

Pastor Scott L. Harris
Grace Bible Church, NY
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Good Friday Service
“The Empty Cross”

Introduction

We have gathered together in memorial to what Jesus did for us on Golgotha's hill. All of the hymns we have sung and will sing, all of the special music, the Scripture reading, and in a short time when we partake of the Lord's Supper, - all of it is focused on “*proclaiming the Lord's death until He comes.*”

As we remember what Jesus went through on our behalf, as we think about the suffering that He endured in our place, I also want us to become very aware of the fact that the cross is empty. The decorative cross behind me is displayed to bear witness to that fact. The cross is empty.

In some traditions of Christianity the cross is most commonly displayed as a crucifix with Jesus still hanging on it. That is not in itself bad, in fact, in way, it can be a very good and fitting reminder that the cross was an instrument of extreme suffering and death. We too easily forget what Jesus suffered for our sakes. We become somewhat nonchalant about what the cross represents. This is most obvious in how the cross has become a common design in decorations and jewelry worn not only by Christians as a symbol of their faith, but also by many other people that do not know Jesus, and even by those that deny Him. The modern equivalents of the cross would be the electric chair or the gas chamber. Would anyone in their right mind use such a symbol as an item of jewelry to make themselves look more beautiful? (Yes, I recognize that Punk fashion glories in symbols of violence and the macabre, but I doubt that even they would wear as jewelry something that was used to murder someone they greatly loved). Yet, because the meaning of the cross has been lost to most people, they use in jewelry because they think it is pretty. The occupied cross is a good reminder of the physical suffering Jesus endured for us at Calvary, and on occasion we need to be reminded of that.

However, as important as it is that we be reminded of Jesus' physical suffering, an occupied cross has little essential meaning for us. It is the empty cross that is significant, for all the physical suffering of Jesus Christ endured would not have been enough if that is all that happened. For Jesus Christ to be our savior, for Him to bring us hope, for Him to change the meaning of the cross from one of cruel Roman execution to one of eternal blessing to us, Jesus also had to die on that cross. He had to hang limp on that cross and then be taken down and buried. The cruel Roman cross was ugly. It was a symbol of torture and death, and it remained that way until it became stained with Jesus' life blood and took on a new meaning. I want to focus on that empty cross tonight. I want us to think about what it meant to those who first saw it. I want us to think about why the cross was necessary in the first place. And I want us to think about the hope that the empty cross has given us.

The Meaning of the Cross to Those Who Saw Jesus Die

First, let's think for a moment about what that empty cross meant to those that saw Jesus die upon it. We read in Matthew 27, Mark 15, Luke 23 and John 19 of what occurred there. Jesus

had already been scourged. He was beaten with a whip until His back was lacerated and chunks of flesh torn away. He had a crown of thorns forced upon His head causing the blood to flow freely down His face and neck. He had been mocked and struck by the soldiers. He had made his way painstakingly up the via del a rosa toward Goglatha's hill. Before He could reach it, He had fallen in exhaustion from all He had already suffered and from under the weight of the cross. Simon of Cyrene was forced to bear Jesus' cross the remainder of the way. Jesus had been laid on top of that cross and nails - really spikes - were driven through His feet and hands. The cross was then lifted up and dropped into the hole in which it would rest with a thud that caused more flesh to tear.

For the next six hours Jesus would hang on that cross between two thieves. The soldiers crucifying Him gambled for His clothes and those passing by would wag their heads at Him and mock Him. One of the theives would join in the mocking while the other would cry out to Jesus for mercy saying, "*Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.*" Jesus' gracious answer to him was, "*Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in paradise.*" Jesus went through all the physical pain of the cross which came not only from His many wounds in His head, hands, feet and back, but also in raging thirst, burning, aching muscles and slow suffocation.

The Soldiers: For most of the soldiers present, Jesus' death simply meant that another disagreeable job was accomplished. Yes, the Centurion was astonished that Jesus should have died so quickly. The things that Jesus had said on the cross were astonishing and the earthquake and the darkness that occurred when Jesus died was disturbing. His conclusion in seeing all these things was that Jesus was different, "*a son of a God*" (Matthew. 27:54), but it would be stretching it to say that this was a conclusion of hope. It is more probable that this was a statement of wonder, or fear, or both. To the soldiers, Jesus' death was a welcome end to a very unpleasant duty.

The Disciples: For almost all of the disciples, Jesus' death only added to the fear that had been controlling them since the previous night. Remember that only John was present at Jesus' crucifixion. All the others, including boasting Peter, had run away. To them the empty cross meant dashed dreams of the kingdom of Israel being revived, crushed hope for their own expectations, an uncertain future, and confusion over what had happened, why it happened, and what it meant.

Most people react like those soldiers or the disciples. Many are indifferent like the soldiers, some are astonished at Jesus' example, and many are filled with fear at what they do not understand.

Leaders: There were quite a few religious leaders that came by Golgotha's hill that day. These hypocritical leaders - Scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, and Priests along with their followers - were comforted by the empty cross. They viewed Jesus as a threat to their positions, so both they and Rome were satisfied that Jesus the troublemaker was dead. To them it meant Jesus would no longer hinder them in their activities nor would He contradict their teaching nor would there be any threat of an uprising seeking to proclaim Jesus king.

The Women: There were also at least four women at the cross including Jesus' mother, His mother's sister, Mary of Clopas and Mary Magdalene. Also standing with them was "*the disciple whom Jesus loved*" - John. They stood there and watched all that went on. They saw Jesus nailed to the cross. They saw Him lifted up on it and heard it "thud" as the post of the cross slid into the

hole for it. After the third hour, they saw the a strange darkness that covered the whole land and continued for the next three hours. They heard Jesus ask that the Father forgive those crucifying Him and entrust the care of His mother to John. They watched as His agony increased and He called out in His thirst and when He cried out "*Eloi, Eloi, Lama Sabachthani,*" which is translated as "*My God, My God, Why hast thou forsaken Me?*" They heard Jesus cry out with a loud voice, "*Father, into thy hands I commend My spirit.*" He then said, "*It is finished!*" And they watched Him bow\ His head and give up His spirit. They felt the earthquake as they stood there in the darkness. They saw the soldier come a short time later and pierce His side with the spear and the blood and water flow out. They watched as His battered body was removed from the cross. They saw that cross stained with His blood and in all probability they also saw some of His flesh still attached to it. Remember that Jesus had been lacerated in the flogging He received only a few hours earlier. The wood of the cross was rough. Jesus would have lift Himself up to breath and as His body lowered after taking a breath it would slide against that rough wood and raw flesh would be caught on the splinters. These four women and John saw all of this. We can well imagine their sorrow and grief. The life of Mary's son had ended on that cruel Roman cross.

Jesus had taught them that He would rise from the dead, but they did not understand what that meant. They thought that was a hope for the distant future when all men would be resurrected - some to eternal life and some to eternal punishment. At that time, the empty cross was a sight of agony, of sorrow and grief.

The Necessity of the Cross

But the cross had to be. It would not be enough for Jesus to just suffer. Jesus also had to die. There was no other way. The night before in Gethsemane, Jesus had prayed earnestly to avoid the cross if there was any other way, but there was no alternative and the Father's will had to be accomplished. God desired to redeem man from His sin and that required Jesus to die.

All the way back in Genesis we find that sin requires a blood sacrifice. Adam and Eve's nakedness was covered by God with the skins of animals. You do not get animal skins without shedding blood. In Leviticus 17:11 God explains "*for the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement.*" The only way man's sins could be paid for was by a bloody sacrifice. Jesus was to be that bloody sacrifice on the cross. It would not be enough for Jesus to just suffer some and bleed a little because the penalty for sin cannot be paid for without death.

In addition, Jesus had to die a certain kind of death. There were many plots and prior attempts to kill Jesus including throwing Him off a cliff and stoning Him, but Jesus had to die on a cross because He was dying for a very specific purpose. Deuteronomy 21:23 in speaking about a person put to death because of their sin states, "*he who is hanged [on a tree] is accursed of God.*" Jesus died on a cross because, as 2 Corinthians 5:21 states, "*He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God.*"

Jesus died because of man's sin - your sin - my sin. The impact of the wretchedness of our sin has been greatly diminished in the last couple of generations. Our society has bought the myth - hook, line and sinker - that man is innately good and has intrinsic value in himself. These are lies from the pit that have sent their tentacles everywhere - how we raise our kids, what we do with criminals, the purpose of government, etc., and it has even entered into the church where preachers and teachers proclaim a man centered theology that turns the cross into a point of human pride. They claim human worth based on the idea that each individual is worthy for Jesus

to die to redeem. Perhaps you have heard someone claim to be worthy because even if they were the only person in the world, Jesus would have died for them. But the Scriptures do not give man inherent worth in himself. Jesus did not die for the worthy, the good or the righteous. Jesus died for sinners! (Romans 5:8). Humans have inherent value only because we are made in the image of God. In himself, man only has wretched sinfulness. Jesus' death on our behalf does not magnify our value - that is, "*I must be worth a lot because such a high price was paid*" - it magnifies our sinfulness and His love! My sinfulness must beyond measure for it demands such a high price to make atonement for it, and His love must be beyond measure since He willingly paid that price.

Let me state it clearly and directly, if Jesus had not died as your substitute, you would have no hope and you would still be in your sins under the condemnation of God destined for eternal hell. The empty cross is a reminder to us that when Jesus said, "*It is finished,*" and He bowed His head and gave up His spirit, it was finished. Atonement had been made. Jesus had paid the penalty of sin and provided the means by which both God's justice and mercy were upheld and humans could be declared righteous before God. Jesus Christ willingly bore the penalty of sin in His own body on the cross so that those who have faith in Him can be forgiven and have His righteousness imputed to them. The empty cross gives man hope of reconciliation with God. Man can be at peace with Him and no longer be under His just condemnation and destined to eternal Hell. Man could now have hope that heaven could be his future eternal home.

For those of us who have placed our faith in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, we glory in the cross and regard it as a beautiful symbol. Why? Because Jesus made the cross, an instrument of a cruel and tortuous death, the supreme symbol of God's love when He died on to redeem us sinners. By God's mercy and grace, through faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ, we stand forgiven and made righteous in Him.

In a moment we will be celebrating Communion because in doing so we "show forth His death until He comes" which is the very purpose of our meeting together tonight. The Lord's Table is for all Christians, so we invite you to partake with us if you have placed your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. We will be taking a few moments to allow you to reflect and make sure your heart is right with the Lord.

If you are not a believer, then please heed the warnings of Scripture and just pass the elements along. They have no meaning for you at present, and you would only bring condemnation upon yourself. Talk with any of us after the service and we would be happy to give further explanation of the gospel of Jesus Christ and how you can have your sins forgiven and be made right with God tonight.