

“A Word from the Cross: Victory!”

For those of you who are visitors today, I will tell you that during Lent, we examined what is commonly known as "The Seven Last Words of Jesus from the Cross." These are the seven phrases that Christ uttered during the crucifixion. We have learned that even the words that seem to be for him were really for us, offered to teach us one last lesson or to extend one more bit of grace before his death. Each week the sermon here was entitled: "A Word from the Cross" with a key word that hopefully captured the meaning of that phrase.

But I am wondering if any of you who are not visitor and *heard* the sermons noticed that I only preached on six of those words. If you didn't notice or perhaps just didn't count, you are probably wondering if I have missed the boat, fallen asleep or am simply not paying attention. You're thinking that you just heard me say that the stone was rolled away! Jesus Christ is NOT in the tomb, the disciples did NOT find him there. So you may be asking yourselves, "Why is Julie taking us back to the cross?"

Well, first let me say that the fact that the tomb could not hold our Lord is THE GOOD NEWS for Christians of all ages. But as I planned my sermons throughout our Lenten journey, I withheld this last word for a reason. Namely this - it is so hard to decide what to *SAY* about Easter that everyone hasn't already heard. In fact, I told someone that my sermon today was going to be, "The stone was rolled away. The tomb was empty. He is risen! Enjoy your ham!" But of course, THAT would NEVER do.

However, while studying these beautiful gifts from Jesus on the cross, the Holy Spirit urged me to hold on to this last word just for this morning. “It is finished!” Because as Easter people, who live on *this* side of the cross, this may be the best news of all, when you think of all the things that “**IT**” can stand for.

When Christ cried out, “It is finished”, it is recorded in the English language as three separate words but in the original Greek that John wrote in, Jesus spoke only one word. So to translate it as “finished” is *adequate*, but does not really give us a full appreciation for what it was that was accomplished on the cross. In my Greek dictionary, I counted no less than twelve definitions for the word including “complete”, “execute”, “accomplish”, “fill up” and “pay”. But James Montgomery Boice explained it best when he wrote that this word from Jesus on the cross was a complete summation of the gospel!

So let us consider that “it” stood for Jesus’ suffering. Surely Jesus knew that never again would he be spit upon by Roman soldiers or have his motives questioned by Pharisees and Sadducees. He would endure no more flogging or mocking or betrayal by his followers. No desertion from his disciples and denial from his close friends. No one ever suffered as Jesus did and surely he knew that he was finally headed to a place of eternal rest and that the sufferings of life were finished. But can we take “IT” a step further and believe that OUR suffering has ended too? Well, yes, I think we can.

You see, the idea that suffering can have an ending is an important word to anyone who is living in what I call a Good Friday day. Often when we get bad news – when the test comes back positive or pink slip is delivered or the crops fail or the stock market plummets, it is easy to think OUR lives are finished and suffering is all that lies ahead. Jesus’ ability to pronounce suffering finished on that day gives us hope that

Sunday will come again in our lives when we believe in the sacrifices that Christ made on our behalf. So this means that ULTIMATELY our suffering will end too.

Or perhaps, Jesus was saying these words for the benefit of the doubting Jews in the crowd so that they would understand that “it” stood for the prophecies of the coming Messiah. We know that most of Jesus’ Jewish opponents were very pious and so they would have known the Scriptures well. And in many ways, his proclamation was almost a summation of what their prophets had been telling them for centuries.

Isaiah had foretold that the Messiah would be born of a woman without benefit of a human father and that he would be rejected by his own people. As rejection stood embodied around the cross in the very ones who had yelled, “Crucify Him!” perhaps these words of the prophet rang in their ears. Isaiah had also said that the Messiah would open the eyes of the blind, unstop the ears of the deaf and make the lame to leap like deer. Witnesses to his many miracles would have known that these words had come true.

Micah had said that the savior would be born in Bethlehem. Zechariah had predicted that the Messiah would ride into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey and the Psalmist had written that his hands and feet would be pierced and that soldiers would cast lots for his clothing. So as both his followers and enemies gathered to watch his death, they may have been remembering the words from their OWN Scriptures that had been taught to them all their lives and realized that “IT” was the fulfillment of the Old Testament Messianic promise.

Of course, the whole realm of our Christian doctrine is based on the belief that, upon Jesus death, SIN is finished and I am sure that this was on the mind of Christ that day too. His death means the end of *our* sins and that sin is not ON us any more. Now,

please notice that I did not say that sin is not IN us. We will always be sinful in nature because of the fall of Adam. Of course, some people have a hard time understanding the true implications of their sinfulness. A Sunday School teacher once asked her middle school class if they knew what sins of omission were. After some thought, one young man answered, "They're the sins we should have committed but haven't gotten around to."

But when we are honest, we recognize our sinfulness. And we know that our hope is in the knowledge that by Christ's atoning death on the cross, sin cannot be ON us. Your guilt and mine were transferred to a Holy substitute. As Reformed Christians, we believe that there is nothing we can do to take away our sin. No rosary prayers, no little animals burned at the altar. Left to our own devices we will always live mired down IN sin until after our death. But by the sacrifice of his only son, God has taken any sin that is ON us and transferred it to His own child. So in effect, the cross of Christ has become the GRAVE for our sins. And there is nothing WE can do to remove our sinfulness except believe! And so, IT, sin, has spoken for the last time.

Of course, Jesus could easily have meant "my work" is finished! Jesus had been telling people over and over that *his* work was to glorify God and bring back the lost sheep of Israel to their covenantal father. Earlier in the priestly prayer that John recorded Jesus to have prayed he said to God, "I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do." So now, having reassured God that his work was done, maybe he wanted his people to hear it too. So he proclaimed, "I can do no more for you than what I have already done. IT IS FINISHED!"

At this point, I would like to say that I do NOT believe that “it” means OUR work is finished. Now for those of us real "Type A" personalities, this is a huge relief because we cannot relate to the idea of having nothing to do! I was driving through the country the other day and passed a little non-denominational church with a marquee out front that said, “God so loved the world that he did not send a committee!” Some of us diehard Presbyterians may not know how to act if we get to Heaven and don’t have a committee meeting to go to.

However, by the fact that all four gospel accounts of the resurrection of Christ include some form of the words, “GO AND TELL”, we know that while Christ’s work may be finished, ours is not. When Michelangelo put the finishing touches on the Sistine Chapel, I can imagine that, as the artist, he leaned back, looked with satisfaction at his work and declared, “I can do no more.” And so Jesus, as the master himself, could declare on the cross that with his death, he TOO, could do no more.

But as recipients of the masterpiece of eternal life, our work is not finished. We, like the first disciples at the tomb, are commanded by our Lord to go and tell. To teach and preach and baptize even to the ends of the earth. To share the good news of God’s love and grace with anyone who will listen. And to demonstrate it in our daily living.

But I believe that the true meaning to us on this Easter day, the word of resurrection that we find in this last battle cry of Christ from the cross is the assurance that “DEATH” is finished. Because THAT really is **the** Gospel. And I feel sure that THIS is why the Holy Spirit kept sending this Good Friday word into my thoughts for Easter Sunday.

As much as I try to keep an open mind and accept other ideas and viewpoints, I have a very traditional idea of what happened when Jesus was taken off the cross. I believe that when Jesus' spirit departed that day and they laid him in the tomb, that he literally went to Hell on our behalf and did a three day battle with the devil. And by the appearance of the resurrected Christ to so many people, we know that Jesus Christ was the final victor.

So when Jesus cried those words on the cross, he gave us the message of resurrection and new life. He gave us in that ONE word a picture of the Holy city where, as the old song says, "all who would might enter and no one be denied." On the cross on Good Friday, Jesus gave us hope and light and joy and life in that word given in sacrificial love. And so, the joy of our Easter this day is that when Jesus said, "It is finished!" what he means was that your eternal life and mine had just begun. The word from the cross is VICTORY.

I don't mean to paint a rosy picture of a perfect life for all who believe. Everyone here knows that this is not true. But I do believe the story of the cross and the empty tomb is truly the story of the grace to cope with *what is* and the story of hope for *what is to come*. Christ's sacrifice on the cross gives us this gift and calls us to hold on to it every day. So today, as we go from this place, let us each in our own way go and tell the good news that it is finished. Alleluia! Amen.

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The Rev. Julie Schaaf