A Death Like No Other

Matthew 27:45-61
Key Verse: Matthew 27:50
“And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.”

The topic of today’s message is death, particularly Jesus’ death. Now, death is not an easy subject to talk about, but it is one of the most universal. After all, “in this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes”. Death is something that has affected or will affect everyone here. We have lost friends, grandparents, parents, siblings, cousins, coworkers, leaders and even pets to death. On top of all that, one day, we too will be at death’s door. Every one of us here will face death head on and do you know what? Each of our deaths and the deaths of everyone that we know all have the same effect on the world. The world continues to spin and life moves on. After the death of one of your loved ones, you are still here, living your life. Last year saw a lot of celebrity deaths. At the end of the year, Carrie Fischer died after complications from a heart attack. She had finished filming the eighth *Star Wars* movie, *The Last Jedi*, and she was supposed to have a big part in the ninth film, but not anymore. The movies will go on without her. She played an iconic character, but the world moves on. I don’t say this to be rude or to belittle anyone’s accomplishments. The people close to us that have died have left holes in our lives, but the world still moves on. Over the course of all history, it has been like this. Billions have died, but there is only one death that is unique. There is only one death that is like no other. There is only one death in which the world did not simply move on. Nearly two thousand years ago, Jesus, the Son of God died and the world has never been the same since.

In the past two weeks, we saw Jesus stand before the Roman governor Pilate and not appeal his case. The religious leaders brought false charges to Pilate and Jesus remained silent. There was no basis for their charges, but he was sentenced to be crucified nonetheless. Jesus chose punishment to save us from punishment. Jesus was handed over to the Roman soldiers, who beat and mocked him before leading him out to be crucified. Jesus was raised up on the cross and everybody who passed by hurled insults at him, tempting him to come down from the cross, but if he came down, Jesus could not save. So, he chose to remain on the cross. As our passage begins today, Jesus is still hanging on the cross, enduring shame, pain and ridicule as he was dying. However, as I said, Jesus’ death is like no other. Our passage starts, “From noon until three in the afternoon darkness came over all the land.” (45) Jesus was crucified at around 9 in the morning and this passage begins three hours after that. Jesus has been hearing taunts and rejection for three hours when something unexpected happened, darkness covered the land for three hours. This is not normal. If you have a total eclipse of the sun, where the moon totally blocks out the sun, the longest it lasts is seven-and-a-half minutes, but as Jesus hung on the cross, it became dark for three hours. There is nothing in nature that could do that. Nature was reeling at the death of Christ, at the death of the Son of God. That is not an insignificant thing. The author of life, the one who had been there before creation, was dying, and creation, itself, was darkening because the light of life was being snuffed out. The impossible was happening; God was dying.

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After three hours of darkness, Jesus cries out in a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lema sebachthani?”, which means “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” (46) The darkness that covered the land was symbolic of the separation from the Father that Jesus was experiencing. God’s wrath was being poured out over Jesus, and the fullness of that wrath is God turning away from him, breaking the relationship that Jesus had known forever. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit were all one, but now the Son was separate. The Son was alone. It must have been so difficult for Jesus and the Father. If you have ever had bouts of loneliness, you know how hard it is, but magnify that more than one hundred times and you get a glimpse of what Jesus was going through. Our being lonely is about as close as we can get to understanding what Jesus was going through, but it was so much more and so much deeper. Jesus could endure the physical punishment of the cross. He took the flogging, the beating and the nailing to the cross without uttering a word. While hanging on the cross, the people mocked him and called for him to come down, but Jesus said nothing. And yet, when his connection to God was broken, Jesus’ spirit was torn in a way it had never been before. It was during that time that Jesus cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Jesus was forsaken by God and abandoned. Jesus’ words are the cry of a son wanting his father, but there is even more to it than that.

The first additional meaning to Jesus’ words is that what he is saying is a quote from the Bible. Jesus is quoting Psalm 22:1. Now, this is a psalm that King David wrote over a thousand years prior. David wrote the psalm because he was being attacked by people that he did not provoke and God didn’t deliver him from them, yet. But when you read the psalm and compare it to the past few weeks and this passage, you get a different feel. The first 18 verses sound an awful lot like what Jesus was going through. David talks of people staring and gloating at him, hands and feet being pierced, bones out of joint and on display, and the dividing of his clothes by casting lots. When Jesus was on the cross, he was fulfilling what David wrote and he was drawing attention to that fact. He had a bit of a Bible study while hanging on the cross, near the end of his life. Unfortunately, the quote went over the people’s heads.

Which brings us to the second additional meaning to Jesus’ words. You might have noticed that the Bible records the literal words of what Jesus says in Aramaic and then translates it for the reader. Quite honestly, Jesus never spoke a lick of English and the entire Bible is translated from other languages. So, why is this left here in its original language. “Eli, Eli, lema sebachthani?” You can find an answer in how the crowd responded. “When some of those standing there heard this, they said, ‘He’s calling Elijah.’” (47) Some of the people heard Jesus say, “Eli, Eli”, and thought he was calling Elijah. The original language was kept because of this confusion. Now, the confusion had some plausible footing. The prophet Elijah was to be the forerunner of the Christ and if Jesus was the Christ, then perhaps he was calling Elijah down to prove it. Also, it was commonly believed that Elijah would come in times of need to protect the innocent and rescue the righteous. If Jesus were truly innocent, then Elijah would come.

Our passage continues, “Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a staff, and offered it to Jesus to drink.” (48) This is an interesting verse and it

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can be taken a couple of different ways. One is that it looks like someone wanted to help Jesus and they gave Jesus a drink, and this drink might have been a way to dull the pain a bit or to help him fight delirium. He might have been so dehydrated that the people thought he was speaking nonsense. This could be a bit of kindness in a time of scorn. I have also heard that this might not be kindness. It could still be mocking. You see, the sponge on a stick had a specific purpose in those times. At the public toilets, the poor could earn money by using a sponge on a stick to wipe people's butts. That means that the sponge might not be clean if it were used to wipe. If that were the case, then some people were very sadistic, but it also explains the response it triggered. The people reprimand the man with the sponge, saying "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to save him." (49) They say to leave him alone. That sounds like something you say to a person who is antagonizing someone else, not something you would say to someone who was showing compassion. At any rate, the people wanted to see if Elijah would come.

Unfortunately for them, Elijah did not come because they wanted to see Elijah, but also fortunately for them, Elijah did not come. Instead, "And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit." (50) Jesus cried out one more time and Luke records what he said: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." (Luke 23:46) His last words before death were about trusting God. Remember, Jesus had been forsaken by the Father, making Jesus all alone. He had no connection to the Father, but in his last moments, Jesus chose to trust in the Father all the more. Even when he looked like he had lost all control, Jesus was still in complete control. He knew when it was his time. He chose the moment when to give up his spirit and to give it to the Father. He breathed his last; his breath was not taken from him. By his own choice and according to his own will, God died.

Right at that moment, right at the moment of death, a whole lot happened. "At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs after Jesus' resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people." (51-53) None of these things are normal when someone dies. The temple curtain separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place inside the temple. The Most Holy Place was the place where God chose to dwell on earth. Only one person was allowed in that room only once a year, and, even then, that person was especially purified before entering. The curtain that separated the two places was no ordinary curtain. It was 60 feet long and 30 feet wide and was as thick as the palm of a person's hand. It was so massive that an earthquake could not rip it apart. It was also mentioned that two horses would be unable to rip the curtain, but at Jesus' death, that curtain was ripped in two from top to bottom.

On top of that, the earth shook, the rocks split and the tombs broke open. Jesus' death is marked with nature crying out with an earthquake. It wasn't a little tremor, but one that caused the rocks to split and tombs to break open. It was the anguish of the world losing the author of life. It was like the Jewish method of showing anguish, where they tore their clothes, but now the earth was tearing its rocks and breaking its tombs. Not only were the tombs broken open, the holy people in

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the tombs were brought back to life. When Jesus was resurrected, they came out of the tombs and went into Jerusalem. These people were dead for a while, but at Jesus' death they were restored. I don't know about you, but I have never heard of people coming back to life when someone else dies. It is an unprecedented act that again shows why Jesus' death is like no other.

And to be sure, Jesus did die. When he gave up his spirit, he did not just pass out from the pain. He died and there are many eye witnesses. The remainder of our passage is just proof that Jesus died. There were soldiers guarding Jesus and these men were very familiar to death. It was their job to be around death and they know whether someone is dead and not merely fainted. In fact, after Jesus died, other gospel record that the soldiers stabbed him in the side with a spear, just to make sure that he was in fact dead. There was no doubt in the soldiers' minds that Jesus was dead. Furthermore, the women who took care of Jesus were witnesses to Jesus' death. Then there was Joseph. Joseph is mentioned as a rich man who asked for the body of Jesus. Again, when the soldiers took Jesus' body down, they would have noticed if he was breathing. They know death. Joseph, too, could tell if Jesus was dead or merely in a coma. He prepared the body for burial and placed a linen cloth over him. Surely, he would have noticed the linen move if he were not dead.

So, one of the pressing questions is, "Why did Jesus have to die?" You know, last week we had the question "Why did Jesus have to go to the cross?" We heard last week, that Jesus had to go to the cross because of our sins. Our sins deserved punishment, but Jesus took in in our place, but there is more to it than that. The Bible explains that he wages of sin is death, or in its original form, "The wages of the righteous is life, but the earnings of the wicked are sin and death." (Proverbs 10:16) The punishment that we deserve for our sins is death. We like to think that we are not bad people and that our sins are not that bad, but the fact of the matter is that each of our sins is deserving of death. The white lies we tell deserve death. Our inaction to do good deserves death. The anger we hold in our hearts deserve death. We deserve death multiple times over, but Jesus' death changes all that.

This is where we truly get into the significance of Jesus' death and we can see why Jesus' death is truly like no other. Jesus' death saves us from the power of death and only Jesus can do that. It is written, "Our God is a God who saves; from the Sovereign Lord comes escape from death." (Psalm 68:20) Jesus is a God who saves. In fact, his name, the name of Jesus, means "the Lord saves". It is only the Lord that can save us from death, because it is only the Lord that has power over sin and death. Jesus is the only one who is righteous and pure. He is the only one who can break the power of death, because our fear of death is the power of sin.

We all have a form of the fear of death. There is a finality to death. Life leaves the body there is a sense of unknown to what happens next. I don't like death; it disturbs me. Seeing dead things leaves me unsettled. For the past two years, we've had possums die in the back stairwell and each time, I was unsettled by it. I don't like taking life, even from insects or vermin. You know, I do kill bugs, but afterwards, it doesn't sit well with me. It's even hard for me to eat meat if I can tell

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where it came from. If it still looks like a body part, it bothers me. This is how the fear of death manifests itself in my life, but it is Jesus' death that can break the power of death.

Again, it is written, "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil— and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death." (Hebrews 2:14-15) Jesus came down to this earth to share our humanity. He came to die so that he could break the power of death and free everyone who was held in bondage by their fear of death. If Jesus did not die, then he couldn't break that power. If he had come down from the cross before everything was finished and before his death, death would still reign supreme. Jesus shared in every aspect of humanity from birth to death. He experienced everything that we go through and it would have no meaning if Jesus did not die. But he did die and the death he died frees us from the power of sin and death. We don't have to be afraid anymore. The last enemy has been destroyed.

Jesus' death is so powerful that it is like no other. When Jesus raised the dead during his ministry, those people had to die again, but after Jesus' death, the dead that were raised rose to heaven with Jesus. Paul writes, "The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God." (Romans 6:10) The devil thought that by killing Jesus, he would have victory over God, but the tables turned and it is the death of Jesus that breaks the power of death itself because death cannot contain him. "The last enemy to be destroyed is death." (1 Corinthians 15:26) Death died when Jesus died. It has no more meaning and no more power. We can now have hope and life.

People die every day. Billions of people have died and billions more will die before Jesus' return, but not even one of those deaths has left an impact like Jesus' death. As Jesus died, natured ached as the sky darkened for three hours. When he finally died, the earth shook, rocks split and the dead rose. That is not normal by any measure, but more important than all of that is that Jesus' death changes the course of history. Before his death, death was to be feared. It was all our punishment for our sins. We were paralyzed by fear because there was no way to overcome death. It was final. It was the end, but with Jesus' death, death is broken. Jesus chose to die. God chose to die. That is a stumbling block for many to believe. How can God die? He is God and above death, but Jesus died because he chose to, but when death received that input, it too was confused and errored out. Death didn't know what to do with Jesus, so it just broke.

Jesus' death is not a sad thing. It is something that we should be thankful for. His death is something that should empower us. It should make us brave and bold. Our greatest enemy has been defeated and fear no longer should have a hold on us. We are free because of his love for us. We are alive because he died in our place. Praise be to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ whose death is truly like no other.

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