

“So Jesus was Dead”

John 18 & 19 and Luke 23:45b

Good Friday, March 29, 2013

Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

The Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor

So Jesus was dead.

For anything wonderful to come of this Good Friday and of the day we long for, when Easter “Alleluias” again will be sung and trumpets dare to declare God’s triumph over death, we must pause and let this truth sink into the fiber of our being: Jesus was dead. Not pretend dead; not the appearance of death; but, in the words of the Creed, “*crucified, dead and buried.*”

It is not a pleasant place. It calls to mind those whom we have loved and lost; to feel that ache and emptiness that never is quite filled; to remember early mornings at loved ones’ graves in cemetery’s spring. Touching on such painful places of the soul gives us, if but fleetingly, some measure of the disciples loss and of the utter desolation of the people as their valiant leader died a most ignoble death. Using an idiom from the old cops and robbers movies, it is “curtains” for Jesus. So I say again: Jesus was dead.

That Jesus’ death was undeserved and gruesome is woven through the passion story. The religious leaders could not articulate a charge to Pilate, saying only “if this man were not a criminal we would not have handed him over to you.” (vs. 30) Pilate found no case against him (vs. 38). The only blessing in this tortured death by asphyxiation was that his close friends were close by and his bones were not broken since the soldiers found him dead. Both fulfilled scriptures in Psalm 34:20 and Zechariah 12:10. Small comfort. For those who think righteous living spares us from human travail, these are sobering images. If Jesus, as good as ever a human was, was so treated, what is left for us?

I want to answer that question with a line from the passion according to Luke that we heard read last Sunday. It is a quiet, almost

innocuous line. Verse 45b of Chapter 23 says “*the curtain of the temple was torn in two.*”

Most of us are familiar enough with curtains. A shower curtain keeps the water in the tub. Living room curtains keep out neighbor’s prying eyes. Some rooms use curtains that protect from the fading effects of ultraviolet light. The Iron Curtain kept out freedom. A theatre curtain shields the stage from the audience until the actors are ready.

But what of the temple curtain? The temple curtain surrounded the most sacred space in the temple, the “Holy of Holies.” The Holy of Holies was a vestige of the time when Israel was a nomadic people and the Ark of the Covenant reminded them of the presence of God in their midst. After they became a settled people and Solomon’s temple was built, the Ark of the Covenant was placed in the Holy of Holies. It was the most sacred place in the temple, a reminder of God’s presence in the center of religious life, and separated by a curtain because of the belief that no one could look upon God and live.

In the hierarchy of the temple, only the chief priest could go behind the curtain to the Holy of Holies. In fact, the hierarchy was clearly specified. Furthest away from the Holy of Holies was the Court of the Gentiles, then closer the Court of Women, then the men, then the priests and, finally, the chief priest. So sacred was this place that when the chief priest entered, a rope was tied around his waist so that, should he fall or die while in the Holy of Holies, he could be pulled out rather than have the unworthy enter and profane themselves and the temple.

So although it is “curtains” for Jesus, his death tore the curtain in two. His death eliminates the curtain between us and God. The curtain is torn in two and nothing is ever the same again. Nothing can ever separate us from the love of God, not even death. As we sang moments ago in the words of Charles Wesley:

*The veil is rent; in Christ alone the living way to heaven is seen;
The middle wall is broken down, and all the world may enter in.*