

Good Friday  
March 21, 2008

**Mark 15:37**

37 With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last.

**Mark 15:39**

39 And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard his cry and<sup>[a]</sup> saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son<sup>[b]</sup> of God!"

Do you have travel plans this year? Many people intend to stay closer to home with the rising gas prices. Recently I read about what I think was called a "staycation". You stay at home, don't go to work or slave away at home projects, but use your vacation days for outings and activities you might not otherwise do. When it is over you can return to your job relaxed (and not as poor). Some families will travel on lengthy vacations because of the special destination or event involved, so you feel it is worth it. On the trip there might be some breathtaking scenery in God's creation. The trip creates memories that will last a lifetime.

During the past six weeks of Lent we were traveling to crossroads with our Savior during the final week of His life. We didn't go far. His journey actually was underway from the time of His birth. Today He arrives at His destination, the cross. There we view a different kind of breathtaking scene, as Jesus breathed His last.

The trip might seem to be wasted. God overruled the ways of nature that He had established to bring His Son here by means of the virgin birth; Jesus left heaven and set aside His glory to come and hang on a hunk of wood? We wouldn't want to travel hundreds of miles on a highway that winds up as a dead end. Is that what we have here?

THE CROSSROAD AT CALVARY: A DEAD END?

- I. The signs pointed to it
- II. The road extends to life

The signs at the crossroad at Calvary pointed to a dead end. It was a scene of death. Death brings such finality. It is the end. There is no more achievement or accumulation. All activity is over.

Death is not natural. God created us to live. Death is the separation of our very being as the soul leaves the body. That happened also for Jesus when, "With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last."

Because of the conditions of death, some people do not like to think or talk about it. We mask the signs of aging and death's approach with cosmetics and surgery. The emphasis is on looking and feeling young. We view death as a dead end.

Good Friday stands here and declares that Jesus died on a cross. You can't get much lower than that. Crucifixion was a horrid form of death, lingering and painful. It was reserved for the worst criminals and for slaves. The Romans would not use it on their own citizens. Yet the day and its activity were probably routine experiences for the centurion, the commander of the guard assigned to the task of carrying out the crucifixion of the three men that Friday long ago. Surely it was not the first time he had been on the scene and thus he was not touched by the duties as we would be. I cannot imagine driving spikes through flesh. My stomach would churn; I think my muscles would rebel and I would just stand there shaking, unable to strike a strong blow with the hammer. My heart would be filled with pity as the criminal writhed in pain. But the centurion would have been used to it. His feelings were blunted. He could be resolute, like stone.

His spiritual condition was likely the same. If he held to the faith of his nation, he did not know the true and living God. The Romans had many gods, dealing with all areas of life. Mars was the god of war, Jupiter was the chief god, Venus was the goddess of love. They even viewed their emperors as gods. Thus Caesar would have been an object of trust. Their faith rested on mythological beings and human leaders, a real dead end.

Death filled the scene for us. We were dead in transgressions and sins. We caused this day. We should have been there. We deserved that horrible death and worse: we deserved to suffer eternal death in hell. We trust idols of self, pleasure, and possessions. We break God's commands as we lie, cheat, steal, and trample feelings of others in pursuing paths of selfishness and pride. Calvary should be the place of our funeral. We deserve to be the ones parched with thirst, mocked by onlookers, and

forsaken by the heavenly Father. Jesus was bearing all that, which was why He suffered as He hung on the cross.

As we recognize of our conditions, we are filled with remorse. We reflect such feelings with the black banners, hanging on the cross and the black stole, the only day of the year it is worn. Our hymns are in a minor key. We have times for somber and silent reflection in the service. We will leave in silence. We mourn the death of Jesus. The signs pointed to a dead end.

## II.

Keep your eyes on the scene and you will see that the road extends to life. This day of history produced a change in the centurion. As he went about his duties the man observed differences in one of the condemned men he watched that day. If he had started the day with the prisoner, he would have heard Him tell Pilate that He was a king but that His kingdom was not of this world. He also would have observed Pilate's struggles to release Jesus as he had found no guilt in Him. On the route to the hill outside the city this man gave instructions to the women not to weep for Him but for themselves and their children. He heard the victim pray for His enemies, including the centurion, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." He witnessed the strange darkness at midday and heard the agonized cry that pierced the scene, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" He also heard the shout of victory, "It is finished," and the way Jesus committed His spirit into His Father's hands as He breathed His last. This man did not die as a hapless victim but as a willing participant. The centurion also shook during the earthquake that occurred at the moment of Jesus' last breath.

Because of those miracles he witnessed and the day's experiences, things changed for the man. "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!'" Faith came to his dead heart. He likely had heard from the citizens among whom he lived what God had promised through the prophets and what they awaited in the Messiah. This man had to be the one. There was no other like Him. So the Church started growing that day with the addition of this Roman centurion. Good Friday was not a dead end, not for Jesus, for His soul was with His Father, as He had also promised to the thief on the cross beside Him. It was not a dead end for the centurion, who now had the way of life opened before him.

This day also produced a change for us. Because the soul of Jesus was committed to and received by His Father, all is right again. Those sins of ours that He had taken on Himself were all paid for. They are gone from the record. God's anger is satisfied. We are at peace with God through the death of His Son.

The road extends to life because Jesus would rise again as He had predicted. He told the Jews, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up again," referring to the temple of His body. An event in the Old Testament prefigured His resurrection. He once pointed out that as Jonah was in the great fish for three days and came out alive, so would He be in the tomb and come out. And as we know now after the fact, it happened. Jesus returned to life on Easter and lives still as the triumphant and glorious God-man, ruling in heaven and at the same time present with us.

That's why the day is termed "Good Friday". It is good in its outcome for us. That return to life by our Savior provides the message to the sacrament of Holy Communion that we will soon receive.

It is also the beginning of life for us. We have been connected with Jesus. The apostle Paul wrote to the Romans, "All of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death. We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin...Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him...In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus." New life is yours because Jesus died for you and rose again, continuing past signs saying there was a dead end on a road extending to life. Follow that road in thankful love and serve your Savior with your whole life.

In reality, Good Friday meant a dead end only for death. Look to Jesus in faith like the centurion and have life. We will still leave our service in contemplative silence, for this day is like no other. It is a day of overwhelming thoughts. Jesus, who is true God and cannot die, did die; He died for me and my sins. He did it in love beyond comparison or comprehension. He did it to remove the signs pointing to a dead end and instead extended the road to life everlasting. Glory be to Jesus!