



From the Pulpit: April 2, 2023

Palm Sunday

The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

Luke 23:32-43

The Unnamed, XII: The Gangsters

There are scores, maybe hundreds of characters in the biblical stories, that are important to the narrative, but never get a name, including these two figures from the first Good Friday.

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. There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

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 in your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

“Rabbi, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ And Jesus famously replies, ‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.’”

One of those officers was Rex Engelbert. He graduated from Loyola Academy in 2014. He’s a hero, and I wanted to honor him this morning.

Every age has its brigands and its malefactors. Luke tells us that Jesus was crucified between two thieves, one on his right and another on his left. We don’t know what their crimes were, but they were probably way bigger than the misdeeds of your common shoplifter, purse snatcher, car thief, or 7-11 robber.

Crucifixion was so horrible that the Romans reserved it for the lowest of the low, the meanest of the mean, the deadliest of the deadly. They saved it for notorious gangsters, unscrupulous cutthroats, and itinerant prophets who threatened the kingdom of Caesar by babbling on about the Kingdom of God.

So these thieves might have been more than thieves. They might have been revolutionaries throwing Molotov cocktails at the occupying troops in first-century Jerusalem. Some Jews might have called them patriots, but the Romans would have called them terrorists.

In Uvalde, Texas, on May 24 last year, 376 law enforcement officers descended on Robb Elementary School. It took them 74 minutes to dispatch the killer; 21 students and teachers died.

In Nashville on Monday, the officers arrived at the Covenant School at 10:21; by 10:26, the killer was dead. Instead of loitering around doing nothing, they ran straight toward the sound of gunfire.

The Latin word for ‘assassin’ is *sicarius*. A *sicarius* was named for the curved dagger they used to dispatch their victims, so if you want to know what these thieves at Golgotha were like, you could do worse than picturing the brigands of the Mexican drug cartels in the *Sicario* films. They were bad hombres.

One of the thieves—traditionally the one on Jesus’ left—is determined to play the brigand right up till his last breath. He wants to die as he has lived—a royal pain in the...neck. He mocks Jesus. He says, “If you’re such a damned, blankety-blank Bigshot of a Messiah, “why don’t just say ‘Abracadabra!’ or something and get us all the hell out of here! Save yourself and us!”

The other thief—traditionally the one on Jesus’ right—rebukes his partner in crime. “Shut the bleep up, you bleeping fraud!” he says. “There’s a reason they’ve pinned us up here. We deserve this. His being here makes no sense at all.” And then he turns to Jesus and says, “Rabbi, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And Jesus famously replies, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

Sometimes the Church calls this guy “The Good Thief.” Sometimes they call him “The Thief Who Stole the Kingdom.” You see what they mean, right? He lives a whole lifetime as a malevolent gangster and then at the last possible instant he wants to skate his way freely straight into the kingdom across the unmerited favor of a Christ with clearly lax standards and frightfully low expectations for those he chooses, inscrutably, to love.

It doesn’t seem fair, does it? To rape and pillage your whole life and then to steal salvation minutes before you take your last breath. But remember, this is St. Luke. Luke is the only evangelist to tell us this story, and Luke wants to tell us that Jesus dies just like he lived.

It’s just one final instance of St. Luke hammering home his insistent point—that Jesus always cared for the least, the last, the lost, the lame, the leper, and the loser.

In this Gospel Jesus spends his whole life consorting with thieves, tax collectors, Samaritans, and other scoundrels of ill-repute, even women, for Christ’s sweet sake. It’s stories like this which have prompted New

Testament scholars to speak of Jesus’ “pronounced, prominent, prolonged preference for the poor” in the Gospel of Luke.

Jesus is always trying to redeem the unredeemable, to love the unlovable, to touch the untouchable. At the last possible instant, Jesus snatches this vile assassin from the dumpster he’s made of his life.

You know what I miss most about Greenwich, Connecticut? Unexpectedly, it’s the Town Dump. Greenwich has the greatest junkyard I’d ever seen. They picked up our trash for us, but for the most part any substantial recycling was do-it-yourself. You had to haul it there yourself, but it was the Ritz Carlton of junkyards.

They didn’t call it The Dump; they called it “The Resource Recovery Facility.” Everything’s fancy in Greenwich. It sprawled across something like ten acres and there were separate stations for everything—paper and cardboard, appliances, furniture, building materials, discarded tools, and books. The shelves at the Book

Exchange at the “Resource Recovery Facility” had more books than a smalltown library.

As you might imagine, the trash in Greenwich is of a fairly high quality. You might find a first-edition copy of *The Great Gatsby*, or a Viking refrigerator somebody had discarded in favor of a new Sub-Zero, or an original Andy Warhol thrown out by mistake. I’ve actually never heard of any of that happening. I made it up, but you see my point.

So sometimes when you went there, you might encounter one of our local scavengers. They’re called Junkers, and they’re looking for stuff people threw out because they didn’t see the value of it. These Junkers make their living at it. One woman said, “I found a Pentax camera. Digital. Wide-angle lens. The shutter was stuck. But I poked my finger in it, found some batteries, and—boom!—it worked!”

“It doesn’t seem fair, does it? To rape and pillage your whole life and then to steal salvation minutes before you take your last breath. ”

This woman knows people look down on her for scavenging. It's a dirty, menial job. But she defends what she's doing. She says, "My job is rescuing things that shouldn't be thrown out in the first place."¹ Yes? Pretty rewarding job!

That's Jesus' motto: "I want to rescue people who shouldn't have been thrown out in the first place." It's all kind of unfair, and it's all kind of scandalous, but that's Jesus for you. The Scandal of the Gospel.

What's the point? Glad you asked! There are two. First of all, this story means that we are loved and loved and loved, all of us. We are loved and loved and loved, comprehensively, unconditionally loved. There's not a person Jesus thinks is beyond redemption. Maybe not even the Bad Thief. Maybe Jesus got him into the kingdom as well. The story doesn't tell us that, but it'd be just like him.

Second point: think about someone in your life who is a mess and a pain in the...neck, who is in fact unredeemable. If you want to be like Jesus, take a crack at it anyway. You might deliver someone straight into Paradise. Your job might be rescuing somebody who shouldn't have been thrown out in the first place. He might not deserve it, but so what? Do any of us?

Luke never gives a name to the two thieves who flanked Jesus on Golgotha that first Good Friday. But the Church thought this was so wrong, so as early as the fourth century, the Church started calling them Gestas and Dismas. Gestas is The Bad Thief on Jesus' left. Dismas is The Good Thief on Jesus' right.

And here's a really interesting thing. It might be beautiful and it might be scandalous, but Dismas the Dag-german is a Saint in the Roman Catholic Church. You can probably guess whom he is the patron saint for: prisoners, death row inmates, and repentant thieves. Even Sam Bankman-Fried gets a patron saint.

There is a Church of the Good Thief in Kingston, Ontario. It was built by prisoners from a nearby penitentiary. The Church of St. Dismas, The Good Thief, sits inside a correctional facility in New York State. It too

was built by prisoners, some of them good thieves, and some of them bad thieves.

In the Orthodox Church, the cross always has three crossbars. The top bar holds the inscription: "Jesus, King of the Jews." The middle bar is where they nailed his hands. The bottom bar is for his feet. It is always crooked to remind us that Jesus was in so much pain he pressed down on it in his agony.

And it always tilts up to Jesus' right. You know why? It's pointing at the face of Dismas the assassin, the Thief Who Stole the Kingdom.

"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." It's a good prayer to pray every night when you fall asleep. "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

"That's Jesus' motto: "I want to rescue people who shouldn't have been thrown out in the first place." It's all kind of unfair, and it's all kind of scandalous, but that's Jesus for you. The Scandal of the Gospel."



¹Peter Berger, "Trash of the Rich Can Support Poor Neighbor," *The New York Times*, December 12, 1998.

—Prayers of The People—

By The Reverend Christine V. Hides

Gracious God we come to you with voices breaking and crying “Hosanna, save us!” We come to you with souls weary from the tragedies of this world. Be with us O God after a weekend of deadly storms. Be near O God in this week where children and their caregivers were once again victims of violence.

Receive your beloved children of Nashville into the arms of your mercy:

- Evelyn Dieckhaus, a third grader who loved the color pink, and put on skits in her backyard with her big sister.
- Mike Hill a father of seven and a grandfather of 14, who loved his job as the school custodian.
- William Kinney, age nine who never knew a stranger and whose “unflappable” spirit radiated kindness.
- Katherine Koonce a devoted head of school, trusted colleague, and “remarkable spirit” who made preschoolers, board members, teachers, and parents feel seen and heard.
- Cynthia Peak a lifelong educator and substitute teacher, whose faith was unwavering.
- Hallie Scruggs age nine, the youngest of the pastor’s children at Covenant who possessed a love for life, and “always on the go” spirit.

Lord hear the prayers of their loved ones. Accompany the grieving. Bring hope from heart ache. As we trust in the words of your prophet who said “From the valley of dry bones you raise us up, giving us the flesh of your Word and the breath of your Spirit.

You open our graves and set our feet in the land of the living.” (Ezek. 37:1–14)

Merciful God, forgive us for the tragedies we have not acknowledged. Forgive our weariness. Forgive our inability to grapple with the complex causes of violence. Forgive us when we know not what to do. Turn our thoughts and prayers into commitment. Open our hearts with compassion for the gaping hurt in this world.

Show us how to put our faith and love into action.

Let your mercy wash over teachers, first responders, doctors, nurses, children, parents, mental health workers, and all who experience trauma. Let your Spirit fill the halls where decisions are made. Let hope and truth be louder than fear.

Eternal God grant us the imagination to see what it means to follow your son, Jesus

who rode unarmed and humbly into Jerusalem. Give us the courage to live as he lived, and love as he loved, and the wisdom to change what is not your will, that the ends of the earth might know the King of Peace. Give us strength and faith when the cross is revealed starkly in our lives. Help us to live with gratitude for the gifts of grace, nourishment, and companionship.

For it is our Savior, who entered a troubled city, who was betrayed, accused, and put to death on the cross. There in the darkest hour, you are victorious over evil and death, that we might know light in the darkness, hope in the midst of heartbreak, and the power of your eternal love.

Set our minds on your Holy Spirit in whom we find our life and peace. Let the same Spirit who raised Jesus dwell in us always, giving life to our mortal bodies, and light to our souls (Rom. 8:6–11) as we pray the words Christ teaches: Our Father...Amen.

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