

Good Friday Sermon: Ecumenical Service

Text: Mark 14:53-65

Jurgen Moltmann once said that “Good Friday is the center of the world.” That isn’t the last word, to be sure; Moltmann also reminds us that the Christian journey is always towards Easter morning and the dawn of a new day. But if you read the newspapers you know full well that Good Friday is where we live much of our lives. Easter’s truth begins here. And so we walk this leg of the journey together into the center of the world, and into the center of life’s hurts and fears and betrayals and sorrows.

In the journey from the gazebo to this house of worship we’ve already heard about how Judas betrayed Jesus with a kiss. Since the Gospel of Judas has been in the news I want to say just a word about it before we move forward. Notice Mark doesn’t claim to know what Judas’ motivation is. Perhaps he was, as the Gospel of Judas apparently claims, acting in a way he believed to be obedient to Jesus. Certainly it wouldn’t be the first time (nor, I might add, would it be the last time) that a devout religious person absolutely firm in his or her convictions was misguided in their actions. As Christians, our quarrel with the gospel of Judas isn’t about Judas’ motivations; it’s theological. As a Gnostic text it is decidedly dualistic and counter to orthodox faith—which has always claimed that creation is good, that the Word really did *become flesh*, and that this day and this entire weekend are not about liberation of Jesus’ soul but about his real suffering, his real death, and ultimately a real resurrection.

We get not one but four canonical witnesses to this day’s events: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. None of them claim to be eyewitnesses; rather, each offers the Church testimony from the perspective of their first-century congregations. Our work today, as the people of God, is not to reconstruct what happened, which would be an impossible task. Our work is like being on a jury and listening to the witnesses carefully—listening for a Word of the Lord in the midst of the details. Specifically it is as if Mark were on the stand today offering us his testimony and our job is to listen attentively—not to force his account into our preconceived theologies. Therein lies the challenge: we all know the story. Or at least we think we do. And that can get in the way of our ability to hear. So I want to invite you into this narrative today—into St. Mark’s Passion—as if for the first time.

This gospel is generally associated with the early Christian community in Rome, which of course was connected from fairly early on with Peter. Mark is a second-generation disciple familiar with Peter’s first-hand testimony. It’s the account, remember, where there is no birth narrative and in fact (and I hope this doesn’t spoil the ending for you) the one which (at least in the oldest manuscripts) ends without any actual resurrection appearances: just an empty tomb and the words of a few women who came and found the stone rolled away.

So we have come to the point in the narrative where Jesus stands before the religious authorities. The testimony before us in this hour has to do with the first of two trials. Mark insists (in no uncertain terms) that the prosecution has no case and that the trial itself is a mockery. “*They sought testimony, but found none,*” he says. While there were plenty of people willing to perjure themselves, “*their accounts didn’t agree.*”

And then someone stood up and quoted Jesus out of context. (Now I wish I could tell you that this was the last time that Jesus was ever quoted out of context—but unfortunately even Jesus’ friends seem prone to do this!) In this case, however, as hearers of this gospel we know that Jesus did talk about destroying the temple and in three days raising it again. We also know, however, that the temple he was talking about was his body. But when someone stands up at his trial and says he has a plan to destroy the temple—well it makes him sound a bit like a terrorist, doesn’t it? In the interest of national security somebody better stop this guy! Even here, though, Mark assures us, there were inconsistencies and their testimony could not be made to agree.

So the outcome of the trial seems clear: *if the accounts do not fit you must acquit*. According to the Torah, Jesus should be acquitted if the witnesses don’t agree. The evidence is too flimsy to convict him of a capital offence. Deuteronomy 19 says that at least two witnesses must agree to find a person guilty and take their life. You can’t do it on hearsay. *But hearsay is all we have here*. And Jesus isn’t incriminating himself. Asked if he has anything to say, he says nothing. As the old spiritual puts it, “he never said a mumblin’ word.” *Silence*.

So here’s my question for you. If the trial were to stop right here, would Jesus have been acquitted? Is this what Mark is suggesting?

We’ll never know, because the whole thing changes when the high priest asks the million dollar question of Jesus. “*Are you the Christ?*” Ultimately, that is the most important question that will be asked today. How Jesus answers, but just as importantly how we answer this question is at the heart of what this gathering today is all about.

Now you all know the answer already, or you wouldn’t be here. Or at least you believe and you want help with your unbelief. It may be a little harder as a preacher to make that assumption on Easter morning when everyone is so dressed up and (or so I’ve been told anyway) some of those who are sitting in the pews have been dragged there against their wishes for their semi-annual pilgrimage to church. Today is much easier on a preacher. Look around you: this is the hard-core faithful of Holden, taking time in the middle of the day to ponder the meaning and scandal and healing power of the Cross. That’s like extra credit or something isn’t it?

So I don’t need to convince anyone here who this Jesus is. Despite the fact that we come from different congregations and that we have different perspectives on theology and politics and the issues of the day, here at least we speak with one voice. “Is this the Christ?” *You bet! Amen! Praise the Lord!* And I want to remind you that is no small thing. No one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Spirit. In spite of all that threatens to fragment and polarize us our answer to this question binds us together—for better or worse. Our Baptismal Covenant (no less than the covenant of marriage) makes us one flesh—one body. All of us—Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Episcopalian, Baptist, non-Denominational, United Church of Christ—are one family. (Admittedly a pretty dysfunctional family, but a family nevertheless.) If you take nothing else away from this day then consider taking that one image away with you: of these clergy and these laity walking together through this town to bear witness to this claim that Jesus is Lord, and desiring to take up our own crosses to follow him.

The first hearers of Mark's Gospel knew the answer to this question also. Verse one of Mark's Good News goes like this: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus the Christ, the Son of God." At Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked his friends, "who do you say that I am?" Peter got it right. "You are the Christ!" But then do you remember what happened next? Jesus proceeded to tell the disciples not to tell anyone about him and then went on to explain that the road ahead was not about accolades but suffering. From that point on we've been "going up to Jerusalem"—one step at a time toward this very moment.

"Are you the Messiah, the Christ?" Jesus is asked by the high priest.

So why doesn't Jesus keep the spiritual in mind here? If he remains silent, if he still refuses to say a mumblin' word, then everybody can go home. He and the disciples can continue their itinerant ministry and continue to heal the sick and proclaim good news that the Kingdom has come near. In that moment Jesus had a decision to make. He could have just gone back to Galilee and continued the good he was doing. Why not live to a ripe old age and continue to heal and cast out demons and proclaim good news? Maybe write a self-help book? In fact I think that is precisely the temptation he wrestles with in Gethsemane—and maybe even as far back as the wilderness time that followed his baptism. Maybe it is the central question in his whole life—right up to this moment. Like us, Jesus' greatest temptation isn't between doing something everybody knows is wrong and something everybody knows is right. The greatest temptations that come our way are the ones where it's hard to discern the right path—where two roads converge in a yellow wood and it's tempting to take the one most traveled.

"Are you the Christ?" Continued silence and perhaps the whole thing ends right here. Yet Jesus breaks the silence and speaks: "I AM." Forget all the rest for now—the quote from Daniel about the Son of Man—the part about being the Son of the Most High. Those first two words, *eigo emi*—I AM, must have filled the courtroom that night with a terrible silence.

Remember Moses standing before the burning bush? Moses asks a very good question of the Voice that calls him to deliver God's people: "if the Pharaoh asks who sent me, whom shall I tell him has done so?" I AM, the voice mysteriously answers. "*I am who I am.*" Which I think is to say, basically, leave me alone Moses—I'm calling the shots here and I will not be boxed in.

Are you the Christ? This trial is over if Jesus simply remains silent. Or maybe he could have said, "define Christ." Instead, Jesus says: I AM. In so doing, he convicts himself. He confesses to who he really is, who he truly is not only for us—the hardcore faithful of Holden gathered here on this Good Friday—but *for all the world*, for those who recognize him just as much as for those who don't.

So either it's true—and Jesus really is who he says he is—or he is in fact guilty of blasphemy and therefore can be put to death. The court convicts him not on the testimony of others but on his own words. Now this isn't the end of the matter...in the next hour we'll hear about another trial before the Roman authorities. But in this first one we need to be careful not to scapegoat that first century Jewish high priest as if it was the last time that religious power was used to silence and destroy the prophetic voice of God. Religious people have a tendency in all times and places of getting attached to the way things are—so when God is doing a new thing there is

always resistance. It's easier to wait for the Christ to come than actually recognize him when he stands right before your very eyes.

Think about how the first hearers of this Gospel were hauled into court to stand before the authorities would have heard this testimony. Might it not have given them courage for their facing of their hour, knowing their Lord had stood before the authorities too? If he could look them in the eye and say "I AM" then maybe—just maybe—they could muster up the courage when hauled into court and asked if they claimed Jesus as their Lord, asked if they dared to admit that they were his disciples, that they might say: "I am." Most of us don't have to worry about that. But this very day, by the Baptism that binds us together across lines of ethnicity and race and culture, there are places in the world where Christians are hauled into the courts. At the very least we can pause today to remember them in our prayers.

But what of us? If you are going to follow this Jesus all the way—even to death—then the question matters. Is he worth staking your life on? Our culture is perhaps more complex and far more seductive. Most of us will probably not get hauled into the courts where we are asked the direct question about whether we claim Jesus as Lord or not. But in a thousand little ways every day we face a choice about how we will live: will we be seduced by Wall Street, or Hollywood, or the Pentagon, or Madison Avenue? Is Jesus really Lord, or just a totem we turn to when we are in need? Will we stand with Jesus—even when it puts our own reputations at risk—as he stood before the authorities in his day? Will we let others define us or will we define ourselves by the one label that matters—the claim that God has on us in Jesus Christ through Holy Baptism?

Or to ask the question another way: if you were hauled into court today and brought up on charges and accused of being a Christian: would there be enough evidence to convict you?

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