

Theme: Jesus' great gift

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, on this day Jesus hung on a cross for the sins of the whole world; we give you thanks for this great gift, but do so with sadness; may we never forget what your son did for us, through him who died for our sins, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

If you get a chance to go to Jerusalem, there is a part of town that has several significant sites. It is called Mount Zion. I won't get started on where the true Mt. Zion is, but these days it is south of the Old City. King David's tomb, the Upper Room, and a church over the site believed to be where Peter denied Jesus, St. Peter Gallicantu, or St. Peter of the crowing rooster.

A few years ago, what is believed to be Caiaphas' house was excavated next to the church. Everything they have found there is consistent with a villa of the high priest. When I was there, we went down a couple levels where the jail cells are. This is where the temple prisoners were held. This is likely where Jesus was held as the Sanhedrin gathered for his trial.

There is a nearby room that is dug out from the rock. It is as it was when it was dug out (not that the room with cells was the Waldorf). Looking up in this room there is hole going through all the floors above. Prisoners were hung upside down from a rope up above and left to dangle in the dark below. It is very likely that they did this to Jesus. Guides turn out the lights so that visitors experience the total darkness in that room.

Jesus talks a lot about light and darkness in John's gospel. He warned his disciples that they would not have the light much longer. In John's prologue, John calls Jesus the light of the world. The light is nearly out in Caiaphas' house, especially when hanging upside down in the dark.

Jesus knows his time is coming to an end. Jesus' only defense is to point out the hypocrisy of his accusers. This only makes them angrier. Jesus verbally spars with Pilate, but stops short of defending himself against his accusers. The deck is stacked against him. The odds are good that the religious authorities had already arranged with Pilate to effect Jesus' execution. They

were astute politicians who have worked with the Romans to ensure that they can continue to practice their religion.

The Romans are even more vicious than the religious authorities. Nobody is crucified without being scourged first. Many don't survive the scourging to make it to the cross. And Jesus was already tortured before being brought to Pilate. Even though Jesus was not on the cross a good deal of time before his death, the Romans would not be surprised given all that Jesus' body had already endured.

The point is that Jesus had to go to the cross. Jesus had to survive to make it to the cross. It needed to be public and not a death in some private Roman courtyard. People needed to witness Jesus' death. There had to be no doubt that Jesus physically died.

Even with all these lines being filled in, there were some who doubted that Jesus really died on the cross. According to them, he rested, gathered up his strength, and escaped a few days later. This was said by critics of Christianity and even by some Christians who were later branded as heretics. This is why the gospel writers go to such great lengths to make sure the reader or the hearer knows Jesus really died.

When someone who has lived a full life dies, we celebrate the life they had. When someone dies young, we struggle to make sense of a seemingly senseless death. It took a few centuries for Christians to make sense of Jesus' death. But the basis for this thinking was done for us by St. Paul and others. Our sins died on the cross with Jesus.

Author and Episcopal priest Fleming Rutledge tells the story of a friend named Sally who was falsely suspected of shoplifting at an upscale department store. Rutledge writes, "The store in question is fashionable and elegant. Sally herself is fashionable and elegant, the epitome of aristocratic dignity.

"She bought an expensive blouse at the store and took it with her in a shopping bag. Unfortunately, the saleswoman had forgotten to remove the white plastic device that was attached to the blouse. When Sally tried to go through the door, the alarms went off and the security forces pounced upon her. 'Oh, my dear, how horrible for you!' cried her friends, listening to the

story ‘Did you have identification? Did you call your lawyer? Did you ask to see the president of the store?’

“Sally answered, ‘That wasn’t a problem. I didn’t have any trouble establishing who I was. That wasn’t the bad part. The really bad part was the feeling of being treated like a common criminal!’”

Reflecting on this incident, Fleming Rutledge made a connection between Sally’s experience and Jesus’ trial and crucifixion, “I tried to explain to Sally that the feeling of shame that she felt was a clue to the meaning of the death of Jesus, who was arrested like a common criminal, exhibited to the public like a common criminal, executed like a common criminal.

“I was unable to put this across. She does not believe herself to be guilty of anything. Wronged, yes; misunderstood, yes; undervalued, yes; imperfect, perhaps; but not guilty, certainly not sinful. Because she believes herself to be one of the ‘good’ people, because she could never, never commit a small sin like shoplifting, she cannot see the connection between Jesus’ death as a common criminal and herself. Sally could not hear the message of Good Friday.”

The Passion story is a brutal story. The world throws all it can at Jesus. But Jesus remains unfazed and triumphant. Jesus gives us a glimpse of what it means for us in how we are capable of being transformed by the Holy Spirit. We can be more present to the horrors of the world – to the suffering of the world – to the inhumanity of the world. With God’s help we can confront the evils of the world and not be defeated.

Text: **John 18:1–19:42** (NRSV)

18 After Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley to a place where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered. ² Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, because Jesus often met there with his disciples. ³ So Judas brought a detachment of soldiers together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees, and they came there with lanterns and torches and weapons. ⁴ Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them, “Whom are you looking for?” ⁵ They answered, “Jesus of Nazareth.”^a Jesus replied, “I am he.”^b Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. ⁶ When Jesus^c said to them, “I

^a Gk *the Nazorean*

^b Gk *I am*

^c Gk *he*

am he,”^d they stepped back and fell to the ground. ⁷ Again he asked them, “Whom are you looking for?” And they said, “Jesus of Nazareth.”^e ⁸ Jesus answered, “I told you that I am he.”^f So if you are looking for me, let these men go.” ⁹ This was to fulfill the word that he had spoken, “I did not lose a single one of those whom you gave me.” ¹⁰ Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it, struck the high priest’s slave, and cut off his right ear. The slave’s name was Malchus. ¹¹ Jesus said to Peter, “Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?”

¹² So the soldiers, their officer, and the Jewish police arrested Jesus and bound him. ¹³ First they took him to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year. ¹⁴ Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it was better to have one person die for the people.

¹⁵ Simon Peter and another disciple followed Jesus. Since that disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest, ¹⁶ but Peter was standing outside at the gate. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out, spoke to the woman who guarded the gate, and brought Peter in. ¹⁷ The woman said to Peter, “You are not also one of this man’s disciples, are you?” He said, “I am not.” ¹⁸ Now the slaves and the police had made a charcoal fire because it was cold, and they were standing around it and warming themselves. Peter also was standing with them and warming himself.

¹⁹ Then the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and about his teaching. ²⁰ Jesus answered, “I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret. ²¹ Why do you ask me? Ask those who heard what I said to them; they know what I said.” ²² When he had said this, one of the police standing nearby struck Jesus on the face, saying, “Is that how you answer the high priest?” ²³ Jesus answered, “If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong. But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?” ²⁴ Then Annas sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.

²⁵ Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. They asked him, “You are not also one of his disciples, are you?” He denied it and said, “I am not.” ²⁶ One of the slaves of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, “Did I not see you in the garden with him?” ²⁷ Again Peter denied it, and at that moment the cock crowed.

²⁸ Then they took Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate’s headquarters.^g It was early in the morning. They themselves did not enter the headquarters,^h so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover. ²⁹ So Pilate went out to them and said, “What accusation do you bring against this man?” ³⁰ They answered, “If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you.” ³¹ Pilate said to them, “Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law.” The Jews replied, “We are not permitted to put anyone to death.” ³² (This was to fulfill what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death he was to die.)

^d Gk *I am*

^e Gk *the Nazorean*

^f Gk *I am*

^g Gk *the praetorium*

^h Gk *the praetorium*

³³ Then Pilate entered the headquartersⁱ again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” ³⁴ Jesus answered, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” ³⁵ Pilate replied, “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?” ³⁶ Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.” ³⁷ Pilate asked him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” ³⁸ Pilate asked him, “What is truth?”

After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, “I find no case against him.” ³⁹ But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover. Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?” ⁴⁰ They shouted in reply, “Not this man, but Barabbas!” Now Barabbas was a bandit.

19 Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. ² And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe. ³ They kept coming up to him, saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!” and striking him on the face. ⁴ Pilate went out again and said to them, “Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against him.” ⁵ So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, “Here is the man!” ⁶ When the chief priests and the police saw him, they shouted, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” Pilate said to them, “Take him yourselves and crucify him; I find no case against him.” ⁷ The Jews answered him, “We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God.”

⁸ Now when Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever. ⁹ He entered his headquarters^a again and asked Jesus, “Where are you from?” But Jesus gave him no answer. ¹⁰ Pilate therefore said to him, “Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?” ¹¹ Jesus answered him, “You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.” ¹² From then on Pilate tried to release him, but the Jews cried out, “If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor.”

¹³ When Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus outside and sat^b on the judge’s bench at a place called The Stone Pavement, or in Hebrew^c Gabbatha. ¹⁴ Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon. He said to the Jews, “Here is your King!” ¹⁵ They cried out, “Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!” Pilate asked them, “Shall I crucify your King?” The chief priests answered, “We have no king but the emperor.” ¹⁶ Then he handed him over to them to be crucified.

ⁱ Gk *the praetorium*

^a Gk *the praetorium*

^b Or *seated him*

^c That is, *Aramaic*

So they took Jesus; ¹⁷ and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew^d is called Golgotha. ¹⁸ There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them. ¹⁹ Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, “Jesus of Nazareth,^e the King of the Jews.” ²⁰ Many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew,^f in Latin, and in Greek. ²¹ Then the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, “Do not write, ‘The King of the Jews,’ but, ‘This man said, I am King of the Jews.’” ²² Pilate answered, “What I have written I have written.” ²³ When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four parts, one for each soldier. They also took his tunic; now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from the top. ²⁴ So they said to one another, “Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see who will get it.” This was to fulfill what the scripture says,

“They divided my clothes among themselves,
and for my clothing they cast lots.”

²⁵ And that is what the soldiers did.

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶ When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, “Woman, here is your son.” ²⁷ Then he said to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

²⁸ After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), “I am thirsty.” ²⁹ A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. ³⁰ When Jesus had received the wine, he said, “It is finished.” Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

³¹ Since it was the day of Preparation, the Jews did not want the bodies left on the cross during the sabbath, especially because that sabbath was a day of great solemnity. So they asked Pilate to have the legs of the crucified men broken and the bodies removed. ³² Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who had been crucified with him. ³³ But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. ³⁴ Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out. ³⁵ (He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows^g that he tells the truth.) ³⁶ These things occurred so that the scripture might be fulfilled, “None of his bones shall be broken.” ³⁷ And again another passage of scripture says, “They will look on the one whom they have pierced.”

³⁸ After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. ³⁹ Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. ⁴⁰ They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the

^d That is, *Aramaic*

^e Gk *the Nazorean*

^f That is, *Aramaic*

^g Or *there is one who knows*

spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. ⁴¹ Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. ⁴² And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there. ¹

¹ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Jn 18:1–19:42). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.