

Is This Some Kind of Mistake?  
Mark 15:21-47  
First U.P. Church of Craffton Heights  
June 20, 2010  
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In 1970 a 22 year old Englishman named Andrew Lloyd Webber and his 26 year old contemporary Tim Rice wrote a musical about the death of Jesus. As one of the most successful rock operas in history, *Jesus Christ, Superstar* went on to shape the theology (rightly or wrongly) for many people. One of the haunting songs from that work is sung at the very end – Judas' character is reflecting on the death of Jesus, and he sings this:

Every time I look at you I don't understand□  
Why you let the things you did get so out of hand□  
You'd have managed better if you'd had it planned□  
Why'd you choose such a backward time and such a  
strange land?□  
Did you mean to die like that? Was that a mistake?  
Or did you know your messy death would be a record-  
breaker?  
□Don't you get me wrong - I only want to know...<sup>1</sup>

I remember hearing those lyrics for the first time and being shocked...what did it mean to suggest that the death of Jesus could have been a mistake? Yet that is, of course, what many people believe. Jesus was a good man who tried to do some good, but ultimately wound up being brutally killed. A meaningless tragedy...a waste.

Now, when I've considered that question, it's come mostly as an academic exercise – a few of us sitting around talking about life, the universe, and everything, asking theological questions about the purpose and nature of the death of Jesus.

But you see, I have it good. I live in Pittsburgh, PA, USA in

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<sup>1</sup> "Superstar" on *Jesus Christ, Superstar*

2010. I can afford to make this an intellectual pursuit. The first readers of the Gospel of Mark didn't have that kind of luxury. As we've mentioned in previous weeks, this Gospel was written for believers in Rome who were being persecuted for their faith in Jesus. Men and women, boys and girls were beaten and even killed as they professed to be following Jesus. So for them, it was a matter of life and death: when God sent Jesus into the world, did he intend for Jesus to die? Or was it an accident? And if it was a mistake, then what hope is there for those of us who follow him now? The first Christians were subject to arrest, torture, and execution...was this all *for* something? Or were their efforts in vain? Some of them had to be wondering, "Why even bother? Look at what faith got Jesus...what will it get me?" Let's take a look at Mark's account of this terrible scene.

To begin with, let me point out what is *not* in the Gospel of Mark. For instance, there is not much detail about the crucifixion itself. There are three little words in verse 24 ("they crucified him"). Three words to describe the most horrific event in human history. There are not a lot of descriptions about Jesus' pain and suffering; there's not a lot of reflection – just some simple narration about what happened.

Similarly, there is not much speech at all from Jesus. If you've ever been to a traditional Good Friday service, you'll remember that we sometimes talk about Jesus' "Seven last words from the cross". When Mark shows us the crucifixion, the only words that Jesus uses are a quote from Psalm 22. Yes, there is a lot missing from Mark's account – if we are looking for Mark to bring us a moment-by-moment description of this event.

But what *is* in the Gospel? Well, for one thing, there's that quirky little mention of the man who carried Jesus' cross. Think about that...Mark leaves out a lot of details in his narration, but he spends four lines talking about the man who carried the cross and even gives us his sons' names. Why would Mark do that? Chances are that Rufus and Alexander were known to the Christian community in Rome. As Mark is telling the story of Jesus' death, he says to his readers, "Look, you know those guys.

Ask them – their dad was there, for crying out loud!” Mark is giving his readers a connection to the events of that day.

Another thing that Mark does is point to the people who mock and taunt Jesus. The soldiers, the crowds, the chief Priests – even his fellow prisoners – join together to belittle Jesus. Some of that is obvious – even to us. Some is more cloaked. For instance, take a look at verse 36, which describes one of the people standing there holding up a stick on which is a vinegar soaked sponge and offering Jesus a drink. A couple of years ago I visited the ruins of some first-century structures, including some public toilets. It turns out that as the Romans tried to control disease in these facilities, they set out buckets of vinegar with sponges in them – the equivalent of toilet paper. Each Roman soldier was equipped with his own personal sponge and his own stick on which to dry it...and so when the Lord is hanging on the cross, evidently thirsty, and someone offers him a sponge soaked with vinegar...it’s not showing him a kindness. Mark tells us in several ways that people from all walks of life were eager to jeer or mock Jesus as he died – and this is the kind of treatment that Mark’s first hearers could expect in their daily lives, too.

Yet Mark also points us to another group that day. They were not up close, but they were present. Mary Magdalene, another Mary, and Salome were there. A Roman centurion was there. Joseph of Arimathea was there...in other words, there were some witnesses to what went on.

Mark also spends some time in this passage pointing to a corpse. Jesus is dead. Not dead tired, or dead on his feet, or dead to the world. No, he is dead. The life has left him.

So in his Gospel, Mark makes choices – he leaves some details in and he omits others. But the way in which he tells the story, and the characters to which he introduces us, and the details that he chooses to reveal all point to one core affirmation in Mark 15: he has us look at Jesus hanging on the cross and he says, through the voice of the Roman Centurion, “Look! Do you see Jesus? This is what God is like.”

In verse 38 he says simply that the curtain that hung in the Temple was torn that day from top to bottom. He doesn't present any immediate commentary on that, although three ideas spring to mind. When the curtain is torn, it's a prophecy about the fact that the temple – the building that so many people love so much – will be destroyed in a matter of years. It's also an announcement that the old way of worship, based on animal sacrifices and appeasing a God who we had come to see as angry and exacting, was gone, and in its place was a new way of life and worship. And perhaps most importantly and surely most obviously, the tearing of the curtain in the temple means that there is now nothing to stand between humanity and God. Why? Because God has become fully human in the person of Jesus, and in the life and death of Jesus, we see God more clearly than we ever had before.

For the first hearers of Mark's gospel, this was great news. As they suffered at the hands of those who wished them ill, so too, Jesus was abused and scorned. And if they were like him in death, Mark would say, they can be like him in Glory. We've talked about Mark being a handbook for believers in hard times; here, the message is simply that the cross was not some horrible mistake that caught Jesus by surprise, but rather the crux – the crucial point – of all history.

When we look at this passage from the comfort of our own lives as 21<sup>st</sup> century believers, we can take great comfort in the knowledge that Jesus' cry from the cross: "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" is an acknowledgement that he took all the effects of Sin upon himself. In saying this, I'm saying that Sin is separation from God – sin is doing or being in a place where God would have you not do or be – Sin is living outside of God's intentions for your life. And if Jesus, who was never outside of God's intentions for his life, was abandoned by God and felt the pain of that separation, then it would follow that he was experiencing that separation or pain because of someone else. Simply put, Jesus accepted that isolation and torment so that you and I would never have to. To put it a different way, we can hear

him crying out in the words of the Psalmist so that you never, ever have to read that Psalm and say, “Yes, God has abandoned me.”

The theological term for what is happening here is “atonement”. When we use this word, we are saying that in offering his sinless life, Jesus is able to carry the weight of the sin of the entire world. We are able to become one with God the Father because of the life that comes through God the Son.

When Mark tells us that the curtain in the temple was torn, he is stressing the fact that any separation between God and humanity is now removed. The atonement is really an at-one-ment because we now know that there is no part of our lives that is outside of the care or concern of God – we are free to be fully his. In my life – my thought life, my deeds, my desires – I deserve death, because, as I mentioned last week, I keep choosing Barabbas. Yet in reality, I am offered life – because Jesus has taken the sting of death for me.

And if that is true – if I am a sinful person who has been touched by the love and grace of Jesus Christ – then it seems that the only way to respond to that news is to do whatever I can to help my neighbors see the presence of God in any situation. If the crucifixion means that no human will never again need to feel abandoned by God, then it’s my job to be the hands and the feet of Christ in those situations where someone is apt to experience that kind of loneliness and alienation.

Mark, writing to a group of scared believers, shows them a Messiah who is willing to suffer and die among the marginalized in the world. In doing so, he affirms to them that they are not now, not ever alone. The cross and death of Jesus is not a mistake, but rather an invitation to release all that separates us from God and accept the atonement that he offers to us.

Robert Farrar Capon is a theologian from Long Island, wh says that the ministry of Jesus makes sense only to the last, the lost, the least, the little, and the dead – and unless we are willing to see ourselves as last, last, least, little, or dead, we cannot

participate in the ministry of Jesus. Samuel Shoemaker was a priest in New York City and Pittsburgh in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although his early ministry was directed primarily at wealthy men of great social standing, he came to see the importance of sharing the hope of Jesus with anyone he met. One of his most famous writings is called "I stand by the door", and I will close by sharing it with you as an invitation to bring those in your world to a place where they can experience the atoning love of the Lord:

I stand by the door.

I neither go too far in, nor stay too far out.

The door is the most important door in the world -

It is the door through which men walk when they find God.

There is no use my going way inside and staying there,

When so many are still outside and they, as much as I,

Crave to know where the door is.

And all that so many ever find

Is only the wall where the door ought to be.

They creep along the wall like blind men,

With outstretched, groping hands,

Feeling for a door, knowing there must be a door,

Yet they never find it.

So I stand by the door.

The most tremendous thing in the world□

Is for men to find that door - the door to God.□

The most important thing that any man can do□

is to take hold of one of those blind, groping hands□

And put it on the latch - the latch that only clicks□

And opens to the man's own touch.

Men die outside the door, as starving beggars die

□ On cold nights in cruel cities in the dead of winter.□

Die for want of what is within their grasp.□

They live on the other side of it - □ Live there because they have not found it.

Nothing else matters compared to helping them find it,□

And open it, and walk in, and find Him.□

So I stand by the door.

Go in great saints; go all the way in - □ Go way down into the  
 cavernous cellars, □  
 And way up into the spacious attics.  
 □ It is a vast, roomy house, this house where God is. □  
 Go into the deepest of hidden casements,  
 □ Of withdrawal, of silence, of sainthood. □  
 Some must inhabit those inner rooms □  
 And know the depths and heights of God, □  
 And call outside to the rest of us how wonderful it is. □  
 Sometimes I take a deeper look in, □  
 Sometimes venture in a little farther,  
 □ But my place seems closer to the opening. □  
 So I stand by the door.  
 There is another reason why I stand there.  
 □ Some people get part way in and become afraid □  
 Lest God and the zeal of His house devour them;  
 For God is so very great and asks all of us. □  
 And these people feel a cosmic claustrophobia  
 □ And want to get out. 'Let me out!' they cry. □  
 And the people way inside only terrify them more.  
 □ Somebody must be by the door □ to tell them that they are  
 spoiled.  
 For the old life they have seen too much: □  
 One taste of God and nothing but God will do any more.  
 □ Somebody must be watching for the frightened □  
 Who seek to sneak out just where they came in, □  
 To tell them how much better it is inside. □  
 The people too far in do not see how near these are □  
 To leaving - preoccupied with the wonder of it all. □  
 Somebody must watch for those who have entered the door □  
 But would like to run away. □ So for them too, I stand by the door.  
 I admire the people who go way in. □  
 But I wish they would not forget how it was □  
 Before they got in. Then they would be able to help □  
 The people who have not yet even found the door. □  
 Or the people who want to run away again from God.  
 □ You can go in too deeply and stay in too long  
 □ And forget the people outside the door. □

As for me, I shall take my old accustomed place, □  
Near enough to God to hear Him and know He is there,  
□ But not so far from men as not to hear them, □  
And remember they are there too.  
Where? Outside the door - □ Thousands of them. Millions of them.  
□ But - more important for me - □ One of them, two of them, ten of  
them. □  
Whose hands I am intended to put on the latch. □  
So I shall stand by the door and wait □  
For those who seek it.

I had rather be a doorkeeper

□ So I stand by the door.