Sermon for Mid-Week Lenten Service, Week 3

# The Text: John 18:40

# A Surprise Ending?

Dear followers to the cross,

Do you like to skip to the end? Some people are in the habit of turning straight to the conclusion of a novel to find out how it ends. A basic understanding of the storyline is usually needed to make the exercise worthwhile. There’s little use or satisfaction in knowing the conclusion if you don’t know anything about the characters and events leading up to it. Some stories have such a surprise ending that it makes following the entire narrative essential.

What about the passion of Jesus, the Christ?

Pilate was the secular authority in charge, but he didn’t know how this was going to end. Pontius Pilate had dealt with the Jews before. Did he have any reason to believe this Passover would be different? Jesus said, *“My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But My kingdom is not from this world.”1* Imagine the skepticism going through his mind! Another dreamer? Another failed revolutionary? A Saviour? Why would one think so?

Did the passion of Christ have a surprise ending? Any Christian (or unbeliever for that matter) with even a rudimentary knowledge of the Scriptures already knows the finale involves the death and resurrection of the main character. It’s a pretty dramatic curtain call! Did the contemporaries of Jesus expect it? Was the betrayal, suffering, sentencing, and execution of Jesus of Nazareth something that should have caught them by surprise? Well, if they were familiar with the prophecies of Isaiah or the Psalms, one would think not.

Yet, there is more involved here than an intellectual grasp of events and circumstances.

Descending from the Mount of Transfiguration Jesus told Peter, James, and John not to tell anyone what they had seen *“until the Son of Man is risen from the dead. So, they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead might mean.”2* So, we can say that they were kept from properly understanding it until the resurrection. Not until then did the Holy Spirit pull the blinders off their eyes. And not until Pentecost did they really see clearly with the eyes of faith.

We can hardly fault them. We know the entire story, yet clarity of faith - which is such an exceedingly precious gift - is still so easily clouded with doubt, skepticism, and apathy. Such, dear friends, is the power of sin. Satan is forever seeking to turn our gaze from the cross, to countless other distractions. Faith must remain anchored to a certainty that is always external to ourselves. God is unfailing. No one else, nothing else, is. Our God is not of human making.

Pilate poses the question, *“What is truth?”3* We have nothing to do with such cynical philosophizing. Jesus provides the answer. Truth is not whatever we’d like to make of it. A God made in our own image is not a God, but an idol. Christianity is not about constructing your own definitions of morality, security, and beliefs about the here and now, and the hereafter, and pinning God’s name to them. You may have noticed that it is increasingly popular to reinterpret or sideline what the Bible says in the interest of appealing or succumbing to the prevailing culture. You can misrepresent God’s word to make it say pretty much anything at all.

But the truth is still true even if nobody believes it. Lies are still lies even if everybody believes them. Lent does not involve a mental exercise in which try to make a big chronological leap into the ancient past and attempt to identify with the topic under discussion. And this is not what Jesus was teaching when He said in the institution of the Lord’s Supper, *“Do this in remembrance of Me.4* The historical details of the passion of Jesus are critical information, to be sure. Yet, we don’t receive the benefits of His redeeming work by trying to go back to the cross and reconstruct the circumstances. The crucified and risen Lord comes to us. Repentant hearts are always greeted by Him. He meets His baptized with compassion and forgiveness.

Still, in Lent we desire even more fervently both clarity of faith and certainty of conviction.

Sin wages a war of attrition, and we need to be renewed. Included in every prayer to be cleansed with the forgiveness earned at the cross is the plea of Thomas, “Show me Your hands and Your side.”5 He does exactly that when He offers us His body and blood in the sacrament. He does exactly that when the promise of absolution is publicly proclaimed. He does exactly that when our hearts are set at ease by His comforting words of compassion.

It doesn’t mean our faith doesn’t lose perspective anymore. We tend to see things with a very narrow focus according to what is troubling us at the moment. So, we might ask… Where is the gentle Jesus when we need Him? Where is the strong deliverer? Where is the patient pastor? Where is the seeking shepherd? Yet He knows when we need discipline as opposed to coddling. He knows when we need comfort instead of condemnation. He’s not a Saviour we can sculpt according to our own whims. He’s a Shepherd who tends to us according to our actual needs. The Suffering Servant is the Risen Saviour, ***is*** the Ascended Lord, ***is*** the Reigning King. The events of redemption cannot be parceled into stand-alone segments. The love of God is not subject to compartmentalization. Neither is our Saviour.

Your Redeemer hung upon a cross and rose from death. Those events alone qualify Him to meet your every need.

On Palm Sunday jubilant crowds welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem with high expectation. It seems surprising then, that our Passion Reading ends with the release of Barabbas, a criminal. Things were about to get very interesting. Perhaps you’ve wondered whether your own life will have a surprise ending? Well, hopefully your life will have many pleasant surprises in the future, but there are likely to be some difficult ones too. God knows and will be present with you through all circumstances.

But we know the final chapter involves resurrection to eternal life in the heavenly realms. Knowing the ending doesn’t make the journey to that point less relevant, but more exciting. Does your vocation still matter? Do your relationships still matter? Do the daily opportunities you have to walk with people in the brokenness of their lives still matter? Very much in every way! We are not in doubt about the truth like Pilate was. Jesus is the way and the truth and the life6. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end7.

1 John 18:36

2 Mark 9:9-10

3 John 18:38

4 Matthew 22:19

5 See John 20:25

6 See John 14:6

7 See Revelation 22:13