

“Keep Looking”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
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Luke 23:35-43

“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” The last words Jesus spoke to another human being before his death, at least in the Gospel of Luke, he uttered to a criminal dying on the cross right next him, in reply to the man’s simple request: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Basically, he was asking for prayer, but Jesus gave the criminal more than he asked for. Instead of merely being remembered, he would accompany Jesus into the kingdom that very day.

The spontaneity and generosity shown by Jesus has triggered both delight and controversy. The delight comes from the graciousness displayed by Jesus, an innocent man dying in agony, toward a self-confessed criminal. Nothing could better express the love and mercy Jesus wants to share with everyone. It’s an episode that perhaps best illustrates the power of radical forgiveness to heal and reconcile.

Yet such generosity from Jesus has also caused concern among some. This “death bed” request includes no emotional conversion experience, viewed by some as absolutely necessary for salvation. There little repentance, no actual confession, nor did he live out his new birth of discipleship, though we might excuse him that last one, considering he was hanging on a cross about to die.

And yet when everyone else had abandoned or were mocking Jesus, this single criminal somehow saw him for who he was and summoned the gumption to request that Jesus remember him. Perhaps that is what makes this scene so remarkable. Somehow the criminal who asked the

favor figured out who Jesus was, despite the fact that he was probably the least likely person to do so. Just consider the cast of characters involved.

First, we have the people identified as “the leaders,” who “scoffed at [Jesus].” These leaders were the religious elite of Jerusalem, the “holy rollers” of their day. They played an instrumental role in convincing the Romans to crucify Jesus, and from the base of the cross, they taunted him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!” The irony of their cruelty is that they should have been in a better position than anyone else to know that Jesus was the Messiah.

They were ostensibly the best educated theologians of their generation. Their entire lives were dedicated to understanding and applying scripture. If anyone should have been in a position to recognize the Messiah, it was the religious leaders. Yet they had no clue. Maybe he was just not the Messiah they expected, or maybe he was not the Messiah they preferred.

Whichever way, they consistently resisted him, and as soon as they figured out he wasn’t going to go away, they began to plot his demise. The change he brought was too much of a threat to them. Jesus represented the prospect of loss, the removal of something precious, namely their power and authority, their privileged position in society. Jesus threatened to supersede that role, so they conspired to have him killed.

Then, of course, there are the soldiers of Rome, standing at the place called The Skull. They deserve some measure of pity, stranded so far from home, assigned a task that would make monsters out of the kindest of men. Still, none of them exhibited any awareness of who Jesus was, until a single Centurion made his statement of faith *after* Jesus’ death. While he was still alive, the soldiers heaped scorn on Jesus, just like everyone else.

They were without doubt the most powerful people in that crowd. For starters, they were armed and authorized to use force at the slightest provocation with little fear of reprisal. Where the religious leaders had knowledge made useless by their fear of loss, the Roman soldiers had strength and the will to use it, but their ignorance – and dare we say, their arrogance -- made them prone to contempt.

Third, we have the disciples. Or rather we don't, because the disciples' absence from the scene speaks more loudly than any of the slurs shouted by those present. At the crucial moment in the history of the world, the disciples were hiding for fear: perfectly understandable; disappointing nonetheless. More than anyone else, they shared an intimate connection with Jesus – they saw and heard things few others had – but when the going got tough, the disciples ran.

Their reaction was natural, and quite possibly adaptive. Without their flight, the message of Jesus might have died with all twelve of them crucified on a hill. Nevertheless, for those who knew him best, the song goes something like this: “Were you there when they crucified my Lord? No. No. No. No.”

Finally, there's the other criminal, the one who joined his executioners in making fun of Jesus. I understand the whole, if-you-can't-beat-'em-join-'em racket, but when you're imitating the people who are putting you to death, you've got some serious issues. Maybe he was just a mean ole cuss. Maybe a life of crime had hardened him to the point where he had lost all perspective. Who knows what made this criminal different from the other one. But they were different.

Some have speculated that the criminal who asked to be remembered by Jesus had somehow gotten to know him in the dungeons, and was therefore in a better position to ask him

for that special favor. But when you look at the hurried pace Jesus' betrayal, arrest, trial, torture, and crucifixion, there's precious little time for anything like that. A few go farther and claim that the criminal knew Jesus long before their crucifixion, which isn't out of the realm of possibility, but there's nothing in the text to suggest it. Others argue that the criminal who sought mercy from Jesus had heard rumors of who he was supposed to be.

That could be true, I suppose, but a small detail sheds doubt on this notion. Throughout the Gospel of Luke, people address Jesus with some sort of honorific title, like Son of God or Son of Man or Master or Teacher. Only one person, in whole huge Gospel of Luke, simply calls him Jesus, and that was the criminal beside him on a cross.

What was it about that criminal who asked for help? Was there something special in his DNA? Did his parents raise him better? Did he run around with a slightly less depraved crowd than the other criminal? Was he better read, or more reflective? Did the Spirit give him special insight? Who knows, and what does it matter?

Well, it matters plenty, because we occupy positions similar to those featured in the story. We might have been or might be or someday may become like the religious leaders or the Roman soldiers or the original disciples or one of the crucified criminals flanking Jesus. Certainly, the latter is true for each of us.

We have a lot in common with those criminals. Our time is running out. Maybe not as fast as theirs was, but at a steady rate none of us can control. Nobody knows how much time may be left. Just like those criminals, we bear the guilt of deeds we done, soiled by sin and in need of salvation.

Some might argue that only those who share the second criminal's desperation, only those who have reached rock bottom, can see Jesus for who he is and have the audacity to ask for

such an amazing grace so richly undeserved. And yet desperation alone cannot account for the stunning spontaneous faith of that crucified criminal, because everyone was desperate.

The religious leaders were desperate to maintain the respect of the crowds and their control over them. That's why they conspired to kill Jesus. The Roman soldiers were desperate to keep their power and security and their image of invincibility. That's why they nailed him to cross. The disciples were desperate to remain free and alive. That's they stayed away and hid. The other criminal was desperate to get off that cross. So what was it about the desperation of the criminal who called upon Jesus that made him different?

Until we join the criminal and Jesus in paradise, God willing, we may never know for sure, and perhaps we don't need to know, because what we have learned is that there are some serious obstacles that can easily prevent us from seeing Jesus for who he is, asking for mercy, and receiving what he has to offer.

To what extent are we like the religious leaders, desperate to make God's word conform to our most cherished expectations? Do we seek to limit God's ability to surprise us? Are we locked into a narrow way of perceiving, or is there room for God to do something fresh in our lives and in our world?

Are we like the Roman soldiers, so concerned about supremacy and might, so desperate to insure security in a hostile land, that we aren't willing to take risks that could shatter our illusions of control? Are we so inured to violence that we can longer witness the presence of Christ and his peace?

Are we like the original disciples, so afraid of the consequences of following Jesus that we hide our faith, receding into the background while we wait to see how things shake out? Do we view discipleship as a means to an end, with the end being unalloyed goodness and pleasure,

and does this faulty perception cause us to feel betrayed and to flee when discipleship brings us the discomfort of unwanted challenges and changes or disappointments that fail to conform to our expectations?

Are we like the other criminal, so blinded by rage and hate and resentment that our vision is truncated to the point where we can only see the very next thing ahead of us? For the criminal who mocked Jesus, it was all about getting off the cross. The criminal who did not mock Jesus saw the possibility of something much more.

What made that second criminal different, and how can we be different like him? How can we see who Jesus is, and ask for what we truly need, rather than for what we desperately want? Well, the first obvious step is to avoid the obstacles that tripped up the others: being obsessed with being right all the time; reliance upon the security the world falsely offers, as opposed to the sanctity God truly offers. Once we've avoided the obstacles, we're much more likely to see Jesus, though it still can be difficult.

You may remember an art fad that became popular back in the 90's, the hidden three-dimensional graphic. I'm sure many of you have seen these. They look, upon first glance, like a randomly scrambled mess of colors, but if you stare at it long enough, and let your eyes change focus, a concealed three-dimensional image will emerge.

Some people, no matter how hard they try, cannot to see these images, and I am one of them, perhaps because I tried too hard and didn't just let things happen. But I am convinced that when it comes to Jesus, unlike these cleverly concealed 3-D images, everyone CAN see him, as long as we persistent in looking at things differently, without trying too hard, without trying to do it all on our own, instead of relying on the grace of Jesus.

Some people will see who Jesus is faster than others. Everyone will lose focus on Jesus from time to time. Some people will continue to insist that there is no Jesus to see. Others will say that there is only one way you can see Jesus, and of course, *their* way is always the *only* way.

The questions we need to consider in the days and weeks ahead is, “Are we looking?” How hard? Have we seen Jesus yet? Keep looking for Jesus with sincerity and humbleness of heart. Keep looking until you find mercy and forgiveness, despite the risk, because once you see Jesus for who he really is, truly I tell you, you have found Paradise, for the Kingdom dwells in him. Amen.