of the event are not Luke's primary concern. What matters more to Luke is who is there. He focuses on who is present at the execution. The Roman soldiers assigned to crucifixion detail are there. Some of the Jewish ruling authorities are there. The crowd is there.

Two others are there. They hang on either side of Jesus. We don't know their names. We don't know the specific nature of the charges against them, though Matthew and Mark refer to them as "robbers" or "thieves." Here in Luke, they're designated by a term that means "criminals." "Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed" (v. 32). At this point in the story, that's the sum total of who they are—"criminals."

"Criminal" is a hard label to shake off. As labeling theorists remind us, once someone has been successfully labeled as criminal or deviant, that can become the individual's dominant label or "master status," overshadowing everything else about them. They may be lots of other things, like a parent, a spouse, a sibling, a child, a student, an employee, a neighbor, or any number of other roles and occupations. But once the criminal tag gets applied—be it drug dealer, sex offender, prostitute, rapist, murderer, embezzler, or whatever—that designation can override every other aspect of the person's identity. In the eyes of others, the person becomes defined by his or her crime. He or she is simply a criminal.

"When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the other criminals" (v. 33). The way most of the people around the cross saw the situation, that's who Jesus was, just another criminal who had been arrested, locked up, and rightfully sentenced by a judge to have his life extinguished. It was better for society that he, and

the two hanging on either side of him, be eliminated. That's just what such criminals deserve.

"They crucified him with the criminals." In view of this remarkable statement, the great theologian Karl Barth once asked, "Which is more amazing, to find Jesus in such bad company, or to find the criminals in such good company?"<sup>1</sup> He goes on to explain how both are actually true. As we'll soon see, one of the criminals recognizes that he's in the presence of the one who can save. But what's equally amazing is how Jesus is with and among those in such desperate need of salvation.

And yet, isn't that where Jesus has been throughout his earthly ministry? Luke, like the other Gospels, shows us that he spent most of his time with society's outcasts. Those on the margins, those who were forgotten, those who were rejected, those who were considered beyond redemption. So it's no surprise that even as he's in the process of dying, Jesus continues his ministry: "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost" (19:10).

A new show recently aired on the A&E Network. It's called "60 Days In." The idea is pretty simple. Seven innocent people spend two months in an Indiana jail and have their experiences filmed for eventual broadcast. The show's executive producer said, "We wanted to create a show that really shows what it is like to do time, from a perspective that hadn't been seen before."<sup>2</sup> The individuals participating all had their reasons for doing so. One woman was a social worker hoping to put an end to gang violence. One man was an ex-Marine who thought the experience would help him become a DEA agent. One was a teacher who wanted to help students see where bad choices could lead them. Another was a young man who wanted to get a sense of what his jailed brother was going through. As you can probably guess, the setting of the show makes for some very tense, revealing, and dangerous situations.

The story of Jesus' suffering and death shows us that he goes as far as anyone can go into the experience of criminals, those who are behind bars and those who aren't. In fact, Jesus goes to the point of execution itself. And he goes there not primarily to see what it's like, or to see what lessons might be learned from those who've made terrible choices in life, though those may certainly be worthwhile things. No, Jesus is crucified with the criminals in order to do what he has been sent to do from the beginning of Luke's Gospel, namely, to bring God's forgiveness.

What was prophesied following his birth (1:77) and enacted during his ministry has come to a climax here at the place called The Skull. Who Jesus is and what he has been all about is gathered up in what he prays as he hangs pinned to the cross: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (v. 34a). Notice that while most of those around him are spouting words of mockery, Jesus is praying words of mercy. In response to those who give voice to ridicule, Jesus gives voice to reconciliation. While the crowd hurls insults that inflict more pain, Jesus reaches out with the terms of peace.

One of the criminals was among those hurling insults. "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" In other words, if you're the Messiah, get us down from here. Deliver yourself, and us, from this torment. The criminal is right about what Jesus has come to do, but wrong about how Jesus must do it. Jesus cannot rescue the criminal, or anyone there at the cross, including us, by rescuing himself. Jesus cannot release the criminal, or anyone there at the cross, including us, by releasing himself. Freedom from captivity to sin, for them and for us, can only happen through Jesus' own death.

There is one person who sees this and understands this. He's the criminal hanging on the other side of Jesus. He counters the lies of his fellow criminal and confesses the truth about who Jesus is. "We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong" (v. 41). So Jesus isn't crucified with the criminals because he's guilty. He's crucified with the criminals because we're guilty. Jesus' crucifixion with the criminals shows us how deeply he identifies himself with us in our lawlessness and our bondage to sin. He dies because of our violations of God's will, those that land us behind bars and those that don't.

We dare not try to stand at a distance from the cross and look down our noses at anyone else gathered there. Not those whom society has labeled "criminals" and has sent to their death. Not those charged with carrying out the execution. Not those who roll the dice to see who will get Jesus' clothes. Not those who shout insults. We, just as much as they, are included in Jesus' prayer, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

Pastor and author A. J. Swaboda compares our situation to the way that things often unfolded on the kids television show *Scooby-Doo*. Some of you remember the members of the mystery gang: Shaggy, Fred, Daphne, Velma, and the dog Scooby-Doo. They were always getting themselves into some kind of scary trouble with robbers, counterfeiters, burglars, and so on. In each episode, the objective was the same, to discover and catch the villain. When they exposed the villain, it was usually the kind of person you never suspect. As Swaboda puts it, "We'd always assume the villain would be that really mean tour guide, or the obsessive park ranger, or the mean gasoline attendant from the beginning of the episode. But as the Gang ripped off the mask of the villain, it was always quite the surprise. The villain was always the really nice janitor, the sweet teacher, or the seemingly "good guy."<sup>3</sup>

What happens on Good Friday is that we're all unmasked and exposed for our participation in sin and our offenses against God. The cross isn't about some imagined distinction between good guys and bad guys, or between saints and villains. The cross is where we see that the villain is us. The villain is you. The villain is me. Jesus, the innocent one, took the place of us, the guilty ones. And by his death, you are forgiven, released to live in his everlasting kingdom. So we sing those words from Charles Wesley's hymn: "Long my imprisoned spirit lay / Fastbound in sin and nature's night; / Thine eye diffused a quickening ray, / I woke, the dungeon flamed with light; / My chains fell off, my heart was free; / I rose, went forth, and followed Thee. / Amazing love! How can it be / That Thou, my God, should die for me!"

"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" (v. 42). May God give you and me the eyes of the dying criminal who, by God's grace, was made free to become a resident of Jesus' kingdom. Our Lord said to him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise" (v. 43). As one preacher has put it, "The kingdom is real. Forgiveness is possible. Not just for the dying but for the living."<sup>4</sup> Jesus was crucified with the criminals, dying for our sake and in our place. He has already done what needs to be done for your pardon and release. Will you claim the forgiveness and freedom you have in him?

<sup>1</sup> Karl Barth, *Deliverance to the Captives* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961) 76.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in "Seven Innocents Spend Time in Jail for New A&E Show "60 Days in." New York Daily News Website. February 11, 2016. Accessed March 17, 2016 <<http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/tv/innocents-spend-time-jail-new-tv-show-article-1.2528942>>.

<sup>3</sup> A. J. Swaboda, *A Glorious Dark* (Grand Rapids; Baker, 2015) 16-17.

<sup>4</sup> Steven I. Wright, "Forgiveness from the Cross: Luke 23:32-43." In Peter K. Stevenson and Steven I. Wright, *Preaching the Atonement* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2009) 87.