

“CROSS WORDS: II – ‘TODAY YOU WILL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE’”

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Elkton United Methodist Church
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1st Sunday of Lent

Psalm 18:1-6

Luke 23:39-43

The next time you're walking down the hall downstairs and pass by my office, glance across the hall from my door, and you'll see a big framed picture of a mountain. It's actually a picture I took a number of years ago in a spot that was about as close to paradise as I could imagine. I took it at the top of the tallest mountain in Germany – the Zugspitze.

I remember like it was yesterday. It was in October, and Mom, Dad and I were in Europe visiting two of my brothers. John was serving in the Navy on Sardinia and Jeff was serving in the Army in Northern Germany. So we flew into Rome, spent time with John in Italy, and then took the train up to Germany, where we spent time with Jeff.

On one of those days with Jeff, we drove from where he was living to the Zugspitze. To get to the top, you take a cog railway and then nearer to the top, you switch to a gondola. At the top of the mountain, there's a visitor center, and it actually crosses over between two countries – so you have to show your passport to go around the top of the mountain.

But oh, was it beautiful. Absolutely, positively, spectacularly beautiful. Though it was October, because we were so high, there was snow everywhere – pure, beautiful, brilliantly white snow. The sun was shining brightly that day, glistening off all of the snow and ice-covered peaks.

I remember standing by the rail all by myself looking out on all of the grandeur, thinking that there is not much more perfect than that. Perfect beauty, perfect peace, a perfect glimpse of holiness. Someone had actually erected a beautiful gold cross on one of the peaks and it glistened in the sunlight through the snow that had fallen upon it. Standing there in that place at that moment – a glimpse of God, an inkling of what paradise will look like.

I'm sure at one time or another in your life, you've seen a bit of paradise too. A sight that took your breath away, that filled you with peace, that gave you a feeling that, despite everything, all would yet be well. A place where you would be happy to stay rooted forever.

Well, that's about as far away from a place where three men found themselves on a Friday afternoon long ago, as could be. Three men hanging on crosses in a place called Golgotha. Crosses not placed there for worship, but as instruments of death. A place of ugliness, brutality, agonizing pain and death. A place no one would want to be.

And yet, there they were. Two men hanging there by virtue of their crimes. They were convicted criminals. Yet the other, the man in the middle, was hung there, guilty only of being fully who God sent him to be. He was, in the eyes of earthly law, innocent of the charges leveled against him. And yet, he too, hung on the cross to die.

Perhaps no picture would better convey the absolute opposite of paradise – than three crosses on which three men were dying and a crowd gathered to watch for sport.

When we come upon their story, in this morning's Gospel lesson, the end was near. Their bodies were wearing out, their strength was gone. Yet still, the crowd taunted them, jeering and joking while they were dying.

And most of their taunts they threw at Jesus. "If you're who you say you are, go ahead, save yourself." Ha, ha, ha. And unbelievably, one of the men on one of the other crosses joined in with them – taking on Jesus himself.

It was then that the third man, the man hanging on the other side of Jesus, had his moment of awakening, for he confronted his fellow criminal about the taunting. "Don't you fear God? We're guilty of our crimes, but this man has done nothing."

And then he turned to Jesus and pleaded with him. "Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom." You know, I doubt if he really believed Jesus would. He knew he was guilty. He knew he deserved whatever came his way, he didn't deserve any grace.

Oh, but grace came flooding over him when Jesus uttered this, his second word from the cross, "Today you will be with me in paradise."

Imagine the relief that flooded through that man's soul. Imagine what it was like when the certainty of hell and death was wiped away and paradise was promised! You know what? That man didn't need to wait for paradise until he died, I think he knew it at that moment.

Paradise for him was knowing that God loved him, had not forsaken him, had indeed forgiven him and set him free to enjoy new life in heaven. So even the time to come, with pain and agony still, would not be the end – paradise was his! He knew what was to come, and who he would see – and at that moment, and for all the moments ahead, all was well.

His is an incredible story, isn't it, yet it's a story that is meant for the lives of all who believe in Jesus. When we confess our sins, and confess our faith in Jesus and Jesus alone, he forgives our sins, cleanses us from all unrighteousness, and gives us a place in paradise with him.

Did you ever hear the story of the old country doctor who made his rounds in a horse-drawn carriage, accompanied by his faithful dog who was always by his side? One day he went to the home of one of his patients, a man who was critically ill. "How am I?" the man asked, and the doctor replied, "Not good, I'm afraid." Both men were quiet for a while.

Then the man asked the doctor, "What's it like to die, doctor?" The doctor sat there for a few minutes trying to find the right words to comfort his patient, when the answer came to him through a scratching on the door.

He said to his patient, "Do you hear that? That's my dog. He's never been in this house before. He has no idea what's on the other side of that door. He only knows one thing. He knows that his master is in here. And because of that, he knows that everything is all right."

"Now," he continued, "death is like that. We've never been there, and we don't know what's on the other side of the door. But we know our Master is there, and that's all we really need to know, because since he is there, we can be confident that everything is all right." (James W. Moore, *There's a Hole in Your Soul Only God Can Fill*, "Eternal Life with God," p. 64)

Dear friends, that's paradise – our Master is there, and everything is all right. It's a gift he offers to all who believe and give their lives over to him.

You know, in the final analysis, we are, each of us, one of those two men who hung on crosses next to Jesus. We are either those who taunt him and cling tightly to the sins that bind us, or we are those who throw ourselves on his mercy, confess our sins and ask him into our lives. It's one or the other, and the choice is ours.

If you have not made that choice, maybe today is the day. Maybe today is the day to throw yourself on Jesus' mercy, confess your sins and ask him into your life. Maybe today is the day that you will hear those perfect words of promise, "You will be with me in paradise."

I pray that as you come forward for communion and then kneel at the altar in prayer that you'll think on this second word of Jesus from the cross, and that you'll open your heart fully to him that you might know the promise of paradise too. May it be so.

Amen.