

SUNDAY Gospel of the Unseen

Scripture: Luke 23:32-47 (selected verses)

Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him ... The soldiers also mocked him ... One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Having said this, he breathed his last. When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, "Certainly this man was innocent."

MONDAY Luke 21:5-38 Faith in the face of catastrophe

Jesus had bad news—the Temple, the place where Jews met with God, would be destroyed. Still more, great hardship and persecution would follow the Temple's destruction. Jesus' shocking words about the Jerusalem Temple came true in 70 A.D. Despite the dire facts of this life, Jesus urged his listeners to keep faith through the hardship. His central message was, "Don't be alarmed ... raise your heads, because your redemption is near."

- Picture a worst-case scenario, the hardest tragedy you can imagine. That's what the destruction of the Temple sounded like to first-century Jewish ears. Jesus told his hearers this unthinkable event would happen, yet told them to keep their faith because their "redemption was near" (verse 28). Think back to a hard time you've faced. Did your faith help you "weather the storm"? What made it hard to keep your faith in the midst of the hardship?
- The life of faith is not always easy. Scholar N. T. Wright put it this way: "This is what it's about: not an exciting battle, with adrenalin flowing and banners flying, but the steady tread, of prayer and hope and scripture and sacrament and witness, day by day and week by week." What is there that's testing your faith journey right now? Who has modeled living with patient faith when life gets hard for you?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I trust you even when life gets difficult. Give me the strength and patience I need to deal with life's struggles, the ones I am facing now and those that will come in the future. Amen.

TUESDAY Luke 22:1-30 Jesus re-imagined the Passover

The annual Passover meal (part of the weeklong Festival of Unleavened Bread) reminded Hebrews of God's great act rescuing them from Egypt (cf. Exodus 12:1-18). It was their defining story. When Jesus and his disciples shared the Passover meal, with the cross just ahead, Jesus added meaning to the meal. He said that, from that time on, the bread and wine would point to his even greater act of deliverance in dying and rising again.

- The Passover pointed to God's great act in the past. When Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, it didn't just recall the cross, but also pointed forward. The *CEB Study Bible* notes that "until it is fulfilled" (verse 16) "is a promise to Luke's readers that the kingdom truly will come." Do you trust that God's promises are not just empty "church talk," but offer a future you can count on? How can taking part in Communion reinforce your trust and hope?
- Scholar William Barclay noted of verse 10 that in Jesus' day, "A man carrying a jar of water would be as easy to pick out as, say, a man using a lady's umbrella on a wet day. This was a pre-arranged signal." Jesus made careful preparations for this important meal. In what ways can you intentionally prepare your heart to get the most out of being with Jesus in worship this Easter?

Prayer: Living Lord, I rejoice in your saving acts in the past. But even more, I look forward with such eagerness to the day when you fully establish your kingdom. Keep me faithfully on track until that day. Amen.

WEDNESDAY Luke 22:31-62 The storm broke—and Peter failed

"Lord," Peter said, "I'm ready to go with you, both to prison and to death!" Ancient Christian tradition said Peter was crucified in Rome around 64 A.D., but when he spoke these words, he wasn't, in fact, "ready" for that. Jesus knew him better than he knew himself. Jesus was arrested, and when bystanders said he must have been with Jesus, Peter denied it three times. Then a rooster crowed, and Peter "went out and cried uncontrollably."

- Of all the disciples, only Peter walked on water (Matthew 14:28-29). He was first to say flat out that Jesus was the Messiah (Mark 8:27-29). He was no coward—just a human being under pressure. Has pressure ever led you to be ashamed of and to hide your allegiance to Jesus? Jesus told those who arrested him, "This is your time, when darkness rules." Was there anything Peter might have done to keep the darkness from seeping into his soul (cf. verse 46)?
- In *24 Hours that Changed the World*, Pastor Hamilton noted that all four gospels tell of Peter's shattering failure. Yet when the gospels were written, Peter was known as a great apostle, a prominent church leader. It seems likely that he himself told the story—that he had openly shared his failure, and the forgiveness and hope he'd found in its wake. When have you grown through a failure that you were able to embrace and learn from by God's grace?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, like Peter, I keep learning things about myself, finding a need to grow in areas I thought I had down cold. Thank you for your ongoing grace, for nudging me to grow even when I'm comfortable. Amen.

THURSDAY (Maundy Thursday) Luke 22:63-23:12

They “tried” Jesus—and condemned themselves

Throughout most of his public ministry, Jesus’ enemies had dogged his footsteps, claiming that he was a false teacher, perhaps even demonic (cf. Luke 11:14-16). But when they had him in their power, the contrast was striking. Jesus remained calm and in control of himself. The leaders, who claimed great “righteousness,” were frenzied, unfair and cruel, showing a spirit tragically filled with hatred and evil.

- In verse 63, Luke said Jesus’ guards taunted and beat him BEFORE the council met for the trial (Luke 22:66). This was a classic Alice in Wonderland “trial”—“verdict first, evidence later.” Pontius Pilate, a tough Roman career politician, saw through their charges, saying, “I find no legal basis for action against this man.” Have anyone ever treated you unfairly? In what ways can you grow toward having the spirit with which Jesus endured this mockery of a trial?
- The religious leaders loathed tax collectors for working with Rome. Now they readily set aside that “principle” to demand that the Roman procurator help them kill Jesus. Have you ever seen (or been) a person who was willing to use bad means to achieve a desired purpose? From God’s perspective, who was really on trial—Jesus, or Pilate and the religious leaders, who refused to acknowledge Jesus as their king?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I wasn’t part of that awful kangaroo trial. But fear or prejudice can blind me, too. Forgive me, cleanse me and give me a clearer vision of how my actions can heal or harm. Amen.

FRIDAY (Good Friday) Luke 23:13-46

“They crucified him, along with the criminals”

Three times (verse 22) Pilate asked Jesus’ accusers why they were so insistent on his death. He got no coherent answers, yet “their voices won out” (verse 23). Jesus was nailed to a cross by a public road. He asked God to forgive his executioners, promised a crucified thief eternal life, and prayed Psalm 31:5 as he died. On that bad Friday, Jesus absorbed and transformed human evil into God’s central saving act, and turned the day into “Good Friday.”

- Pontius Pilate was somebody—Rome’s highest official in Jerusalem. Jesus looked like a nobody—a poor, traveling rabbi despised and rejected by the leaders of his own faith community. All through the gospel, Luke pointed to the way God lifts up the nobodies. Trying to remain a somebody, Pilate agreed to a gross injustice. Have you ever had to decide whether to do something you believe is right even if it will cause many people to be upset with you, maybe even turn against you? How did you decide?
- We know many Jewish mothers used Psalm 31:5 (“into your hand I entrust my life”) as a children’s bedtime prayer. Jesus may well have learned the verse from Mary as a little boy, and repeated it on the cross. Mary was there that day (Luke 23:49). Imagine what she must have felt hearing her dying son repeat the trusting words of the bedtime prayer she taught him so many years earlier. Are you able to entrust your life fully into God’s hand?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, your example of trust, at a moment of pain and death, shows me again that in your kingdom “the worst thing is never the last thing.” Into your hand I entrust my life. Amen.

SATURDAY Luke 23:47-56 “They saw the tomb”

Luke reported two unexpected acts after Jesus died. The Roman centurion, after directing the crucifixion, “praised God, saying, ‘It’s really true: this man was righteous.’” That testimony might have been especially telling to a person like Theophilus (cf. Luke 1:1-4). The Romans meant crucifixion to create humiliation and fear, so they often left crucified corpses in the open. Belatedly, Joseph of Arimathea, a council member and silent dissenter at Jesus’ mock trial, went public to give the body a decent burial. No one expected the resurrection, but Joseph’s act unwittingly made Easter more powerful, because Jesus’ friends knew just where his body was.

- Scholar N. T. Wright sums up today’s passage: “It really happened. It wasn’t a mistake. We didn’t get it wrong. It’s true. You can rely on it. This is the main point of Luke’s account of Jesus’ death and burial. He began his book telling Theophilus he could rely on these facts, and now that the most vital one is before us he presents his witnesses one by one. The centurion saw ... The crowds standing by saw ... Jesus’ followers, not least the women, stood at some distance, but they too saw ... Then the burial: again, the women saw what happened ... Evidence. Eyewitnesses. This is what Luke promised, and this is what he’s now giving us.” Every witness, every fact was vital—on Easter, an otherwise incredible, one-of-a-kind event was coming. Ponder how different Jesus’ impact on your life would be if the story ended here.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, you walked into the darkest prison I know of: the prison of death. You went there with a purpose: to break the doors of that dark place wide open. Thank you for bringing light into darkness, life out of death. Amen.

Family Activity: Celebrate Easter! Prepare a simple breakfast treat. You will need crescent roll dough, large marshmallows, melted butter, cinnamon and sugar. Wrap a crescent roll triangle around a marshmallow. Dip the roll in melted butter, then in the sugar and cinnamon. Bake the rolls according to package directions. The marshmallow will disappear and leave an empty, sweet surprise. At Easter breakfast, read John 20:1-14. Invite each family member to take one bite out of his or her roll. Celebrate that the tomb is empty (like the roll), and Jesus rose and is alive! Consider baking an extra batch and sharing with your neighbors along with the good news of Easter!

This study was adapted from The United Methodist Church of the Resurrection.