



**From the Pulpit: April 6, 2023**  
Maundy Thursday

**The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg**

Mark 15:33–39; John 19:31–36

*The Unnamed, XIII: The Gunnery Sergeant*

One of the more prominent of the many important but unnamed characters in the biblical narrative is the Roman centurion at Golgotha. He is the commander of the execution detail in Jerusalem on April 6, 27 A.D.

So this is what I see. A Roman centurion was in command of a single platoon or company of the Roman army. The Latin word ‘centurion’ is obviously related to the word ‘century,’ so typically he was in charge of 100 legionnaires, though in practice ‘centuries,’

or companies, in the Roman army ranged from 30 to 100 soldiers.

It was at his order that his soldiers pinned Jesus’ wrists and ankles fast to rough timbers with railroad spikes, but then when Jesus dies after a mere six hours on the cross, the centurion lets loose with the most extravagant affirmation of faith in the entire New Testament: “Surely this man was God’s Son,” he ventures after watching the way Jesus died, forgiving his enemies, welcoming a sinister gangster into Paradise, and handing his spirit over to God.

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In my mind, this one is about 50 years old and near the end of his career. He’s been fighting Caesar’s wars for 30 years and has survived a score of fierce skirmishes with bloodthirsty barbarians wielding 8-foot pikes.

This execution detail is his sunset posting just before he retires to fruity drinks on the beaches of Naples. It was featherbed duty, keeping the peace like a paltry policeman in one of the Empire’s distant outposts, far from both the peace of Rome and the savage action on the European front.

You could identify a centurion by the impressive transverse crest on his helmet, which went sideways from ear to ear rather than forward from neck to brow.

That’s all the Gospels tell us about him. After the execution, he retires to his barracks for some R & R and is never heard from again.

But where the Bible is spare and lean in its details, I like to spin out my own biography of a biblical character. I’m like an actor who disappears deep into his private imagination to concoct a rich and dense backstory for the character he’s playing on stage or screen.

Centurions comprised the tough, reliable spine of the Roman army. In battle, they always led their centuries, or companies, from the front.

When the barbarians of Europe saw the Roman centurions charging into battle with flashing armor and shocking purpose, a rumor began to make its way through the barbarian ranks: the Roman legions are being led into battle by gods.

Centurion was the highest rank an enlisted man could achieve in the Roman army. I don't know which rank in the American army is equivalent to centurion, but it might range from gunnery sergeant to Major, whoever was in charge of and responsible for a company of 100 soldiers.

Hollywood is fascinated by guys like these. When Hollywood wants to tell a war story, it tells that story through the eyes of a brave and noble company commander, like Lieutenant Dan from *Forrest Gump*, or Captain Miller from *Saving Private Ryan*, or Major Winters from *Band of Brothers*, or Captain Willard from *Apocalypse Now*, or Sergeant Elias from *Platoon*, or Sergeant Howell from *Hacksaw Ridge*.

So that's this guy, this centurion at Golgotha. First he **crucified** him, then he **confessed** him. "Surely this man was God's Son." Some scholars think he said it sarcastically, with a sneer: "This man was God's Son? Yeah, right!" But I don't think so. I think he meant it. And even if he said it derisively, he told the truth, and his truth has endured century upon century, from everlasting to everlasting.

That's all from Mark's Gospel. St. John tells the story a different way. When the three death row inmates had been hanging there for six hours, the Roman soldiers tired of the spectacle and wanted to adjourn to the tavern, so they took a sledgehammer to the kneecaps of the two thieves to hasten the inevitable, but when they got to Jesus, that wasn't necessary; he was already dead.

So John tells us that a Roman soldier lanced his side with a spear just to make sure he was gone. John doesn't call him a centurion, merely a soldier, but the Christian Church has always assumed that John's soldier is the same guy as Mark's centurion.

Neither John nor Mark give a name to the anonymous centurion/soldier at Golgotha, but since the sixth century, the Church has called him Longinus, a name which comes from the Greek word for 'spear.' Longinus is, literally, "The Spear-chucker." The soldier gets his name from his weapon.

Longinus has become a saint in the Holy Catholic Church. Sometimes they call him the first Christian, the first one to proclaim publicly who Jesus really is: God's very Son.

If you've been to Rome, you've seen the giant statue of Longinus in the crossing at St. Peter's Basilica. It'll make you weep, seeing this violent, bloody soldier holding his lance aloft in Christendom's most important cathedral, a stone's throw away from the Holy Altar of the Prince of Peace himself.

And his weapon? They call it *The Holy Lance*, or *The Spear of Destiny*. After the Holy Grail itself, it might be the most sacred relic in the Christian Church, because it once touched his holy, life-giving blood.

It still has the power to heal, they say. In the legends of King Arthur, it heals the mortally wounded. In the opera *Parsifal*, maybe the greatest ever written, Wagner makes it the device that churns the sprawling plot.

"The centurion stood facing him," reports St. Mark. It's a vivid tableau, yeah? There stands the armed and armored centurion, symbol of Tiberius Caesar, the most powerful man the world had ever seen—Caesar with his invincible Empire and teeming legions and imperial decree.

And there he hangs, the Crucified Christ, the helpless god, pitiful and yet pitying to the end. Isn't it strange what wins the world?

He's earned our trust and our respect and our blind obedience not with magnificent might, but with fragile, defenseless love. It's the greatest miracle God ever wrought.