

FINISHED
John 19:28-30

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Years ago, a Peter Jennings special entitled “In the Name of God” aired on television. Jennings traveled across America to churches who were trying to make Christianity more acceptable, more palatable to the lost, to the unchurched. Jennings asked the pastor of Willow Creek, “Your sanctuary – it felt like a theater. It didn’t feel religious to me. Is this intentional?”

“Yes,” says Bill Hybels. “Part of what we’re about is letting the non-churched investigate Christianity in a neutral setting.”

“Did you not think it was important to have even one cross somewhere in the sanctuary?”

“No,” said Hybels, “it’s dangerous to try to capture the essence of Christianity in a single symbol.”

The more I thought about Hybels’s words, the more I realized that I couldn’t disagree more. Paul says it in the book of Galatians. “May I never boast in anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

You see, Christianity is a religion of the cross. In authentic Christianity, the cross dominates the entire landscape – it confronts us at every hand and at every turn. We can never escape it.

At least by the second century, if not a great deal earlier, the cross had been singled out as the sign or the signal of Christianity. The great European cathedrals are cruciform in design – that is, designed in the shape of the cross. From the earliest days, the cross found its place in the inscriptions, the seals, the ornaments, the vestments, and the tombstones of Christian communities everywhere.

The cross is the very axis around which our faith rotates. Any modern attempts to remove the horror of the cross, to reshape Christianity into a religion that is more acceptable to modern sensibilities is misguided. For you see, it’s the cross itself that reveals both the horror of sin and, yes, the love of God at the same time.

Look with me at John 19:28-30

After this, Jesus, knowing that all things had already been accomplished, in order that the Scripture might be fulfilled, said, “I am thirsty.” A jar full of sour wine was standing there; so they put a sponge full of the sour wine upon a branch of hyssop, and brought it up to His mouth. When Jesus therefore had received the sour wine, He said, “It is finished!” And he bowed His head and gave up His spirit.

He wants to say it. He hangs there on the cross, upon the tree, but His throat by now is so parched that He cannot utter the words. So He says, "I'm thirsty." Some cheap wine, sour wine, is taken and absorbed in the sponge. And the sponge is lifted on the hyssop branch. It moistens His lips, and He is able to cry out, "It is finished!"

It isn't the resignation of man who has been defeated. Rather, it is a triumphant proclamation for the one who is on the cross to know that all God had to accomplish has been accomplished – that everything He needed to do in His ministry has now been done on the cross. God's will is accomplished.

And John says He bows His head. Notice carefully the note of an eyewitness. No other gospeller tells us that He bowed His head – John, a careful chronicler who was an eyewitness. He bows His head, and He dies.

I asked myself this week, "Where are we after the cross? Where were they after the "it is finished"?"

Look over there – in the field, on the branch. You see him swinging to and fro, gently in the breeze. Yes, now you see him at the end of the rope. It's Judas. Indeed, it is finished for him. The betrayal is complete. The blood money has been received, and he has tried to return it – because, as the text records, he said, "I have betrayed innocent blood."

He must have been thinking to himself, "How could I have done it? Why didn't Jesus just run." It's over now. Conscience came home to the house of Judas and took its vengeance. The rope tightens, and Judas ends it all. It is finished for Judas.

On the hillside lurks a coward – a big man. He's all talk and no action. They call him Peter. Some had even said that he was the rock, the mountain, the one of great faith. There he is now, shivering in the shadows of the cross. The words he had uttered keep echoing over and over again in his mind and in his ear. "Lord, I'll be with you. I don't care what the other disciples do. I'll be with you. There with my sword, I'll go all the way to the end with you, Lord."

All it took was a little wisp of a slave girl to inquire, and he said, cursing, "I never knew the man." And the awful look of disappointment. Even as the syllables of the last denial were lingering upon his lips, Jesus turns and looks at Peter. It was an awful look. Jesus was so disappointed. Peter is so surprised at how small he is. And things are, at least for now for Peter, finished as well.

And then there are Annas and Caiaphas, of the high priestly authority. They were so happy it was over. Someone brought them the news. They had been politicking and laying traps for nearly three years now. At first, they thought Jesus might get the people excited, focused on the Judaism and their nationality. But then people started to call Him king. That would never do – Jesus, king of the Jews. No wonder Herod was shaking on his throne.

It is over. It is finished. Annas and Caiaphas were so happy. In fact, Caiaphas remembers the words that he uttered before the Sanhedrin. He remembers these words: "Better that one man should perish than the whole nation should suddenly come under judgment." Now they bring them the news. It is finished. And Annas and Caiaphas sit back to afternoon refreshments with a sense of accomplishment in their breasts.

Just a stone's throw away from the house of Annas and Caiaphas is the porch of Pilate. He stands on the balcony. He sees there on the horizon three crosses. Just a routine crucifixion – happens every week. Pilate is trying to convince himself. But he knows that somehow on the center cross something is amiss. And half a dozen times he walks out on the porch and looks as if somehow, he hopes, the center cross will just disappear from the landscape. But it doesn't.

He's nervous. His wife doesn't even join him for the afternoon refreshments. You see, she didn't sleep very well the night before. She had dreams – no, she had nightmares. She heard voices. "You'd better let this one go, Pilate. This is a righteous man. I really don't feel good about this one. Something is telling me...I've had a nightmare. Let Jesus go."

But what was Pilate to do? He had the Jewish authorities, the Sanhedrin, against him. The people underneath his window were shouting, "Crucify Him, crucify Him." You know, when you're a politician the best thing is not always the right thing. "It's just the way it is," thinks Pilate.

But his hands feel wet. "Slave boy, get rid of that water basin and give me the towel. I can't stand the house when it's untidy. What is it on my hands? Is it water? Is it sweat? Is it blood?" Pilate is very much ill at ease. And Pilate begins to hope at least for now it is finished.

And then there is Barabbas. He can't believe His good fortune. "You mean they're going to let me go free? And they are going to crucify some teacher, some rabbi from Nazareth? Don't ask too many questions," thinks Barabbas. "Just run." And he runs – doesn't even notice that the sky is dark and ominous today. He makes his flight. He makes his escape.

Then there are the thieves, one on each side of Jesus. "Hey, aren't you the Messiah? Go ahead and save yourself and save us." You see, he had heard the people below say that Jesus said He was going to tear the temple down and build it back in three days. "Hey, Jesus. Come down off that cross. Then we'll bow down and worship you."

What was it? Was the whip inadequate? Was there something about the crown of thorns that didn't bring enough agony upon Jesus? Were the spikes piercing His palms and His feet – were they not getting the job done? Were these not enough that now the people have to hurl insult upon injury and lash Him with their tongues?

His comrade listens to the conversation. "You don't know what you're talking about. We're up here for good cause. Aren't you even scared of God at the moment of your death? I know you, Jesus," said the second thief. "I've heard you preach. You preach about a God who is willing to forgive. You preach about starting over and having a second chance. Could it happen for me, Jesus? Even me? Even now?"

“It is finished,” says Jesus. And somehow the thief knows it is. It’s like sweet music to his ears. He feels, even at the moment of his death, like a newborn baby.

Then there was the centurion. He was just doing his job. There he was, playing a game with his buddies. “My, the sky is unusually dark for this hour,” says another soldier. “I think a storm might be brewing,” says another. “Time for one more roll. Here we go. Six - six - six. You’re always lucky. You get His cloak.”

“What’s that? The one on the center cross is thirsty? Of course He’s thirsty. It’s been a long day. We’re all thirsty. Give Him some of this rancid wine. That will teach Him about thirsty.”

“My God, my God. Why have You forsaken me?” That was the worst of all. That was worse than the whip on the back, the nail in the hand. The One who had been so intimate, who had been at one time one with God, was now totally separate from God because He bore your sins and my sins. Every lie ever told was on His back. Everything ever coveted was on His back. Every lusty thought He bore there on the cross.

Some thought He called for Elijah. “Quick, go get some more wine.” They didn’t want to miss it – if the fiery chariot was going to come down and do something spectacular, they needed to sustain Jesus until the prophet might come. This would be too good to miss.

Some had said that the curtain that encloses the Holy of Holies has been ripped from top to bottom – sixty feet by thirty feet long. Others said that the rocks themselves were shaking and reeling, and the earth was quaking.

Finally, the centurion says, “Surely this was the Son of God.”

The crowd dwindles, now subsiding. They hear Jesus, too. “It is finished.”

“Who did He think He was anyway? Every dog has his day. Now we’re done with Jesus. Let’s get back to the activities and festivities of the feast. What an odd one this Jesus must have been.”

Then there is Mary. Oh, Mary. While the crowd begins to dwindle, Mary stays steadfast. She lingers as the others are leaving. “Is this really my son?” she must think. “Is this really the tiny life that was growing in my womb and kicking? Is this the baby that we welcomed – with the stars and the shepherds and the angelic choir? Is this the child that Simeon took in his arms? What was it that the old man said in the temple?” His words now come so prophetically true. “Mary,” he says, looking her in the eye. “A sword will pierce your heart as well.”

“How did he know? How did Simeon know?” she must have thought. Because he knew that when it came to the person of Jesus, no one could be neutral. Either you would proclaim Him as the Son of God, or you would crucify Him. There was no in-between. So Simeon says, “Mary, your heart will be pierced through.”

“Did it have to come to all this?” Mary must have thought. All those years she washed His clothes. All those years she cooked His meals. All those times she lingered on the edge of the crowd, watching His ministry and wanting to be more a part of it.

“Why couldn’t they leave Him alone? Why can’t He just go home to Nazareth? Take Him off the cross – I’ll take care of Him. I promise. He won’t bother you again.”

Then He looks at her – nods with His head as his hands are occupied. “Woman.” Did you hear that? Woman, not mother. He is saying to Mary that things are finished for them. He is no longer her son. “Woman,” He says, nodding to John, His best friend, “here’s your son. John, here is your mother.”

He says it is finished. And for Mary, life must, indeed, feel finished. She must have wanted to die with Him.

What about the other disciples – lurking on the distant slopes of Jerusalem? Oh, they wanted to be close to the crucifixion – but not so close that they, themselves, might be next on the cross. They could remember just the night before having the Lord’s Supper and remembering so much about the ministry of Jesus. “The look of the lady from Sychar,” one of them had talked about. “Or the time they tried to kill you in Nazareth, Jesus.”

But now the one they thought would bring them power and prestige was hanging on the cross. What now? It is finished for them, too. Back to the boats, I guess. Back to collecting the tax.

What happens next is the ironic part of the story. Nothing happens next. No chariots of fire. No dancing angels swooping down in a chorus. He says it’s finished, and it seems done. Why couldn’t God, one more time, thunderously speak from heaven? Why couldn’t the earth stop spinning on its axis? This is the Son of God on the cross.

How dare the sun get up the next morning? How dare the women go about preparing meals – and the men adorning themselves in their prayer shawls as if it was finished?

Joseph of Arimathea collects the body, wraps it in the strips of cloth, and places it in the damp tomb.

The cross, congregation, cannot be made more respectable. The cross cannot be ignored. It is the most awful day in all of cosmic history – the day that Jesus bears our sin and God refuses to rescue His Son.

We come to the cross. We can’t fix it up to make it more acceptable.

In the late 1800s, Charles Berry, an English preacher, came to be pastor of the great Plymouth Church in Brooklyn. One day Berry related the story about how he, himself, had come to know Christ as his Savior. There had been a time early in Berry’s ministry when he preached a very diluted gospel – really no gospel at all. He said that Jesus was a good teacher, a noble man who taught us how to live life.

Late one night during his first pastorate, he sat in his cozy study. There came a knock at the door. He opened the door and found a typical girl with a shawl on her head and clogs on her feet. “Are you a minister?” she asked. Upon receiving the affirmative answer she said, “Come quickly. You need to get my mother in.” Thinking that her mother must be some drunk out on the street, he said, “Ma’am, you don’t need a pastor. You need a policeman.”

“No,” said the girl. “My mother is dying, and I need you to come and get her into heaven.”

Berry quickly got dressed and followed her a mile and a half through the streets that night. He knelt at the woman’s side and began to relate to her again what a fine, ethical teacher Jesus really was. “You can’t tell me anything else?” she said. She halted his story. “I am a woman who is dying in her sin. I’ve lived a sinful life. Can’t someone give me mercy? Give me hope?”

“I stood there in the presence,” writes Berry, “of a dying woman and I realized I had nothing to tell her. In the midst of her sin and her death, I had no message. And in order to bring something to that dying woman, I had to go back to the gospel of my mother’s knee, of my cradle faith. And it came to me what it meant – the story of the cross, of a Christ who is able to save the worst of sinners.”

“Now you’re getting it,” the woman said. “Now you’re bringing me comfort.”

Berry concluded by saying, “Thank God I got her in. And thank God the same evening I got myself in.”

One of these days, some of us will come to the conclusion that we need to get in. And we will have tried every route that we know. The route of success in our business. The route of being happy just in a family life or the life of a single. And all of it will come up wanting. We will have played the whole game, and it won’t be enough.

And in that moment – and when it comes for you, be it in a moment of stress or terror or in the silence of the quiet, dark night – when you have a dramatic insight you’ll know that while the market place can explain so many things for you, the market place cannot tell you to have a permanent and intimate relationship with God. At that moment we’ll have to come to the cross. No personality. No Paul. No Apollos. No Cephas. No glitzy message will do. It will be an awful message you come to – a message of an angry God and His Son upon a cross, dying on your behalf as well as on behalf of the scum of the world.

It will not be a great intellectual deduction to which you arrive. Rather, it will be the simple cry – either aloud or in the silence of your heart – “God, save me.” And then, because of the cross, there will be eternal life.

Father, we come to you this morning. How much I don’t want to leave Jesus on the cross. How much I want to rush ahead to the resurrection sermon. But we have to wait. We have to wait so we realize the awfulness of that day. And how, for so many of the people of God, things seemed finished.