

**April 14, 2017 – Annunciation Episcopal Church – Good Friday**

**Rev. Elizabeth Molitors**

***“Jesus, remember me...”***

**Luke 23:42**

The inmates at Shawshank prison are all innocent. Or at least that's what they all say. Near the beginning of the movie, Shawshank Redemption, we see the routine that the more senior prisoners go through when a new inmate arrives. They ask this one new guy, Andy Dufresne – what are you in for? Why did you do it? Andy explains that he's been framed for a crime he never committed, that circumstantial evidence was simply against him. I'm innocent, he says, and I shouldn't be here. One of the other prisoners, Red, laughs and says that Andy is going to fit right in, because everyone at Shawshank is innocent – just ask 'em! Everybody got a raw deal, everybody had a bad lawyer, everybody had circumstantial evidence working against them. Andy doesn't realize, though, until he's been in the prison for a while, that these claims of innocence by man after man are meant as a kind of cynical joke, a way to cope with the fear and the tedium of their circumstance, a way to distance themselves from their guilt and suffering; a railing against the general unfairness of life.

Atop a hill outside of Jerusalem: three crosses. Jesus, in the middle, flanked by two criminals who were convicted of a crime serious enough to have warranted the penalty of death on a cross. Maybe they did what they'd been accused of doing, maybe they were completely innocent. Whatever brought them to where they are, their own circumstance isn't what holds their attention. They are interested in the man who hangs between them. If they hadn't heard of Jesus before, they know a bit more about him now. Surely, they've seen the crowds that were so interested in Jesus' trial. They heard the people who shouted for Jesus' blood when Pilate asked whether Jesus or Barabbas

should be set free. Maybe they also heard the incensed mutterings of others who thought that Jesus was getting a raw deal but they didn't want to speak up, for fear that the crowd might turn on them, might accuse them of being one of Jesus' accomplices. Maybe, as they hung on their respective crosses, the two criminals asked Jesus the questions posed to new prisoners: so, what are you in for? And, why'd you do it?

It's possible that Jesus answered, like any other inmate at Shawshank: that he'd been framed for a crime he never committed, that the people who convicted him misunderstood the work he was trying to do. That he wasn't making a power grab – he had no interest in being a king like the Romans thought of kings. If he was guilty of anything at all it was of holding up a mirror to the society and faith he was part of, and reflecting back what was already there. If the Romans didn't like what was reflected back, that was of their own doing. If the chief priests and pharisees didn't like what they saw, that was of their own doing, as well. Railing against Jesus about healing on the sabbath, trying to paint him into a corner about fine considerations of religious law....well, that just reinforced what Jesus had said all along. The religious authorities were focused on compliance with every jot and tittle of religious purity while Jesus pointed to the Kingdom of God.

It's possible that Jesus, as he hung between the two other men being crucified, went on about his own innocence and railed against the unfair sequence of events that led him to where he was now. But, I don't think so. He'd lived long enough, seen more than enough, to know that the rain falls on the just and the unjust alike. Throughout his ministry, Jesus saw instance after instance of unfair suffering; he also witnessed true despots skate through life unchallenged. He knew the bigger truth, too: that none of us are completely innocent.

But while most of us are mightily concerned with fairness (especially when we're the ones unjustly accused) Jesus was more focused on redemption, and the transformation that redemption can bring about.

If we stay in the place of stewing about our own guilt or innocence – feeling horrible for what we've done or bitter for having been unfairly accused – then we run the risk of not seeing the redeemer hanging right there next to us.

The one criminal – he got it. For whatever reason, he understood that there was something that Jesus had to offer him, and so he reached out and said, please remember me. Please do something with the junk of my life, and make it so my dying in this way isn't the most significant thing of my life. Redeem me.

If you could change places with that one criminal, what would you ask of Jesus? What is it in your life that needs to be redeemed?

At the beginning of Lent, I read a reflection by a clergy colleague, a woman who is an avid organic gardener and former farmer. On Ash Wednesday, she wrote about her compost pile where, as she put it, “the waste of our daily lives—food scraps, fallen leaves, grass clippings, plant material—is slowly acted upon by nature, slowly transfigured into life-giving soil.”

Composting as redemption; it's a rich, powerful image.

In a moment, we'll come to the part of the service where you have the opportunity to come forward to honor the cross, the symbol of Jesus' sacrifice for us. But let's not just honor Jesus – let's give him the opportunity to do in our lives what he went to that

cross to do. Redemption. And the good news is that we don't have to wait until the eve of our death, like the criminal beside Jesus, to reach out and ask him to remember and redeem us.

As you come forward to the cross, I invite you to pick up a piece of this compostable paper. There are pencils here, as well. You can write on it – a word or two – or not. Let the paper symbolize what it is that you'd like redeemed – what in your life needs to be transformed into something life-giving, something nourishing, something healed. You can leave your scraps of paper in the basket by the cross, and I'll add them to my home compost pile. This paper, along with other discards from my kitchen and yard, will slowly be turned into rich soil, that will feed the garden beds that grow the tomatoes from which seeds will be harvested next fall to be grown again next spring. And all the while, as the worms and nematodes and enzymes are breaking down and transforming your bit of paper, at the same time God will be working in you – composting, transforming, and redeeming whatever it is that keeps you stuck, unable to fully live the life God desires for you to live. *Amen.*