

Meet Jesus...Again: 6. Savior
Mark 15:33-39
April 14, 2019
Pastor Steve Richards

A week ago, I attended a two-day conference for pastors in which I listened to teaching and preaching on the theme of living life fully. Each message was based on the verse from John 10 where Jesus said, "I have come that you may have life and have it to the full." And there was a point in every talk where I thought, how did he know or how did she know? I was just one person among thousands at this conference and yet it seemed like they were describing my life. Have you ever experienced that – in worship, hearing some message and thinking – that's my life? Or it's a movie or a book and suddenly it relates so directly to your life that it could be you in that particular scene. I remember reading William Kent Krueger's book, *Ordinary Grace*, which describes a pastor's family in a fictional small town and I could have sworn he was describing my childhood. And I suspect it's not even necessary to have grown up in a small town to find his story resonates with all of us. That's the sign of a good story. It's also an indication of our common human experience.

So, this morning, we come to chapters 14-15 of the gospel of Mark, which describe the final 24 hours of Jesus' life. In those two chapters, Jesus says very little and does very little. What we read is what other people say and do to Jesus. I think Mark wants to teach us something about ourselves. I think Mark wants us to find ourselves in the story. This is a story about us.

We read how Judas Iscariot betrays Jesus, a mob is sent by the Temple priests to arrest Jesus, the disciples desert Jesus, Peter denies Jesus, the Jewish Sanhedrin tries Jesus and sentences him to death, Pontius Pilate finds him innocent but condemns him to death anyway, the crowd cries out "crucify him," Roman soldiers humiliate him, nail him to a cross, and then gamble for his clothes, people walk by hurling insults, even the man being crucified next to him insults him. This is the story we find in Mark. Remember, Jesus is the Word of God. It's what we heard on Christmas Eve in that moment before we passed candlelight throughout this room. "In the beginning was the Word. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Jesus is the Word made flesh. Everything Jesus says and does is part of God's divine Word to us. And if so much of the final 24 hours is about what humanity does to Jesus, I think part of the message is meant to be about us. As if by holding up Mark's Gospel, we are holding up a mirror so we can see ourselves. This is us. So who are we?

Would we be Judas? For three years, he followed Jesus. He thought Jesus would be the earthly king that people were seeking. And if Jesus became king, then Judas would be part of the inner circle. Imagine the power and influence he would have. But when they reach Jerusalem and Judas suddenly realizes that's not the kind of king Jesus would be, Judas decides to cut his losses and sells Jesus out for 30 pieces of silver. And isn't this part of our struggle? Which Jesus will we follow – the one we want him to be or the one God has sent him to be. Do we seek power and influence – at least let me control my life! Or will we let God be the one who directs us – even if it means servant of all.

Maybe we're like the other disciples who fall asleep when Jesus asks them to stay awake and pray. Haven't we all fallen asleep without praying? Haven't we all forgotten to pray? And when the mob arrives, the disciples run – afraid for themselves. Afraid to admit they'd fallen asleep.

Maybe we're like Simon Peter who has enough courage to follow at a distance to the place where Jesus would be tried, but then he stands outside and when someone asks, "Are you one

of his disciples?" He replies, "I don't know what you are talking about." Three times, he denies Jesus. Haven't we all denied Jesus at some point?

Maybe we're like the 71 members of the Jewish Sanhedrin. They know the Bible and can quote every verse, but they're angry with Jesus because he interprets the Bible differently and applies it differently. Jesus challenges their authority and has become more popular than they are. They can't allow that. So they put him on trial. God walked among us in human flesh, surely they could see that! But they were blinded by their own agendas. **The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for testimony against Jesus in order to put him to death, but they couldn't find any. They all condemned him. "He deserves to die!" Some began to spit on him. Some covered his face and hit him, saying, "Prophecy!" Then the guards took him and beat him.** Even if they believe he was guilty, why would they treat him this way? What's wrong with them?

The next morning, Jesus is taken to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. The Sanhedrin could sentence Jesus to death but could not carry out that sentence without Roman consent. **[Pilate] knew that the chief priests had handed him over because of jealousy. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd... "What do you want me to do with the one you call king of the Jews?" They shouted back, "Crucify him!"** Just days earlier they had shouted "Hosanna!" **Pilate said to them, "Why? What wrong has he done?" They shouted even louder, "Crucify him!" Pilate wanted to satisfy the crowd, so he... handed [Jesus] over to be crucified.** Pontius Pilate, the person that Rome put in charge to insure there would be justice finds a man innocent but wishing to satisfy the crowd he goes along with the crucifixion. What's wrong with humanity? In other words, what's wrong with us? Have we ever gone along with the crowd, chosen what's popular instead of right or torn down someone's character or didn't speak up? This is our story.

Then, **The soldiers led Jesus away... and they called together the whole company of soldiers. They dressed him up in a purple robe and twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on him. They saluted him, "Hey! King of the Jews!" Again and again, they struck his head with a stick. They spit on him and knelt before him to honor him. When they finished mocking him, they stripped him of the purple robe and put his own clothes back on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.** It wasn't enough to nail him to a cross. They had to humiliate him, try to crush his soul. What's wrong with humanity?

Last weekend, Amanda and I toured the mission at San Juan Capistrano. We didn't see the swallows but we learned a bit of history – how in the 18th century Spain sent priests to establish missions up and down the coast of California. We listened to the tour guide describe the way the missionaries taught skills to the Native Americans and eventually baptized thousands of them. As we walked away, I said to Amanda, I guess the victors get to write the history. Last summer, I toured a Native American historical site in New Mexico in which I heard the other side of the story, how these missionaries brought new diseases, forced the Native Americans to abandon their religious rituals, killing them if they refused, using them as slave labor to build the missions. Sometimes sending a diseased person into a village because they knew the disease would spread, killing most of them. All of which was done in the name of religion. Or here in the Twin Cities as recently as the 1960s, there were laws to keep Jews and African Americans out of certain neighborhoods. Who created those laws? Christians. Today, we're not like that, but do harm people, passing around comments about other people that aren't true or we don't know if it's true but we gossip anyway. Have we ever acted in ways that harmed others and did not reflect the love of God?

When we look at the cross we are meant to see something in us that needs to be healed or forgiven. The crucifixion of Jesus was an indictment on humanity and our brokenness. I think God knew if he sent his son in the flesh this is what humanity would do. But then God said, "I will take what they do and use it as an instrument of saving them." We need the cross. When I look at the cross, I see our brokenness. I see God's pain and broken-heartedness for us – and how we treat each other. I see Jesus offering himself as an atonement. When we hurt someone's feeling, we send a note – an atonement. I tend to bring home flowers. And Jesus is looking at all of human history and saying, "For them, I offer myself for them. Father, forgive them." There is a cost to forgiveness. Grace comes with a cost.

When I look at the cross, I see the depth of God's love. If I had to give my life to save one of my children, I would do that in a heartbeat. I love you that much. God is saying that to you. **Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.** (John 15:13) At Jesus' time, an important person would have people under them who would die for them. But in Jesus we see just the opposite. Jesus would die for all of us.

In preparing for this message, I found in my notes a story that I remember hearing on MPR. Each Friday morning, there is a segment called "StoryCorps" where people tell some story from their lives. This particular story was a mother named Tanai Bernard and her 10 year old son, Desmond. They were talking about the active shooter training that now takes place in schools across America.

MOTHER: So can you tell me exactly what happens in active shooter drills?

DEZMOND: The teacher's supposed to lock the door, turn the lights off and push this big desk behind the door. And the first time I did an active shooter drill, I saw her having a hard time with it so I decided to come help her because if she doesn't get the desk on the door in time, the intruder can open it.

MOTHER: So what do you do next? After you push the table?

DEZMOND: The class is supposed to stand on the back wall. But I decided to stand in front of the class because I want to take the bully and save my friends.

MOTHER: So did your teacher ask you to stand in front of the class?

DEZMOND: No. My life matters, but, it's kind of like, there's one person that can come home to the family, or there can be 22 people that come home to the family.

MOTHER: Do you know why it's hard for me to accept that?

DEZMOND: Because I'm such a young age, I shouldn't really be giving my life up. Like, you shouldn't have to worry about that.

MOTHER: Right. If there's any a time that I want you to be selfish, it's then. I need you to come home. So would you still stand in front of your friends even with me telling you not to?

DEZMOND: Yes. I get that you would want me to come home, but it's really not a choice that you can make. It's a choice that I have to make.

Jesus is saying, I did this for you. Don't miss it. So let's take a few moments and take in the power of the cross.

[Procession of the cross]

And when Jesus takes his final breath, Mark said Jesus let out a loud cry and he died. And when the Roman centurion who stood facing Jesus, saw how he died, he said, "This man was certainly God's Son." Perhaps the least likely person in this story is the one, the first one to see who God really is.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of April 14, 2019

Weekly Prayer: Almighty and Eternal God, when all else fails, you are still God. Your steadfast love endures forever. As we recall the death of Jesus and all the suffering that he faced, help us to also anticipate the joy to come. We look toward the resurrection, confident that you are the answer to the deepest need of our hearts and our hope in life, in death and life beyond death. Amen.

Stay alert!

Monday, April 15

Scripture: Mark 13:21-37

"Then if someone says to you, 'Look, here's the Christ,' or 'There he is,' don't believe it. False christs and false prophets will appear, and they will offer signs and wonders in order to deceive, if possible, those whom God has chosen. But you, watch out! I've told you everything ahead of time. "In those days, after the suffering of that time, the sun will become dark, and the moon won't give its light. The stars will fall from the sky, and the planets and other heavenly bodies will be shaken. Then they will see the Human One coming in the clouds with great power and splendor. Then he will send the angels and gather together his chosen people from the four corners of the earth, from the end of the earth to the end of heaven.

"Learn this parable from the fig tree. After its branch becomes tender and it sprouts new leaves, you know that summer is near. In the same way, when you see these things happening, you know that he's near, at the door. I assure you that this generation won't pass away until all these things happen. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will certainly not pass away.

"But nobody knows when that day or hour will come, not the angels in heaven and not the Son. Only the Father knows. Watch out! Stay alert! You don't know when the time is coming. It is as if someone took a trip, left the household behind, and put the servants in charge, giving each one a job to do, and told the doorkeeper to stay alert. Therefore, stay alert! You don't know when the head of the household will come, whether in the evening or at midnight, or when the rooster crows in the early morning or at daybreak. Don't let him show up when you weren't expecting and find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to all: Stay alert!"

Observation: Beyond the destruction of Jerusalem, Jesus gave his disciples some significant insights about his second coming and the end of the world. He said there would be nothing secret about his coming. "From the end of the earth to the end of heaven," people would see it. He also told them that though signs might point toward time's end, they would not pinpoint the exact day or hour of the end. "Only the Father knows" that—so "stay alert!"

Application: In verses 21-22, Jesus instructed his followers to beware of false, alarmist messages and claims about the end of the world. Sometimes, even from religious teachers with large followings, we hear outlooks about the end that differ greatly from one another. How can Jesus' teaching help you to discern the true from the false, regardless of the source from which you hear or read it?

Faith Group Discussion: Three times, in verses 33-37, Jesus repeated the same injunction: "Stay alert!" It was a call to faithful, steady spiritual preparation, not some last-day crash program. Jesus' first followers didn't know when he would return, and neither do we. Jesus simply taught them to always be prepared and never anxious. What spiritual practices have you built into your life which daily help you know Jesus better?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, the Bible ended with the prayer, "Come, Lord Jesus!" (Revelation 22:20). Teach me how to live so that can be my confident prayer every day. Amen.

A transformed Passover with a cross ahead

Tuesday, April 16

Scripture: Mark 14:1-26

It was two days before Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and legal experts through cunning tricks were searching for a way to arrest Jesus and kill him. But they agreed that it shouldn't happen during the festival; otherwise, there would be an uproar among the people. Jesus was at Bethany visiting the house of Simon, who had a skin disease. During dinner, a woman came in with a vase made of alabaster and containing very expensive perfume of pure nard. She broke open the vase and poured the perfume on his head. Some grew angry. They said to each other, "Why waste the perfume? This perfume could have been sold for almost a year's pay and the money given to the poor." And they scolded her. Jesus said, "Leave her alone. Why do you make trouble for her? She has done a good thing for me. You always have the poor with you; and whenever you want, you can do something good for them. But you won't always have me. She has done what she could. She has anointed my body ahead of time for burial. I tell you the truth that, wherever in the whole world the good news is announced, what she's done will also be told in memory of her."

Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went to the chief priests to give Jesus up to them. When they heard it, they were delighted and promised to give him money. So he started looking for an opportunity to turn him in. On the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb was sacrificed, the disciples said to Jesus, "Where do you want us to prepare for you to eat the Passover meal?" He sent two of his disciples and said to them, "Go into the city. A man carrying a water jar will meet you. Follow him. Wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house, 'The teacher asks, Where is my guest room where I can eat the Passover meal with my disciples?' He will show you a large room upstairs already furnished. Prepare for us there." The disciples left, came into the city, found everything just as he had told them, and they prepared the Passover meal. That evening, Jesus arrived with the Twelve. During the meal, Jesus said, "I assure you that one of you will betray me—someone eating with me." Deeply saddened, they asked him, one by one, "It's not me, is it?" Jesus answered, "It's one of the Twelve, one who is dipping bread with me into this bowl. The Human One goes to his death just as it is written about him. But how terrible it is for that person who betrays the Human One! It would have been better for him if he had never been born." While they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body." He took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, and they all drank from it. He said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. I assure you that I won't drink wine again until that day when I drink it in a new way in God's kingdom." After singing songs of praise, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

Observation: Two suppers—one hosted by Simon, "who had a skin disease," likely a man Jesus healed. A woman anointed Jesus with expensive perfume. Keenly aware that within 48 hours he would die, Jesus said she had anointed him in advance of his burial. Then a Passover supper, which Jesus redefined. We often take Judas' betrayal for granted—but imagine how Jesus' words stunned the disciples, who didn't know the story in advance. Mark didn't feel a need to give much detail about "songs of praise." Psalm 118 was pretty much always the last hymn sung at the end of Passover.

Application: Some people criticized the woman's extravagant anointing of Jesus. "Leave her alone," Jesus told them. Her devotion touched his heart, and her anointing fit his sense that he was the messianic king. Are you ever tempted to be critical when someone else praises or serves God differently than you do? How can Jesus' example help you move beyond a critical spirit to value the uniqueness of each giver and each gift?

Faith Group Discussion: Passover worshippers sang, "The LORD is with me; I will not be afraid. What can human beings do to me?" (Psalm 118:6) and "I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the LORD has done" (Psalm 118:17). How might those words have held special meaning for Jesus as he sang them in the upper room hours before his crucifixion? How do they speak to any fear you carry in your heart? What can you proclaim about what the Lord has done for you?

Prayer: King Jesus, you intentionally walked into the darkest experience any human could face—and you did it for me. Guide me to be more and more effective in proclaiming what you have done for me. Amen.

The time has come

Wednesday, April 17

Scripture: Mark 14:27-42

Jesus said to them, "You will all falter in your faithfulness to me. It is written, I will hit the shepherd, and the sheep will go off in all directions. But after I'm raised up, I will go before you to Galilee." Peter said to him, "Even if everyone else stumbles, I won't." But Jesus said to him, "I assure you that on this very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times." But Peter insisted, "If I must die alongside you, I won't deny you." And they all said the same thing.

Jesus and his disciples came to a place called Gethsemane. Jesus said to them, "Sit here while I pray." He took Peter, James, and John along with him. He began to feel despair and was anxious. He said to them, "I'm very sad. It's as if I'm dying. Stay here and keep alert." Then he went a short distance farther and fell to the ground. He prayed that, if possible, he might be spared the time of suffering. He said, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible. Take this cup of suffering away from me. However—not what I want but what you want." He came and found them sleeping. He said to Peter, "Simon, are you asleep? Couldn't you stay alert for one hour? Stay alert and pray so that you won't give in to temptation. The spirit is eager, but the flesh is weak." Again, he left them and prayed, repeating the same words. And, again, when he came back, he found them sleeping, for they couldn't keep their eyes open, and they didn't know how to respond to him. He came a third time and said to them, "Will you sleep and rest all night? That's enough! The time has come for the Human One to be betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up! Let's go! Look, here comes my betrayer."

Observation: There are very old olive trees today in Gethsemane, where Jesus prayed. Despite Jesus' recent urging of the importance of alertness, his disciples couldn't manage it for even one night as he prayed. One aspect of historic Christian belief about Jesus is that he was fully human and fully divine. His anguish and pleading with God gave one glimpse of what "fully human" meant.

Application: When was the last time you were deeply distressed and troubled? Did others say (or did you tell yourself) that you should be stronger, and shouldn't feel what you felt? Hebrews 4:15 said Jesus is not "a high priest who can't sympathize with our weaknesses." Can Jesus'

prayers before his crucifixion help you understand that grief and fear are not shameful? Do they help you to realize that at those times Jesus understands, weeps and walks through the feelings with you?

Faith Group Discussion: “Not what I want but what you want” are among the best known of all Jesus’ words. We often quote them about situations like the death of a loved one, in which we had no choice. But Jesus wasn’t dealing with an untreatable illness. His words of submission reflected his active choice to stay the course that led to the cross. In what ways do you have to choose, intentionally, to do God’s will rather than your own?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, how I want to say, “I’d have stayed awake praying with you.” Honestly, I don’t know that. But I thank you for the confidence I can have that when I’m hurting, you stay with me always. Amen.

Betrayal: a kiss led to a pre-determined verdict

Thursday, April 18

Scripture: Mark 14:43-65

Suddenly, while Jesus was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, came with a mob carrying swords and clubs. They had been sent by the chief priests, legal experts, and elders. His betrayer had given them a sign: “Arrest the man I kiss, and take him away under guard.” As soon as he got there, Judas said to Jesus, “Rabbi!” Then he kissed him. Then they came and grabbed Jesus and arrested him. One of the bystanders drew a sword and struck the high priest’s slave and cut off his ear. Jesus responded, “Have you come with swords and clubs to arrest me, like an outlaw? Day after day, I was with you, teaching in the temple, but you didn’t arrest me. But let the scriptures be fulfilled.” And all his disciples left him and ran away. One young man, a disciple, was wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They grabbed him, but he left the linen cloth behind and ran away naked.

They led Jesus away to the high priest, and all the chief priests, elders, and legal experts gathered. Peter followed him from a distance, right into the high priest’s courtyard. He was sitting with the guards, warming himself by the fire. The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for testimony against Jesus in order to put him to death, but they couldn’t find any. Many brought false testimony against him, but they contradicted each other. Some stood to offer false witness against him, saying, “We heard him saying, ‘I will destroy this temple, constructed by humans, and within three days I will build another, one not made by humans.’” But their testimonies didn’t agree even on this point. Then the high priest stood up in the middle of the gathering and examined Jesus. “Aren’t you going to respond to the testimony these people have brought against you?” But Jesus was silent and didn’t answer. Again, the high priest asked, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the blessed one?” Jesus said, “I am. And you will see the Human One sitting on the right side of the Almighty and coming on the heavenly clouds.” Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, “Why do we need any more witnesses? You’ve heard his insult against God. What do you think?” They all condemned him. “He deserves to die!” Some began to spit on him. Some covered his face and hit him, saying, “Prophecy!” Then the guards took him and beat him.

Observation: Jesus was not an innocuous storyteller. The Jewish authorities sought to kill Jesus not because he was a good man but because Jesus was perceived as a very serious political threat. He entered Jerusalem as the anointed son of David. He assumed authority in the temple as though possessed of messianic authority. He entered Jerusalem in a way that indicated he was a king. And he was anointed by at least one follower. It is hardly surprising that

the Roman governor would place near the cross a placard that read, "This is Jesus, the king of the Jews."

Application: In Jesus' culture, a kiss usually showed a disciple's great regard and honor for his teacher. It was unusual that Judas chose a kiss as the betrayal signal. Perhaps it was a sign of a love for this man and yet a desire to be free of him, of a love for God's kingdom and a desire for the kingdoms of this world. In what ways do you find yourself torn between love for God and love for the kingdoms of this world?

Faith Group Discussion: The Sanhedrin, the 71-member ruling Hebrew religious court, should have been the most fair-minded, reliable group Jesus could have faced. Verse 65 is sad: "Some began to spit on him. Some covered his face and hit him, saying, 'Prophecy!'" These weren't Roman soldiers, but religious leaders. Have you ever wanted to hurt someone in the name of a cause you believe is holy? How can you stand up for good without resorting to evil actions (see Romans 12:17-21)?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, it seemed clear to your enemies that killing you would silence you forever. I, and millions of my fellow believers, worship and praise you for being brave enough to show that love and life really are stronger than hatred and death. Amen.

Peter and Pilate both wilted before a crowd

Friday, April 19

Scripture: Mark 14:66-15:15

Meanwhile, Peter was below in the courtyard. A woman, one of the high priest's servants, approached and saw Peter warming himself by the fire. She stared at him and said, "You were also with the Nazarene, Jesus." But he denied it, saying, "I don't know what you're talking about. I don't understand what you're saying." And he went outside into the outer courtyard. A rooster crowed. The female servant saw him and began a second time to say to those standing around, "This man is one of them." But he denied it again. A short time later, those standing around again said to Peter, "You must be one of them, because you are also a Galilean." But he cursed and swore, "I don't know this man you're talking about." At that very moment, a rooster crowed a second time. Peter remembered what Jesus told him, "Before a rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times." And he broke down, sobbing.

At daybreak, the chief priests—with the elders, legal experts, and the whole Sanhedrin—formed a plan. They bound Jesus, led him away, and turned him over to Pilate. Pilate questioned him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus replied, "That's what you say." The chief priests were accusing him of many things. Pilate asked him again, "Aren't you going to answer? What about all these accusations?" But Jesus gave no more answers, so that Pilate marveled. During the festival, Pilate released one prisoner to them, whomever they requested. A man named Barabbas was locked up with the rebels who had committed murder during an uprising. The crowd pushed forward and asked Pilate to release someone, as he regularly did. Pilate answered them, "Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?" He knew that the chief priests had handed him over because of jealousy. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas to them instead. Pilate replied, "Then what do you want me to do with the one you call king of the Jews?" They shouted back, "Crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Why? What wrong has he done?" They shouted even louder, "Crucify him!" Pilate wanted to satisfy the crowd, so he released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus whipped, then handed him over to be crucified.

Observation: Why would Mark (and all four gospels) tell the story of Peter denying Jesus? We're used to a famous person's rivals telling negative stories to damage that person. But early Christian tradition claims that Mark wrote down the apostle Peter's memories. It's more likely that Peter told this story himself, offering his hearers (and all of us) the forgiveness and new hope he'd found in Jesus. Pontius Pilate asked, one last time, "What wrong has he done?" The crowd (stirred up by the chief priests) didn't answer; they just snarled, "Crucify him!"

Application: Pilate, pragmatic and morally weak, chose to sanction a clear injustice rather than stand up to a crowd. This part of the story may be most disturbing, not because it is strange, but because it feels too familiar. What happens when you are faced with doing something you believe is right but which will cause a large number of people to be upset with you, maybe even turn against you? When have you said or done things aimed at satisfying the crowd? When have you remained silent when you should have spoken out?

Faith Group Discussion: In Mark 8:34-38, Jesus said his followers needed to "take up their cross." He added that if his followers were ashamed of him, he would be ashamed of them when he came in glory. What are some ways in which you could be ashamed of Jesus in the pressures of your daily life? Is there a difference between being "ashamed" of Jesus and being tactful or tolerant toward those who do not share your faith?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I don't want to be Pilate, cynically okaying an innocent's death to further my own position. And I don't want to be Peter, loving you yet terribly afraid of saying so in the face of opposition or ridicule. Grow my courage to follow you at all costs. Amen.

The centurion: "This man was certainly God's Son"

Saturday, April 20

Scripture: Mark 15:16-39

The soldiers led Jesus away into the courtyard of the palace known as the governor's headquarters, and they called together the whole company of soldiers. They dressed him up in a purple robe and twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on him. They saluted him, "Hey! King of the Jews!" Again and again, they struck his head with a stick. They spit on him and knelt before him to honor him. When they finished mocking him, they stripped him of the purple robe and put his own clothes back on him. Then they led him out to crucify him. Simon, a man from Cyrene, Alexander and Rufus' father, was coming in from the countryside. They forced him to carry his cross. They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha, which means Skull Place. They tried to give him wine mixed with myrrh, but he didn't take it. They crucified him. They divided up his clothes, drawing lots for them to determine who would take what. It was nine in the morning when they crucified him. The notice of the formal charge against him was written, "The king of the Jews." They crucified two outlaws with him, one on his right and one on his left. People walking by insulted him, shaking their heads and saying, "Ha! So you were going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, were you? Save yourself and come down from that cross!" In the same way, the chief priests were making fun of him among themselves, together with the legal experts. "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself. Let the Christ, the king of Israel, come down from the cross. Then we'll see and believe." Even those who had been crucified with Jesus insulted him. From noon until three in the afternoon the whole earth was dark. At three, Jesus cried out with a loud shout, "Eloi, eloi, lama sabachthani," which means, "My God, my God, why have you left me?" After hearing him, some standing

there said, "Look! He's calling Elijah!" Someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, and put it on a pole. He offered it to Jesus to drink, saying, "Let's see if Elijah will come to take him down." But Jesus let out a loud cry and died. The curtain of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom. When the centurion, who stood facing Jesus, saw how he died, he said, "This man was certainly God's Son."

Observation: Roman crosses were only seven to nine feet high. Rome wanted people to see, close-up, what happened if they defied the Empire. So Mark didn't need to offer gory details about Jesus' crucifixion. His readers knew exactly what crucifixions were like—and shuddered. Like Mark, Matthew 27:51 and Luke 23:45 reported that the Temple's curtain tore in two. Jesus' death, the gospel writers said, tore all the barriers between God and us. The Roman centurion confesses of Jesus what he should only confess of the Roman emperor. Caesar is not the son of God; Jesus the crucified Messiah is. In calling Jesus the Son of God, the centurion has switched his allegiance from Caesar, the official "son of God," to Jesus, the real Son of God.

Application: Now at last, not the high priest, not a leading rabbi, not even a loyal disciple, but a battle-hardened Roman soldier, used to killing humans, stands before this dying young Jew and says something which, in Mark's mind, sends a signal to the whole world. The Roman centurion becomes the first sane human being in Mark's gospel to call Jesus God's Son, and mean it. What would the Roman centurion have seen and heard that moved him to the confession he made as Jesus died? What leads you to believe that Jesus is God's Son? How can your life bear witness that the one you worship and serve "was certainly God's Son"?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, open my eyes, and keep them open, to see what the Roman centurion saw on that grim hillside outside the walls of Jerusalem. With reverence and joy, I too say that you were "certainly God's Son." Amen.