

WHAT EASTER MEANS TO ME
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Good Friday is not just one day of the year. It is a day relived in every day of the world, and in every day of our lives in the world. In the Christian view of things, all reality revolves around the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As the Passover marks Israel's liberation from bondage in Egypt, so the death and resurrection of Christ marks humanity's passage from death to life. Good Friday cannot be confined to Holy Week, and it is more than merely the dismal but necessary prelude to the joy of Easter. Every day of the year is a good day to think about Good Friday, for Good Friday is the drama of the love by which our every day is sustained.

There is nothing more central to Christianity than what happened on Good Friday. What happened on that day is crucial. In fact, the word "crucial" comes from the Latin word *crux*, meaning "cross." The cross is the crux of Christianity. If what Christians say about Good Friday is true, then it is the truth about everything.

In today's world, the Holocaust is the only culturally available symbol of absolute evil. It is the only thing on which everyone, or almost everyone, agrees. Unlike Stalin or Mao, Hitler has no defenders in respectable circles. So the Holocaust has become the symbol of the worst that could happen. As some tell the story, the twentieth century was the century of the Holocaust. It was the century of the cross, with the Holocaust representing the cross. But it is a cross without Christ, which makes all the difference. The cross is not simply the horror and the tragedy and the shame of it all. It is the death of this specific man, Jesus of Nazareth, who is God and who, therefore, experiences in his death the death of every man and woman.

All the while he hung on the cross they mocked him. "You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself by coming down from the cross!"¹ "He

¹Matt 27:40; Mark 15:29-30.

saved others, but he cannot save himself.”² “Let God deliver him if he cares for him for he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’”³ With little variation, all four Gospels report a threefold mockery. In this story, things happen in threes. In Gethsemane, Jesus prays three times and three times comes back to find the disciples sleeping. Peter denies him three times. The three mockeries at the end of Jesus’ life match the three temptations by Satan at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. Satan prefaced his temptations with, “If you are the Son of God . . .” And so the echo at the cross: “If you are the Son of God.” Satan is there, there at the cross. Is it possible that he is winning after all?

The past is returning with a vengeance. Mary had whispered to the baby, “You will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and of your kingdom there will be no end.”⁴ Now in his death struggle on the cross, the words of Mary and the angel—almost word for word—are thrown back at Jesus, spoken with contempt and derision. In Matthew’s Gospel, the connection between the three temptations and the three mockeries are especially easy to see. Back then in the wilderness, Jesus could have met Satan’s challenges. He could have changed the stones into bread; he could have jumped safely from the pinnacle of the temple; he could have held political power over the world. And so now on the cross, he could have met the challenge of those who mocked him; he could come down from the cross and silence those who are ridiculing his claim to be the Son of God. But had he done so in the wilderness, and if he does so now on Golgotha, he would not be who he claims to be; he would not be the Son living and dying in perfect obedience the Father’s will. Only as he remains on the cross to the death does Jesus prove that he is indeed the Son of God.

The story is called the passion narrative, and we are reminded that the word “passion” is from the Latin, meaning “to suffer.” In a time when “passion” is associated with heavy-breathing romance and the selling of perfumes, we are stunned by the reminder that to love is to suffer and that suffering is not always sweet. In real love, the stakes are high; it is risking absolutely all.

Throughout the story, Psalm 22 keeps intruding. More precisely, Psalm 22 is being

²Matt 27:42; Mark 15:31; Luke 23:35.

³Matt 27:43.

⁴Adapted from Luke 1:30-33.

played out on Golgotha.

But I am a worm, less than human;
scorned by men, despised by people.
All who see me mock me;
they curl their lips,
they shake their heads.
“Let him commit himself to the LORD;
let Him rescue him,
let Him save him,
for He is pleased with him” (vv. 6-8).

Where now are all Jesus’ wonderful sayings about being one with the Father? Where now is that warm security that comes from knowing that the heavenly Father cares for every sparrow that falls and numbers every hair on our heads? Son of God indeed! Some God. Some Son.

“My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?” (v. 1). The anguished cry of Psalm 22 becomes, on the lips of Jesus, the most gut-wrenching cry of loneliness in the history of the world.⁵ “My God, my God!” he screamed, “Why have You forsaken me?” Never have words carried so much hurt. Never has one being been so lonely. It is more than Jesus can bear. He withstood the beatings and he remained strong at the mock trials. He watched in silence as those he loved ran away. He did not retaliate when the insults were hurled nor did he scream when the nails pierced his hands. But when God turned his head, that was more than he could handle. “My God!” The wail rises from parched lips. The holy heart is broken. The sinbearer screams as he enters into the eternal wasteland.

“My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?” Always before Jesus has addressed God as “Father.” When speaking to God or about God, it was with great familiarity. “All things have been given over to me by my Father,” Jesus told the disciples. “No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”⁶ Those to whom Jesus had revealed the Father, he taught them to pray, “Our Father in heaven.”⁷ In Gethsemane, Jesus had prayed, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you

⁵Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34.

⁶Matt 11:27; Luke 10:22; cf. John 16:15.

⁷Matt 6:9; Luke 11:2.

will.”⁸ Three times he prayed that, and three times there was no answer, unless this seemingly endless agony on the cross is the answer. Now, having drunk the dregs of the cup, he cries out as mortals beyond number have cried out in their agony—not to a familiar or to a beloved, not to “Father,” but to “God”—to a God out there somewhere, but obviously not here. The anguished cry of abandonment to a God who is absent.

But . . . note that even the apparently absent God is still “*My God, my God.*” He was mine before—and He will be mine again. Recall, also, that Psalm 22 does not end on the note of desolation.

For He did not scorn, He did not spurn
the plea of the lowly;
He did not hid His face from him;
when he cried out to Him, He listened (v. 24).

And then the conclusion:

Offspring shall serve Him;
the Lord’s fame shall be proclaimed to the generation to come;
they shall tell of His righteousness to people yet to be born,
for He has acted (vv. 30-31).

Did Jesus, at the moment he cried out, really think that God had abandoned him? If we answer “yes” to that question, we would seem to be denying his divinity and we would seem to be dividing the Trinity. In Mark’s Gospel, this cry is immediately followed by an affirmation: “And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that he thus breathed his last, he said, ‘Truly this man was the Son of God!’”⁹ How can this be? How can the one who is, even in his dying, true God and true man be abandoned by God? The very idea would seem to split apart the two natures of the one who is Jesus Christ. Such are the questions that boggle our minds as we try to understand this moment on the cross. These and greater difficulties are to be expected when we reflect on the apparently impossible proposition that on a certain Friday afternoon God died.

This is what Easter means to me: on a certain “Good Friday” God died.

OBERSERVANCE OF LORD’S SUPPER

⁸Matthew 26:36-46; Mark 14:32-42; Luke 22:39-46.

⁹Mark 15:39.

After Good Friday comes Easter Sunday. And with Easter Sunday comes the resurrection morning! The cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ represent total opposites: death and life, the absence of God and the nearness of God, godforsakenness and the glory of God. Jesus abandoned by his Father to death and Jesus raised to life in the divine glory.

This is what Easter means to me: on a certain “Easter Sunday” God arose from the dead.

^{Luke 24:1}On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. ²They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. ⁴While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. ⁵In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? ⁶He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: ⁷“The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.”” ⁸Then they remembered his words.