

What the cross meant to the Disciples

Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 21, 2009

We're continuing in our series, "What did the cross mean to..." today by taking a look at what it meant to the disciples. To start off today, I'd like to show you a clip from the movie, "Saint John in Exile." However, before I show the clip, I have to set it up a little. The clip is a little longer than I would usually have shown. I think the longest clip we've had here was a little over three minutes; this clip is just a hair under six minutes. I believe you will like it.

Saint John in Exile was recorded live at a church in Pasadena, California. It is a one-man play about the last living Disciple, John – the Disciple who wrote the books John, 1st, 2nd and 3rd John, and Revelation. The play is about a group of Christians – the audience – who comes to see John while he is in exile, and asks him to tell them about Jesus. The scene we are going to see is right after he tells about Jesus' arrest in the garden of Gethsemane: Jesus has been arrested, the disciples have all scattered in the darkness, and somehow he and Peter find each other. This is where we pick it up.

{CLIP}

What did the cross mean to the disciples? As it said in the clip, they saw the damning difference – literally, the 'sending-to-hell' difference – between them and the rest of the unbelieving world. It meant a realization of all they'd turned their backs on for expedience sake. It meant they knew what they did.

They were the ones who knew Jesus better than anyone else, yet they ran away and deserted Him when He needed them the most. The unbelievers at least had the excuse of not knowing who Jesus was; the disciples didn't have that excuse – and that was the difference for them as a whole. To a few of them it meant even more.

To Peter it meant the fulfillment of the prophecy of Jesus that Peter would deny him. Jesus had called Peter, "Satan" once before – the cross meant Jesus' words of reproach and prophecy would scream in his mind.

To Matthew, the former tax collector, the one who gave up everything to follow Jesus, the cross meant the one person in his life who loved him and ushered him into a new life was gone. What would he do? His life had been changed by the Nazarene, and now the Nazarene was dying the death of a cursed and condemned man.

To Thomas, the one who seemed to always question Jesus' motives, the cross meant that perhaps Thomas had been right all along, even though in his heart of hearts he had hoped to be proven wrong. Thomas had never been sure if Jesus really was the Messiah or just another teacher. Now it seemed he had the answer to his question.

The first time the disciple Nathaniel heard about Jesus from his brother Andrew his response was "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Now it appeared he had the answer to his question – no. Nothing that can save; nothing that can redeem; nothing that can restore.

And to John, the beloved disciple; the one from our clip this morning; the youngest of the disciples, probably no older than his early twenties, the cross meant the business he had walked away from with his brother James would be the one they would return to. Jesus had told the disciples they would be fishers of men. The cross meant that dream was shattered – they would be nothing more than just fishermen.

In just examples we see a spectrum of human feelings and reason, and in this spectrum, we see ourselves.

Like Peter, we deny Jesus; like Matthew we feel lost and alone; like Thomas there are times when all seems hopeless; like Nathaniel there are days when all was lost; and like John there are times when we feel stuck in the place where we are in our lives with no hope of moving forward, just backward.

And all these things are true if we just stop at the cross. If we go no further than “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me”, if we do not dig a little deeper and look into the mystery of “It is finished”, then we are finished – left where we are to somehow try to make it on our own.

There was the cross, yes. But there was also the empty tomb.

To Peter the empty tomb meant forgiveness and restoration. To Matthew the empty tomb meant life had meaning. To Thomas the empty tomb meant that there was hope and something to put his faith and trust in. To Nathaniel the empty tomb meant all was not lost, and there was a glorious future

ahead. And to John the empty tomb meant he was not stuck and going backward, but the promises of Jesus would prevail – John would be used by the living Jesus once again.

After the resurrection, Jesus met with the disciples again and again. He taught them more, opened their eyes, and turned them loose in the world. All that was old had been made new, and the cross that once meant the death of their Master, meant life to them, even at the cost of their own lives. According to tradition and ancient writings:

- **Peter** was crucified upside down on an x-shaped cross.
- **Matthew** suffered martyrdom in Ethiopia, killed by a sword.
- **Thomas** was stabbed with spears in a mob attack in India during one of his missionary trips.
- **Nathaniel**, also known as Bartholomew, was a missionary to Asia, and was believed to have been flayed by a whip and then crucified.
- **James** the brother of John, was beheaded at Jerusalem.
- **Andrew** was crucified on an x-shaped cross in Greece.
- **Phillip** was also crucified.
- **John** faced martyrdom when he was boiled in a huge basin of boiling oil during a wave of persecution in Rome. However, he was miraculously delivered from death and was the only disciple to die peacefully.

To the disciples, the cross meant the loss of earthly lives to gain eternal life in Heaven with Jesus.

Now it's our turn.

How many of us have felt too sinful to be forgiven? We've done too much, we've wandered too far. We're beyond the forgiving and healing hand of God. The cross and empty tomb remind us, "All that is finished!" and forgiveness and restoration wait for us in Christ.

How many times have we felt lost and alone? Silently crying out for someone to notice us, someone to care about us? The cross and empty tomb remind us "These feelings are finished!" You are not alone, and you are loved with a love that lays down its life for you. Your life has meaning!

Have there been days when we've doubted what we've been taught and felt as though all was hopeless? The cross and empty tomb remind us that "Hopelessness is finished!" There is Someone to put your faith and trust in, even in those dark days and long nights when we wrestle with these feelings.

There are times, especially after major setbacks, when all seems lost. The cross and empty tomb remind us, "That which was lost is found – being without is finished!" Jesus comes to give Life, and to give it more abundantly. Life with a capital "L" – eternal Life in Heaven. Though setbacks occur in this life, and things may seem lost, the best is yet to come. All this will be finished.

And how many times have we felt stuck? Stuck in the same old job? Stuck in the same old situation that never changes? We thought things were finally moving in the right direction, and instead we ended up going backward? The cross and the empty tomb remind us that this life is temporary,

and the stuck-ness is finished! We are saved from the punishment our sins deserve; we are rescued from what once was and placed in a new relationship with God the Father through Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

And now we are turned loose.

Turned loose to impact and change our world. Turned loose to reach out to so many who feel lost, alone, stuck, too-far gone, and hopeless. Turned loose to introduce them to Jesus and His cross.

That's what the cross meant to the disciples; and it's what the cross still means to Jesus' disciples – that's you and me – today.

Would you pray with me please?

Lord Jesus, thank You for Your cross. Thank You for not leaving us on our own to try and save ourselves. Thank You for experiencing the damnation of hell – separation from God the Father – for us on the cross so those who believe in You will never have to. Send Your Spirit to us to strengthen our faith, encourage us on dark days, and turn us loose in the world where You have placed us.

Amen.