

**"I Believe in Jesus Christ:
Who Was Crucified, Dead, and Buried"**
Sermon Series on the Apostles' Creed - # 8
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(Mk. 15:37-47)

Introduction.

Earlier this month I concluded my sabbatical with a trip to Italy, and I had an amazing experience visiting the ancient sites, studying the history, viewing the art, and, of course, eating all the wonderful food. During the tour we saw many of the great cathedrals that have been built in Italy, and some of them are 500- to even 1,000-years-old!

When you walk into one of these grand cathedrals your attention is immediately drawn upward because of the high vaulted ceilings, and the architecture inspires you to think about the majesty and the transcendence of God. But as you walk around the cathedral it begins to dawn on you that the footprint of the building is actually a cross. There is the long nave and the transepts and then the top of the cross where worship is led from the front of the cathedral. The floorplan of the entire building is actually in the shape of a cross.

In big and small ways, the cross has become the dominant symbol of Christianity. But that wasn't always the case. When we visited the Catacombs outside the city of Rome, we saw many Christian symbols that believers painted on the crypts of those who were buried there in the 1st and 2nd centuries, but we never saw a cross. We saw a fish and the Greek word *ichthus* which means "fish" and was shorthand for the phrase "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior." We also saw an anchor which resembled Peter being crucified upside down. We saw drawings of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, and the Greek letters *XP* which are the first two letters of Jesus' name in Greek. It's fascinating. The cross didn't become a symbol of Christianity until later in the second century. I think the reason for this is because of the horror associated with this terrible form of capital punishment. C.S. Lewis once pointed out that the crucifixion didn't become common in Christian art until all who had seen a real one had died off!¹

But over time the cross became the dominant symbol of our faith because of the centrality of the death of Jesus on the cross which accomplished the salvation of the world. Therefore, it's not surprising to read these words in the very center of the Apostles' Creed: "I believe in Jesus Christ, who was crucified, died, and was buried."

I. The Crucifixion of Jesus.

Last week we looked at the crucifixion of Jesus in detail, and we examined the physical and spiritual suffering He experienced on our behalf. If you didn't hear that sermon I'd encourage you to go back and listen to a podcast of it on our church's website. Today we're going to take a closer look at the meaning and significance of the crucifixion.

In many ways the idea that the cross should become the focus of worship and a symbol of our faith seems crazy, even scandalous. It would be like having an electric chair, or a hanging on the gallows, or a lethal injection as a symbol of our faith because it represents the means of execution by which Jesus died. But there it is, high above our chancel, a stained-glass cross which dominates this sanctuary, and a wooden cross front and center on our communion table. We are proud to display the cross because it is so very central to the Christian faith.

In his classic book *The Cross of Christ* the late John Stott said that, "The fact that a cross became the Christian symbol, and that Christians stubbornly refused, in spite of the ridicule, to discard it in favour of something less offensive, can have only one explanation. It means that the centrality of the cross originated in the mind of Jesus Himself. It was out of loyalty to Him that His followers clung so doggedly to this sign."²

Stott goes on to explain that Jesus knew He was going to die, and He sought to prepare His disciples for its inevitability. He knew He would die because of the opposition of the Jewish leaders, and because of the prophecies written about the Messiah in the Old Testament. But Jesus also knew He would die because of His own deliberate choice. Christ resolved to do His Father's will, and that path led Him directly to the cross to become the Lamb of God who took away the sin of the world.

Stott says the cross is the single most important feature of the life and ministry of Jesus. He concludes, "This was the perspective of Jesus on His death. Despite the great importance of His teaching, His example, and His works of compassion and power, none of these was central to His mission. What dominated His mind was not the living but the giving of His life. This final self-sacrifice was His 'hour' for which He had come into the world."³

In 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 the apostle Paul acknowledged that to some people the cross represents weakness, and to others it is utter foolishness. But to those of us who are being saved it is the power and the wisdom of God. That's why the crucifixion is given a central place in the Apostles' Creed.

II. The Death of Jesus.

But why does the Creed go on to say that Jesus died? Isn't that obvious? From the earliest days of Christianity to our present time, there have been people who have questioned whether or not Jesus actually died on the cross. For example, an early expression of Christianity called Gnosticism tried to separate the spiritual from the material, and they had a hard time reconciling the idea of God dying. So, they came up with a theory that God didn't really die on the cross. Instead, what happened was that the Holy Spirit entered Jesus at His baptism, but the Spirit departed from Jesus before His crucifixion. This idea was rejected and officially ruled to be a heresy by the early church.

Another example of questioning whether or not Jesus really died is a notion that has actually been around for centuries but was revived and popularized about 30 years ago in the book *The Passover Plot*, and then again recently in Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code*. They suggest that Jesus didn't really die on the cross, but rather He just passed out and only appeared to die. When he was put in the tomb, the cool air revived Him, and He was able to walk out on His own. This is commonly known as the "swoon theory."

A final example of how people have struggled with Jesus' death is the way in which Islam treats the matter. Muslims reject the cross of Christ and declare that it's inappropriate that a major prophet of God should come to such an ignominious end. The Koran says that the Jews 'uttered a monstrous falsehood' when they declared 'we have put to death the Messiah Jesus, the son of Mary, the apostle of Allah', for 'they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but they only thought they did.' The commonly held belief among Muslims is that God cast a spell over the enemies of Jesus in order to rescue Him, and that either Judas Iscariot or Simon of Cyrene was substituted for the Lord at the last minute.⁴

Why is any of this important? It's important because all of these ideas make a mockery of what the Bible clearly says concerning the death of Jesus. All four gospel writers go to great lengths with extraordinary detail to demonstrate that Jesus really and truly was dead. Matthew says that Jesus cried out with a loud voice and yielded up His spirit. In Mark's gospel the centurion saw Jesus breathe his last. Luke tells of the moment of death and then goes on to relate the heart-broken reaction of those who witnessed it. The two disciples walking on the road to Emmaus didn't have the slightest doubt that Jesus had died. And John goes even further and tells of the soldiers' decision not to break the legs of Jesus in order to hasten His death because it was determined He had already died. John also gives the detail of the thrust of the spear into Jesus' side and the flow of water and blood from the wound, proof that death had occurred.⁵

Everywhere we turn in the NT there is an insistence on the death of Jesus Christ. And why? Because without His death there is no forgiveness of sins.

Without Jesus' death there is no atonement. Without Jesus' real suffering, we are still dead in our sins. That's why the writers of the NT insist over and over again that Jesus Christ actually died. It is also why it is a central statement in the Apostles' Creed. Jesus truly suffered death with all its agony, and He was laid in a grave. His death was complete.

III. The Burial of Jesus.

The gospel writers take great pains to also describe Jesus' burial. We're told that each of the three corpses of the men who were crucified were taken down towards the evening, before the Jewish Sabbath which began at sundown. Commentators suggest that the two robbers were probably buried on the spot, crosses and all, or they were carried off to some obscure ditch where their remains were discarded. No one went to much trouble to dispose of the bodies of criminals.

This would have been the fate of Jesus, too, if it hadn't been for the intervention of a man named Joseph of Arimathea. He was a member of the Sanhedrin, and he asked Pilate for the body. It was the custom of the Romans to give the corpses of criminals to their friends, if requested, and Pilate granted his Joseph's wish. This is the first time Joseph appears in Scripture, and not much is known about him, except this act of mercy and compassion. He was obviously a wealthy person because he owned a garden and a burial place in the city of Jerusalem. He also used his position of influence to do the right thing, and this act of kindness set the scene for the miracle of the resurrection.

John tells us that along with Joseph a man named Nicodemus, who was also a member of the Sanhedrin, took the body of Jesus and wrapped it in linen burial clothes. And together they put 75 pounds of spices, a mixture of myrrh and aloes, in the strips of linen in accordance with the Jewish custom of burial. We also learn that they placed the body of Jesus in a new tomb that had been carved out of rock, and when they placed the body of the Lord in it they rolled a large stone in front of the entrance to close it off completely.

All this was done on the day of Jesus' death because the Jews had a practice of burying a person within 24 hours of dying because this was commanded in Deuteronomy 21. In addition, it was the Friday of Passover, and the Jewish law prohibited any unclean thing, like an unburied corpse, to be exposed to view during the Sabbath, which was the next day. It was the leaders of the Sanhedrin who requested that Pilate have the legs of the crucified broken so that this gruesome business could be finished before the Sabbath. How ironic that those who were responsible for one of the greatest injustices in history were more concerned about ceremonial defilement than any remorse for what they had done.

Each of the gospels mentions that Jesus was buried, and each of them adds particular information the others omit. Why all this detail? Why so many particulars? I think the gospel writers included all this detail in order to eliminate any confusion or uncertainty about the finality of Jesus' death. They wanted us to know that Christ had a real body, and that His very real body died and was buried. In this way the Apostles' Creed reminds us that Jesus, who suffered under Pontius Pilate died at a particular time in history. He was a real person who died a real death, and He was buried in a real tomb in order to pay for our very real sins. It is not a myth. It actually happened.

Conclusion.

Why is this affirmation in the Creed so important? It's because Jesus endured the cross, He faced death, and He experienced the finality of the grave so that you and I wouldn't ever have to in an ultimate and spiritual sense. His sacrifice and burial accomplished our salvation and granted us eternal life, and His victory over death in the resurrection gives us the assurance that our salvation is secure. That's why Paul could write, *"Where, O Death, is your sting? Where, O Death, is your victory?" (1 Cor. 15:55)*. Indeed, as Paul says again, *"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus" (Rm. 3:23)*.

As I was writing this sermon and reflecting on the process of Jesus' death and burial, it took me back to 3 years ago when my late wife Lorie was in her last days. I remember asking her a few days before she passed away, "How are you doing? Are you afraid to die?" She answered, "No, Peter. I'm ready to go." There was calm in her voice. She was at peace.

A few days later when our sons arrived to be with their mom, the last conversation we had with her before she went into a coma she made an allusion to one of C.S. Lewis' books about the story of a bus ride to heaven. She said, "Well boys, I guess it's time for me to get on the bus and go home." She passed away three days later.

Jesus was laid in a grave that was meant for you and me so that death would lose its power over us and provide a way for us to live in eternity with Him forever. He was laid in a tomb, but He didn't stay there very long. Three days later He rose again from the dead and conquered sin and death once and for all. And now you and I have hope that because of Jesus' death and His victory over the grave we will have victory too. The apostle Paul wrote in Colossians 2:11-12, *"Having been buried with Him in baptism and raised with Him through faith in the power of God"* we have hope.

May the knowledge that Jesus Christ was crucified, died, and was buried for you give you peace and comfort this day and always, and especially whenever it's time for you to go home too. Amen.

¹Cited by Phillip Yancey in *The Jesus I Never Knew*, p. 203.

² John R.W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, p. 25.

³ *Ibid*, p. 32.

⁴*The Koran*, pp. 114 (liii.38), 176 (xxv.18), 230 (xvii.15), 274 (xxxix.7), and 429 (vi.164). See also the spurious 'Gospel of Barnabas', written in Italian in the fourteenth or fifteenth century by a Christian convert to Islam which contains parts of the Koran as well as of the four canonical Gospels.

⁵Mt. 27:50; Mk. 15:39; Lk. 23:46-49; Lk. 24:19-21; and Jn. 19:30,34. On this last point, see Stroud's treatise on *The Physical Cause of the Death of Christ* or James Stalker's *The Trial and Death of Jesus Christ*, p. 177.