

With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last.³⁹ And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard his cry and saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!" (Mark 15:37, 39)

Was This a Dead End?

What is the longest trip you've ever driven? A couple of years ago, some friends invited us to go camping with them in Custer State Park in western South Dakota. When I looked at the map, Yellowstone National Park in western Wyoming didn't seem that far from Custer. So I convinced my wife that as long as we were going out that way, we should go there, too. With some trepidation about how big the West really is, she agreed. With all the coming and going and side trips, we easily logged 5,000 miles on that trip. But it almost ended early. We were driving through a heat wave in South Dakota. It was 110 degrees and that is no exaggeration. We crossed the Missouri River, went up a hill, and the air conditioner on our van went out. We drove for hours in that heat. Finally we reached the town of Wall and found a hotel. I found a mechanic the next day, but he couldn't fix it. So we went on to Rapid City. We knew that it might take days to get the car fixed. In that case, we might have to just camp there with friends and then turn back. Our trip might be a dead end. But it didn't work out that way. The people in South Dakota showed us enormous hospitality. A lady at the welcome center got out the phone book and started calling repair shops and she didn't stop until she found a mechanic who promised to work on the car that very day. He stayed for hours past closing time just so that we could get on the road that night. He even loaned us his car so that our kids wouldn't have to spend the whole day waiting at his garage. The generosity of those strangers saved our vacation. I was very grateful.

For the last six weeks of Lent, we have been traveling with Jesus. This afternoon, we reach the goal of all those trips: the cross. But unlike Yellowstone National Park, which was full of beautiful scenery and incredible wild life and unique volcanic features, Jesus' trip ended in pain and darkness and hell. To the person who doesn't understand it, it may seem like a tragic end. It may make all of Jesus' life and words seem hollow and wasted. But was that the case? **Was this a dead end?**

I.

No. **Not for the centurion.** Mark relates the end of the journey in simple, straightforward language. He says, **"With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. ... And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard his cry and saw how he died, he said, 'Surely this man was the Son of God!'"** Who was this centurion? How did he reach this conclusion? We don't even know his name. We can only speak to his position. A centurion was an officer in the Roman army. He commanded one hundred men. To reach that rank, it's reasonable to assume that this man had been in the army for some time. He probably was a combat veteran. His current assignment was to enforce Roman rule in one of the most difficult provinces in the empire.

The Romans were brutal rulers. They had perfected tools like crucifixion as a political statement. They nailed their enemies to a cross and hung them up. It usually took days for those people to die, days of pain and moaning, days in which their friends and family could see them hanging there. Days to give their enemies time to think about whether they wanted to challenge Roman power again. This man was an instrument of that kind of policy. Was he at all squeamish about having to crucify Jesus and two other men? When they screamed while the nails were pounded through their hands and feet, did that bother him? We don't know. But he was probably hardened by war and Roman brutality. The sufferings of these men probably meant nothing to him if killing them meant that his own men were safer on the streets of Jerusalem.

As a Roman, he wouldn't even have any fear about facing God later. Roman religion was very mechanical. You offered sacrifices and performed certain rituals and that gave you the favor of the gods – who were very much like men, with all their sins and failings. The Romans viewed the emperor, Caesar, as a kind of god on earth. This man would've viewed this policy of considerable brutality to be the will of the Roman gods. Roman superstition would've snuffed out any pains of conscience he may have felt. He was spiritually dead.

This is the man that Pilate assigned to supervise the execution of Jesus and the other two criminals. It's fairly likely that Pilate chose him because he had done this before and he knew how to get the job done. So this hardened, spiritually dead foreigner accompanied Jesus on his last walk out of the city. He watched our Lord

suspended on that cross. He watched his soldiers gamble for Jesus' clothes. He heard Jesus' enemies mock and ridicule him. He even heard the criminals try to alleviate their own sufferings by lashing out at Jesus.

But that wasn't all he heard. He heard Jesus ask his Father to forgive the soldiers who nailed him to that cross. He heard one criminal repent and defend Jesus and ask to be remembered in Jesus' kingdom and he heard Jesus promise him that that very day he would be in paradise. This centurion stood under the cross when darkness fell at twelve noon and the sun refused to shine for three solid hours in the middle of the day. He watched Jesus provide for his mother. He heard him cry out in the depths of hell, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Then he heard Jesus' victory cry: "It is finished." When Jesus died, the centurion felt an earthquake. All that moved this veteran of war and police actions in a way that nothing else could have. But there was even more. This centurion heard Jesus decide to die. Jesus commended his spirit to God and he died as a simple act of his will. That's not something we can do. He saw and heard the gospel and he knew something incredible had happened. And in all that gospel testimony, the Holy Spirit reached into his heart and brought him to the only conclusion possible: Surely this was the Son of God.

Now, we don't know what happened to the centurion after this. We don't know how God fed his newborn faith. But he confessed that faith and people clearly heard it. We have to trust that God who brought him to faith provided opportunities to hear the Word after this day and that God kept that faith alive until this Roman soldier reached eternal life. What we do know is the incredible grace of God. In spite of all that this man was, God arranged his life so that after years of brutality and spiritual death, he stood next to Jesus and witnessed his Savior dying for him. God claimed one of Jesus' own executioners for himself.

My friends, not one of us is a better person than this Roman soldier was. We are all sinners by birth. But just as God loved this man when he lived in the depths of sin and God reached out and made him a believer, so God loved us before we were baptized, before we heard the gospel, before we trusted in Jesus. God's grace reached out to us with the very same story of Jesus dying and rising that this man lived through. And through that gospel message, God claimed our hearts, too. He made us believers.

II.

This trip to the cross was not a dead end, not for the centurion. And my friends, **not for us**. Today is the most solemn day of the church year. Today is Good Friday. Today, we drape our alters in black and we sing mournful songs of Jesus dying. That solemnity is real. Because today we come face to face with the inescapable conclusion that this is what our sins have done. This is what we have caused.

A friend of mine – who is not a pastor – once told me that he thought funeral sermons would be the easiest sermons to preach. All you have to do is point at the casket and say, "Here is the evidence of sin. This man is dead. Clearly he must have been a sinner because this is what sin does to us." Then you go on with the promises of what Jesus gives us. That man was right about our funerals. We can apply his words to Jesus as well. Today we see clearly and unmistakably what our sin does. We see what it costs. We see death and more – we see the horrors of hell. When Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" he was suffering hell. Not in the sense that we often use the word for something really bad. Not like we might call life in a concentration camp "hell." No, the essence of hell, the place where Jesus' enemies suffer for all eternity, is being locked outside of God's love forever. You can see the joy of those who are inside. But you can't ever come in. That's what Jesus suffered on the cross. That's what our sins deserve.

We are sinners. We were born sinners. We sin every day without realizing it. We're experts at blaming other people for our sins – "Look what he did to me! Look what he said to me! I have a right to be angry, to do and say what I did." No, we don't. Even when we hurt, God demands that we act in love and forgiveness. We're pros at making excuses for our sins: "What else could I do?" "I didn't have any choice." "Everybody else does the same thing." But that doesn't change God's command to treat each other with love and respect, even when we disagree with one another.

For all that sin, Jesus was nailed to a cross. Because we are guilty, God the Father abandoned Jesus and made him suffer hell. But today is about more than what we did to Jesus. Today is about Jesus' willingness to suffer all that. Today is about what Jesus' payment means. If this day were only about us and what we deserve, Good Friday would be a dead end. Jesus died and that's the end. But today is about Jesus. He did die on Good Friday. But that was not the end. You all know that it wasn't, or you wouldn't be here this afternoon. Jesus rose early Sunday morning. Without that rising, we cannot understand what happened in that dying. The rising tells us that the dying did enough. The rising tells us that God treated Jesus as if he were the only human being

who ever lived. God treated Jesus as if he were you and me and Adam and Eve and our grandchildren and great-grandchildren. God extracted from him the price of our guilt and shame. He accepted the price Jesus paid. Now God has erased our sins. They are gone forever. And we will never say, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" because we will spend eternity with God, wrapped in his love forever.

Jesus, the Son of God, became man so that he could shed the blood of God on the cross and die for us. When he rose, that was God's testimony that the blood of Christ pays for every sin of every human being who has ever lived. Jesus' journey to the cross was not a dead end. It was not wasted effort. It was the whole reason he came here. It did what we needed it to do. It won eternal life for us. Amen.