

“What Should I Do with Jesus?”

Many of you know that I have been away studying with my colleague and partner in crime, Allyson Helvie, pastor of Mt. Zion Presbyterian Church in Sandy Springs, SC. We have been friends since I was assigned to be her mentor while she went through seminary and we have been soul sisters ever since. Allyson preached at my installation service here in 2017. This week, the two of us have been intensely studying the book of Hebrews in preparation for a sermon series that we will preach in our respective churches this summer.

Both of us have been to the Holy Land and are actually in the preliminary stages of planning a joint trip for anyone interested from our two congregations in making that wonderful pilgrimage together. Of course, after talking to the travel agent, we began to reminisce, and we discovered for the first time that, even though we made the trip two years apart, we had the very same tour guide. The two of us talked about our different memories. I shared one that gave me goose bumps and then caused me to read the passage that you just heard.

Which is why I am preaching on this particular passage AFTER Easter even though a normal minister would only preach on it during Holy Week. But I mean, let's be honest, no one here thinks I am normal any way. And there is one part of the story that I realized brings a message for us that is important all year long. However, it is especially important for the graduates to hear today. So, let me begin by sharing our memory from this passage.

When we were in Jerusalem, we visited the house of Caiaphas. Near it is a chapel that has what looks like a gold weathervane with a rooster on top. It is called the Church of St. Peter. Of course, the rooster is not to help predict storms but to remind us that Peter, one of Jesus'

closest friends, would deny knowing him when questioned at the events surrounding the crucifixion. Jesus had predicted that Peter would deny him three times before the cock and the rooster is a reminder that Jesus was right.

We also learned on our trip that between the time that the High Priest Caiaphas questioned Jesus and when he was handed over to Pilate, the governor, he stayed all night, alone in a pit beneath Caiaphas' house. I never really thought about what happened during that time frame, but it makes sense that Jesus had to be somewhere between the events that are recorded in our Gospels.

Our group was taken to that very pit. Jacob, our Jewish tour guide, asked us to line up around the walls and stand where no one else was touching us. Then he asked us to close our eyes and be completely quiet for one whole minute. As we stood in the darkness and silence for what seemed like a very long time, an eerie feeling of sadness and loneliness came over me. And I *felt* rather than heard an ancestral calling from the people who were present with our Lord during his life on earth.

When Jacob asked us to open our eyes, we shared our emotions. Every one of us had experienced a loneliness, an ache that could not really be described. Then he said, "Imagine how Jesus, your Lord, felt when he was here all night, alone in the dark." That's where the goose bumps came in! It was an amazing question for a Jew to be asking us. Even if he did not recognize the Messiah, it was clear that he understood that WE did and wanted us to comprehend the sentiments of the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

As I reread the words of Matthew in preparation for this sermon, I pictured the pit in my mind's eye and felt that loneliness again, and knew that it was only a fraction of the emotions that would soon have Jesus cry from the cross – "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken

me?” Yet, Jesus’ lament is “intended to touch us at the core of our being so that we, his present-day disciples, may remember his teachings and endeavor to live according to them.” (1)

Standing in the place where he waited to face his death on our behalf, I understood that his cry was not *his* alone but a timeless cry on behalf of everyone who has felt or will feel forsaken by God or humanity. Jesus felt abandoned by both and turned to his Heavenly Father in anguish.

Some of you who have attended Bible study here may also remember that Matthew wrote his Gospel specifically for the Jews. I remind you of this because certain aspects of this story were vital for the Jews to pay attention to – at least in Matthew’s mind. You see, he wanted to get it on record that it was the Jews themselves, not Pilate, who were responsible for the death of the long awaited for Messiah.

This is to fulfill Jesus’ words earlier when he said in Matthew, “Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.” Today, we understand that it is only by the fact that the chosen people rejected their own king that his message was sent out into the world and eventually to us today. Indeed, their rejection became our “Good News”!

And as if to sharpen his point, Matthew records that Pilate asks the crowd that had gathered **THREE** times which criminal they would like spared. If you read this story like you’ve never heard it, maybe you are hoping that the Jews will come to their senses. But every time the people’s answer is to crucify Christ. So on the third time, Pilate says, “What should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?”

As I planned a sermon for graduation Sunday, that question has been rolling around in my mind because it is a question for each of us here today, not just those who are headed off to college or to start our careers. **WHAT SHOULD I DO WITH JESUS?**

Now, if I were an evangelist at an old-fashioned tent meeting, I would point my fingers at the sky and carry on about your eternity and being left behind when Jesus comes again so I could try to scare salvation into you. But being mostly polite Presbyterians, with a few revering Baptists and Methodist thrown in who have become used to the ways of the “Frozen Chosen”, you know not to expect that from me!

Unfortunately, some of us may answer the question just the way that Peter did and say, “I don’t know him, I’ve never heard of him, and I want nothing to do with him.” Because we all know that there are people, not just in the world, but right here in Spartanburg who have absolutely NO IDEA what to do with Jesus because they really know nothing about him.

Another thing that can make this question challenging is living in the multi-cultural world that we do today. Everywhere we go, it is stressed that we should not offend others who may not have the same beliefs that we do. So when pondering the question “What shall I do with Jesus”, we may feel that the best thing to do is hold him quietly in our hearts. And of course, in some ways this is true. No matter our age or our circumstance, it is important that we spend time alone with Jesus so that we can know God’s will and consider God’s plans for our future. But that is not the same thing as not mentioning him because we think we should be politically correct.

Some of us may answer this question by saying that we tend to think of Jesus only at certain times of the day or even the year. I am sorry to say that this is what I DID when I first went to college. Even though I had been very involved in church and had a strong faith when I went to Clemson, once I got there, I got kind of swept up in the whole college atmosphere. I basically did TWO things while I was there – study and party. Unless of course I REALLY NEEDED Jesus to get me out of a bind, help me make a decision or comfort me when I was lonely or uncertain.

So, you might say that when I got to college, my answer to “What should I do with Jesus?” was “keep him on the back burner until you really need him to show up”. And many people will choose to do just that with Jesus all during their lives. Keep Jesus in their pocket and pull him out for important days like Christmas and Easter. Offer him what one of my friends calls 9-1-1- prayers, crying out for him only when I am desperate and can’t think of anyone else to help me.

But let me share my experience of learning why this answer didn’t really work for me. First, it was not true to my faith. I had always leaned very heavily on God. This was easy in high school because I was constantly at church, choir practice or youth group. It was easy to think about God and God’s blessings on an almost daily basis because I was in a setting where that was the emphasis. And once my family got involved in church in my teenaged years, we prayed at home every day. We even prayed every day in public school way back in the ‘70’s!

But honestly, looking back, I realize that sometimes I answered the question the same way Peter did. Only I did it with my life and not my words, as Peter had. I denied knowing Jesus with my actions. I guess you might say I was not a very credible witness for Christ. The trouble was that I didn’t even know this or even think about how important it was until almost the end of my freshman year at Clemson.

Our sorority choir was involved in a big competition. We had practiced for months and when the time arrived for us to perform before the judges, I asked everyone if we could pray before we went in. They all kind of looked at me like I had grown two heads! But the choir at church always prayed before we sang, so I just grabbed hands with my sisters and started to pray.

Afterwards, everyone seemed so emotional. I thought they were just nervous. Then one of my friends told me, “We are all so happy Julie. We had no idea you are a Christian.” Folks,

you could have knocked me over with the proverbial feather. It was then that I knew that faith is not something that you can keep in your pocket and pull out when it is convenient. You have to wear it boldly all the time!

So, it was at that point in my life that the answer to the question, “What should I do with Jesus?” became clear. Even when we are away at school or at work or in the grocery store or in traffic or at a college party, our actions AND words should make it clear to everyone that Jesus is our Lord. The name of Jesus should be on our lips with the hopes that the Holy Spirit will let us know when to share it. But even more importantly, our actions should imitate the kindness, compassion and integrity that our Lord taught us in his time on earth. This is a story that I pray everyone will hold on to when we leave the familiarity of this sanctuary but specifically, that our young people will hold on to as you leave the safety of your own homes and go out into the world.

It is also a question to consider as we come to the table of the Lord. The very table that Jesus set on the night when he knew one of his own would betray him and the rest would desert him while he went to the cross to die for them. This table is a symbol of sacrificial, unconditional love. In Greek, the word used to describe this love is “agape”. It is the love we are called to show as we go into the world as witnesses for Christ. As we approach the Holy meal, the sacrifice that it represents might remind us to answer to the question, “What should I do with Jesus?” in a way that helps others decide what to do with Jesus too!

Each time we share Communion, it is a time to remember. To remember the meal that Jesus set for his friends as well as for us. And to remember that it was not just a farewell dinner. It was at this meal that Jesus took the bread and broke it to remind us that HE was broken on the cross so that each of us could be made whole.

When we drink the cup, we remember that Jesus went to the Garden and wept and prayed and said, “Father take this cup from me.” But God did not take the cup – it was his will for Jesus to drink it. And so the cup reminds us that every drop of blood that fell from the hands and feet of our savior represents another one of our sins that has been forgiven.

So, to all of us, but especially to Emily, Lily and Makayla, as we are blessed to share this meal together, perhaps we might consider that one day God asked himself, “What should I do with My people?”. The answer is that God sent his son to the cross to die. For you. For me. For each one here. Indeed, for the whole world. So as we come to the table and go away fed with the bread of life, perhaps we will know how to answer the question. “What will YOU do with Jesus?” In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Rev. Julie Schaaf

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(1) Veronica Miles, Feasting on the Word, Westminster/John Knox Press,  
2010, Louisville, KY, p.180