

"The Empty Cross"—John 19:31-33

The text for this sermon, the theme of which is, "The Empty Cross", is John 19:31-33 → *Since it was the day of Preparation, and so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken and that they might be taken away. So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first, and of the other who had been crucified with Him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs.* This is the text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus:

As you entered the sanctuary tonight you immediately encountered the altar area emptied of all its trappings and beautiful objects. You are left with a cross veiled in black on an altar draped in black. It is a visual reminder of your sins which took Jesus to the cross. It is meant to facilitate contrition in your heart, that is, a sorrow over your sin in the midst of a somber recognition of Jesus' blood shed for your sin.

Our text today reveals the sin behind the empty cross of Jesus. John records the account of the Jewish leaders wanting the crosses empty because *it was the day of Preparation*. Since the upcoming Sabbath was

special because it fell during the Passover they did not want *the bodies to remain on the cross on the Sabbath.* (verse 31) Why not? It actually seems like a strange concern since these people were the ones who wanted Jesus hung on that cross in the first place.

In preparation for the Passover these leaders wanted to make sure every little detail was done properly, at least externally. According to how they read Old Testament law from Deuteronomy 21:22-23, leaving these men on the crosses would desecrate the city of Jerusalem. There it says: *If a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God. You shall not **defile your land** that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance.*

These religious leaders of God's people were concerned about nullifying their Passover observance and defiling their land by leaving the bodies on the crosses. Interesting—they were not nearly as concerned about breaking God's moral Law by killing His one and only Son! Notice how they were simply going through motions for the sake of keeping the ceremonial law **apparently with no consideration of their sin in God's presence over the past twenty-four hours.**

However, this is understandable from their perspective since they didn't consider themselves to have killed Jesus. It was Pilate whom they

convinced to give the final order to have Jesus crucified. But what about their statement in Matthew 27:25 when *all the people answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!"*? That could have simply been the thoughtless speech of a mob rather than a conscientious accepting of responsibility. Since Pilate was responsible they needed to have Pilate's permission to have the bodies removed. Verse 32 of our text says *the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken and that they might be taken away*. Breaking the legs would take away support of the upper body thus bringing immediate suffocation and death.

What do you see when you look at the empty cross of Jesus? Could it be these Jews wanted to see the cross emptied so they wouldn't have to see their hypocrisy and sin? Could be. The cross will bring the conviction of your sin to light, empty or not, and you will have to face the fact that it wasn't simply Pilate or the Jews who crucified Jesus. We crucified Jesus with our sins which leave us with an empty feeling needing to be filled with much more than running from our sin or denial by outward observances. This empty feeling needs repentance, the confession of sins and faith in the atoning blood of Jesus for forgiveness.

Instead of the empty cross of Jesus giving us an "empty" feeling it should actually fill us with a sense of joy and confidence in knowing that God's plan was being fulfilled **for us sinners!** When your faith sees the impact of Jesus' suffering and death for you according to God's plan and

direction, the empty cross is filled with God's grace—God's Riches At Christ's Expense. The Holy Spirit is God's gift to you so that you *might understand the things freely given you by God*. (cf. 1 Corinthians 2:12) In the empty cross you can see forgiveness of sins, new life and salvation!

For us Christians the empty cross is a sign of the fulfillment of God's plan for the salvation of all people culminating in the resurrection of the body to life everlasting! Jesus had expressed this in John 10:18 when He said: *No one takes My life from Me, but I lay it down of My own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again*. This is why many Christians throughout the centuries look at the empty cross and see a glimpse of the empty tomb!

As you view the empty cross the Holy Spirit fills your heart with the desire to be cleansed of hypocrisy, self-righteousness and whatever other idolatrous thoughts, words and actions it produces by humble repentance and faith. Since *the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses you from all sin* (cf. 1 John 1:7), the Holy Spirit creates in you a pure heart which desires to follow God's law instead of manipulate it for personal benefit. He produces in you a worship of God *in spirit and truth* (cf. John 4:24) rather than simply going through some religious motions of piety with no substance of faith.

In accordance with our worship traditions the season of Lent and the focus of Good Friday traditionally call for somber sorrow over sin, leaving

this place in darkness and silence. However, the most important focus is not on the tradition of emptying ourselves of joy. Rather, the focus is on Jesus, *Who emptied Himself, by taking the form of a servant, Who humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.* (cf. Philippians 2:7-8)

Because Jesus “emptied Himself” on the cross for us we are filled with His gracious concern for others. We want to guide them into this grace relationship and not into a relationship of simply “going through religious motions” according to customs . We want our worship traditions to bring the Gospel through which the Holy Spirit fills us with forgiveness of sins, new life and salvation which faith in Christ sees in the empty cross. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding,
keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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