

Confronting a Cross with an Empty Tomb

Acts 16; Selected Scriptures

After a very somber week...Passion Week...over 2000 years ago... a week of events under the cloud of Jesus going to the cross...the saddest event in all of history... *if* that was the end of the story... but it wasn't!...then came Sunday... an empty tomb...death was NOT victorious... a resurrected Jesus!...the most joyful day in history.

He is risen!...*He is risen indeed!*

This morning I want to look at a passage in Scripture you probably never have looked at on Resurrection Sunday... I know I've never heard an Easter sermon on Acts 16... but I'm going to give it a shot today.

It is a familiar story for those familiar with the Bible... I came to it last Monday as I have been reading through the book of Acts for my own personal Bible study time... I've read and heard this story throughout my life...especially in Sunday School as a child... I've never made a link connecting it to Easter....until last Monday.

On Tuesday this week I was asked to speak at a chapel service for about 80 1st through 12th graders....there's a challenge!... I wrestled with what to talk on... I decided to get their help with what I would preach on today...Easter.

I told them that this would be my 22nd Easter message to the same church... The resurrection can be preached on thousands of times and never get old...but I told them I would like to do something a little differently in that I have spoken on the death and resurrection of Jesus from almost every angle imaginable over the last 22 years... *What should I speak on?*

A first grader spoke out.... Noah and the Flood!... that WOULD be different.... so I ran by them my idea for this message to get their input... they told me to go for it.... so I'm going for it... We will be looking at passages in a few New Testament books this morning....Beginning and centering on the story in Acts... so if you have your Bibles turn with me to Acts 16.

The apostle Paul had been traveling with Barnabas preaching the gospel and starting churches in Antioch... a disagreement... a rather serious one arose between the two and they parted ways... Barnabus teams up with Mark and sailed away to Cypress....

And the apostle Paul teams up with Silas... who was one of the original leaders of the Jerusalem church... and they went the opposite direction through Syria and Cilicia on their way to

Galatia... They arrived in Philippi in what would be the very beginning of the Philippian church which they would establish there.

The story begins in verse 16... let's go through it:

Read verse 16

This young slave girl had “**a spirit of divination**”...literally in the Greek *A spirit of the Python*... or a python spirit... interesting story in Greek mythology... behind that which we don't have time for... bottom line... she was a medium who had contact with demons... a demon possessed girl.

It was believed that one demon possessed could foretell the future...a fortuneteller or soothsayer... apparently some men had been making a lot of money off of this girl's fortunetelling... she was their business!... Paul and Silas were going around Philippi apparently spreading the gospel...

And for some reason... this girl apparently followed them wherever they went... and she began to drive Paul nuts...

Read verses 17-18

Paul had had enough!...he casts out the demonic spirit in the name of Jesus Christ... and the spirit is immediately gone!

Read verse 19

Here's what I've learned at this point... **If you want to continue preaching don't mess with people's money**...*unless you want to be faithful* ...these men are furious that their business just got shut down by Paul and Silas... they didn't care about the girl at all...

Read verses 20-21

Those are trumped up charges designed to get Paul and Silas thrown in jail...the design worked!...It's important to note that what happens to Paul and Silas next are the results of false charges on them...these were innocent men... they hadn't violated any law... they were simply looking for a place of prayer.

Read verse 22

The injustice begins...being punished for no just reason...the false trial with the city's magistrates draws a crowd... this is the entertainment of the day!...such trials as these would be outside in the city square where the public could watch ...the crowd gets all stirred up and it says the crowd attacked them.... hitting them.

Their clothes are ripped off of them by the magistrate... they are beaten with rods... rods striking bare skin...not just a few strikes.... But many, many strikes....

Read verse 23

Many wounds...open wounds... bloody wounds... then they are taken and thrown into prison... not just any cell... it says the guard was to guard them securely... High security prison!...

Read verse 24

The “Inner prison” would be the highest security part of the prison... this is where you would put the worst of criminals...did I mention prisons were filthy dirty?... basically the guard was given the instructions and authority to do whatever it took to confine them.

They were put into stocks...If you are like me...your mind goes to the picture of pilgrims in stocks... The stocks consisting of placing boards around the ankles and wrists... as bad as that was... those stocks were not even close to the stocks in Paul’s day.... They were designed for torture.

wooden stocks in that day were designed to spread the legs as far apart as they could go...actually even further... then clamp excruciatingly tight onto the ankles.... Not only was the confinement miserable... but they were designed to make the legs cramp up... with no way for relief.

Miserable!...there certainly was no way they would be able to sleep...for a moment.... Imagine yourselves in this situation.... I did that on Monday... I decided I would be grumbling!...putting it mildly!...you would be too!

We grumble at things far less worse than what Paul and Silas were experiencing!... We grumble when the internet is slow.... When church gets out at 12:05... when Amazon Prime is a day late on delivery... grumble grumble....

But when you have multiple wounds from being beaten... blood dripping from your body... bound in stocks with legs cramping incessantly...surrounded in filth... sleep deprived... verse 25 is amazing.

Read verse 25

Singing hymns of praise to God?!...praying together... How could this be?...that is so... unnatural!...explanation? HAPPY SONGS!How can this be?

Jesus was seized... He was in the Garden of Gethsemane... and through the betrayal of Judas...Jesus is falsely arrested and taken to the “magistrates”... first to the high priests a trial...then to the Roman authorities... Matthew 26

57 Those who had arrested Jesus led Him away to Caiaphas, the high priest, where the scribes and the elders were gathered together. 58 But Peter was following Him at a distance, as far as the courtyard of the high priest, and he came inside and sat down with the officers to see the outcome.

59 Now the chief priests and the entire Council kept trying to obtain false testimony against Jesus, so that they might put Him to death. 60 They did not find any, even though many false witnesses came forward.

In that trial... Matthew tells us:

65 Then the high priest tore his robes and said, “He has blasphemed! What further need do we have of witnesses? See, you have now heard the blasphemy; 66 what do you think?” They answered, “He deserves death! 67 Then they spit in His face and beat Him with their fists; and others slapped Him, 6

After all the trials were over... Jesus was sentenced to death by crucifixion...Matthew 27

27 Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole Roman cohort to Him. 28 And they stripped Him and put a red cloak on Him. 29 And after twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on His head, and put a reed in His right hand which was a mockery... a fake scepter a king would carry.; and they knelt down before Him and mocked Him, saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!” 30 And they spit on Him, and took the reed and beat Him on the head. 31 And after they had mocked Him, they took the cloak off Him and put His own garments back on Him, and led Him away to crucify Him.

Jesus is spent... dripping of blood and sweat... bruised limbs from beatings... He is to carry His cross... over 200lbs... Physical agony...emotional and even spiritual agony all combined to utterly weaken His perfect but now emaciated body.... Simon of Cyrene carries the cross the rest of the way to Golgotha.

Crucifixion is designed to inflict the maximum amount of pain possible... they gave Him wine mixed with gall to drink before He was nailed on the cross... Gall was a bitter narcotic... they gave it to Jesus so that He would be less difficult when He was nailed to the cross...He refused the drink not wanting His senses dulled.

The gospels don't tell us the exact procedure for how they secured Jesus to the cross... later, after Jesus is resurrected... Thomas wants proof it really was Jesus so he wants to see the nail holes in His hands and feet....

Extra biblical Historical accounts of Roman crucifixion tell us that the “criminal”...Jesus would have been placed on the cross as it lay flat on the ground... first His feet would be nailed to the upright beam... then His arms stretched across the horizontal beam and nailed through the wrists just above the hands.

The cross would be picked up and dropped into a hole... causing excruciating pain.... His flesh around the nails would tear...

The cross was agony unimaginable... but the greatest agony for Jesus was God His Father “forsaking” Him... The Father abandoning His Son on the cross... Isaiah says this in Isaiah 53—“**Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed**”

“**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?**” It was the manifestation of God’s hatred of sin, in some unexplained way, that Jesus experienced in that terrible hour. The suffering He endured was due to us... **HERE’S THE QUESTION...**

How could Jesus endure the cross?... How did He endure the cross?... How could Paul and Silas.... Though not even close to the pain and suffering Christ endured... yet terrible suffering nonetheless... How could they sing hymns of praise in their suffering?

Are the two related in some way?... Jesus certainly wasn’t singing hymns of praise...but... being the second person of the Trinity...all powerful God...Jesus at any time could have removed Himself from that cross...

He could have called ten thousand angels

To destroy the world and set Him free.

He could have called ten thousand angels,

But He died alone, for you and me.

He could have taken Himself off that cross... **BUT HE DIDN’T**...why not?... He was there voluntarily...He was there willingly.... He **WANTED** to go through the cross...Not that He wanted the pain but He wanted what the cross would do for us.... **How could He do that?..**

Hebrews 12 gives us great insight into all this... the writer of Hebrews uses the metaphor of running a race for the Christian life...the Christian life is like other lives complete with hardships, injustice, unfairness, struggles and pain.... **THAT’S LIFE!**.... The previous chapter, Hebrews 11 is that great chapter of faith sometimes called the Great Hall of Faith....

A list of Old Testament saints that lived victorious lives of faith in God...Abraham, Isaac, Jacob...Moses...even Rahab!...all imperfect people... just like you and me... but came to faith in God and lived their lives in faith in God...they all ended well... all of these overcame the trials of life through faith in Almighty God.... and the point here in chapter 12 is that they are an example for us to follow.

The writer paints a picture of one running a race...the race represents the trials and tribulations of life... In the first century... the grand athletic events in Greece were the Isthmian Games... much like the Olympics.

In Chapter 12 verse 1 he writes **Therefore...** Pointing back to all those Old Testament saints in chapter 11...in that we have all those examples of people who completed their lives living by faith... **Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us.**

You can picture a stadium full of people watching the races... but these people are not spectators there to be entertained by the games... they are actually those who have already run the race of life...with all that life throws at them... and were victorious....they are examples for us who are still running the race of life.

So... let's look at how they ran the race...learn from them and do the same... it starts with what you wear for the race... sweatsuits are great for warming up for the race... but when running the actual race... the baggy material will become an "encumbrance"... the sweats will prevent the runner from running his fastest.

So he says in verse 1...**let us lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which easily entangles us... and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.**

Get rid of anything that is getting in the way of your walking in faith with God...encumbrances and sin are two separate things but greatly related...Encumbrances are ANYTHING that could get in the way of your faith in God as you live your life...encumbrances could be good things in themselves....

Media...entertainment.... Hobbies..... a person...some activity you love... All the things that might not be bad in themselves.... But when made too important in your life... gets in the way of your spiritual walk.... And sin... sin is the result of encumbrances...

let's get rid of the encumbrances which leads to sin in our lives that prevent us to live victorious Christian lives.... now... this is important... **let us run with endurance the race**...this is not a sprint... or a jog...some pleasure run.

This is a long race that is agonizing...it is the marathon...the race that never seems to end! the Greek word for "**race**" is *agon* ...guess what word we get from *agon*?...agony.

He says **fix your eyes on Jesus**...while you are in agony running the race...fix your eyes on Jesus like you would fix your eyes on the finish line... concentrate on Him... that's where your victory will be!

This is an agonizing race requiring great stamina and endurance... nothing about this race is pleasant or enjoyable except the finish line!...the enjoyment of the race only happens after the race is completed....and if you end well... there will be great happiness AFTER THE RACE!... there will be a wreath of victory...

And all that agony of working out.... And the agony of actually running the race... IT WAS ALL WORTH IT!.... **the joy in victory... winning the race... is greater than the agony of running the race.**

He said **fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith...**the originator of our faith...the supreme perfect example of faith... fix our eyes on Him.... **why?... this is it....** don't miss this...this is how I can relate all this together...Jesus is the perfect example for us....**who, for the joy set before Him...**

Look at Jesus... fix your eyes on Him while running this agonizing race... why?... because He shows us the secret of winning.... How do you endure the agony in life?... how do you endure the toughest times in life?... the wretched horrible things that life can throw at you?

Look at Jesus who while He was on the cross...we just did that in Matthew...Jesus was in complete agony... but He could have called ten thousand angels to take Him down BUT HE DIDN'T... why?....because He

Focused on a joy that is far greater than anything life could throw at Him.....including being nailed on a cross!... **fixing our eyes on Jesus who, for the joy set before Him... endured the cross.**

[example: you can endure most anything if the reward is big enough]

WHAT WAS THAT JOY?...what joy can overwhelm the agony of the cross?... What joy could Jesus possibly have that made the agony of the cross a worthwhile endeavor?... what joy motivated Jesus through His agony?

WHAT IS THE JOY THAT IS GREATER THAN THE HORRORS OF THE CROSS THAT ENABLED JESUS TO DO IT?

Let's look at some verse for hints... back in Hebrews 1... quoting Psalm 45:7... God speaking about His Son Jesus... **You have loved righteousness and hated lawlessness, therefore God has anointed You with the oil of gladness above Your companions...**because Jesus loved righteousness.... He was anointed with the oil of gladness... That's a hint.

Psalm 16:9-11

Therefore my heart is glad and my glory rejoices;

My flesh also will dwell securely.

10 For You will not abandon my soul to Sheol; (death in hell)

You will not allow Your Holy One to undergo decay.

I may be killed on the cross... but my body will not remain in the state of dead!...It will not have time to decay!!!

11 You will make known to me the way of life;

In Your presence is fullness of joy;

In Your right hand there are pleasures forever.

In Your right hand there are pleasures forever....HUGE HINT!...how about this:

Luke 24:1-12

24 But on the first day of the week that would be Sunday...three days after the crucifixion at early dawn, they came to the tomb bringing the spices which they had prepared. 2 And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, 3 but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. 4 While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men suddenly stood near them in gleaming clothing; 5 and as the women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, “Why are you seeking the living One among the dead? 6 He is not here, but He has risen. Remember how He spoke to you while He was still in Galilee, 7 saying that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinful men, and be crucified, and on the third day rise from the dead.” 8 And they remembered His words, 9 and returned from the tomb and reported all these things to the eleven, and to all the rest. 10 Now these women were Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James; also the other women with them were telling these things to the apostles. 11 But these words appeared to them as nonsense, and they would not believe the women. 12 Nevertheless, Peter got up and ran to the tomb; and when he stooped and looked in, he *saw the linen wrappings only; and he went away to his home, marveling at what had happened.

Jesus could endure the cross unto death... because there was something so much greater than this life awaiting Him... through His love of righteousness...His life of obedience to His Father. Which is living life pleasing to God... and the promise that God Himself made to His Son....

That on that day...three days after His death... He would be bodily resurrected.... Then... He would be exalted to the highest place... the right hand of His Father...

John 17... right before He was betrayed and arrested... hours before the cross... Jesus prayed His High Priestly Prayer:

John 17:4-5

4 I glorified You on the earth by accomplishing the work which You have given Me to do. 5 And now You, Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world existed.

I glorified You by accomplishing the work which You had given Me to do.... The greatest work was that of the cross... that agonizing cross... I did it... I endured it...I did it in love for sinners to be reconciled...I did it...because of the joy that was awaiting Me upon the completion of My work.

Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world existed... that is the joy Jesus was fixated on while enduring the agony of the cross.... Jesus gained His reward by glorifying His Father while on earth.... His prize excelled over the agony of the run.

Don't just listen to me... listen to God's holy word...this is His joy...it all is the resurrection

John 10:18

18 No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it back. This commandment I received from My Father."

John 2: **"Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."**

Luke 9:22**"The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed (life) and be raised on the third day."**

Matthew 28:18... **"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me.**

Revelation 19:16 **And on His robe and on His thigh He has a name written: "KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS."**

Revelation 5:12 **"Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power, wealth, wisdom, might, honor, glory, and blessing."**

Revelation 1:18 and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades. *You want victory over death.... You want to stay out of hell... I have the keys.*

That's how Jesus endured the cross... and of course the connection with Paul and Silas right?... Paul and Silas could endure the pain of the chains and the stocks...the lashings... the torture... they could joyfully sing hymns of praise.... Why?.... **for the joy set before them!**

"The legs feel nothing in the stocks when the heart is in heaven!" -- Tertullian

Listen to Paul's words in Romans 8:18 **For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us....we could stay forever in Romans 8!**

8 Therefore there is now no condemnation at all for those who are in Christ Jesus. 2 For the law of the *Spirit of life in Christ Jesus* has set you free from the law of sin and of death.

let's add us to this:

What about us?

Revelation 3:21 **The one who overcomes, death I will grant to him to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat with My Father on His throne.**

We run for the joy of EXALTATION... being lifted up high as Jesus was lifted high.... God promises for us to be lifted up as Jesus as lifted up as we like Jesus live in righteousness.... glorifying Him on earth.... Just as His Son did.... One commentator said *We glorify God by allowing His attributes to shine through us and by obeying His will in everything we do.*

Even if we must suffer for the Lord... we should be able to echo the apostle Paul's words in Philippians 2:17 **I rejoice and share my joy with you all.** There should be nothing that happens to us in this life that trumps the amazing promises God has for His children.

Again... not me but God's Word:

1 Peter 1:3 **Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,**

Ephesians 2:1-8

2 And you were dead in your offenses and sins, 2 in which you previously walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. 3 Among them we too all previously lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the rest.

4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, **5 even when we were dead in our wrongdoings, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), 6 and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,** **7 so that in the ages to come He might show the boundless riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God**

Conclusion

- Life is hard - it has been....it is..... it will be.....for everyone! All of us are in one of those states right now.

Jesus said to His disciples before the crucifixion....John 16:33

33 These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.”

- But there is a joy that can be in front of you as you go through tribulation!...You need Jesus!.... If you have Him... Great!...If you don't you need Him!

Easter...The resurrection of Jesus Christ...

For the joy set before us...