

Matthew 27:57-61
The Final Stone
Good Friday March 25th, 2016

“It is finished”. That is how John’s Gospel records the closing moments in the earthly life of Jesus Christ. Each of the Gospel writers tells it a little bit differently. Luke quotes Jesus as saying, **“Father, into Thy hands I commit my Spirit.”** And then he **“Breathed his last.”**

In Matthew, Jesus cries out, **“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”** He **cries out with a loud voice and then he died.** In Mark, Jesus does the same. But John’s version is simply, **“It is finished.”**

Now none of these descriptions is inaccurate. When fear and grief grips us, and when sorrow overtakes us, each of us notices, remembers and fastens on different things. But it is also a deeply theological statement when in John Jesus says, **“It is finished.”**

What is “It”?

“It” is God’s plan of Salvation crafted to bring humankind back into an everlasting relationship with the Father once again. **“It” is the life project of Jesus to be the Sacrificial Lamb** for the sins of the world.

“It” is the end of the most horrific week in human history, when loyalty and love was overcome by mob rule, and jealousy, hatred and fear.

“It”, explicitly is the work of Salvation. It was finished/completed on Good Friday.

In truth, it cannot be totally complete until you and I hear it, see it, grasp it, and then make it our own.

And that is why this final stone is the most painful stone of them all. We, you and I we brought Jesus to this place.

So may God now grant us the faith and courage to ponder Good Friday, and the day “it” became God’s most gracious act.

Now, there are so many curious things to note in this tragic story of Jesus’ death. The trial before Pilate was really a kangaroo court, because so many Roman and Jewish laws were broken in the process.

For instance, the trial happened at night, while courts of justice were supposed to occur in the light of day.

Jesus was convicted by a single judge, while typically a jury of three was required.

The deliberations were supposed to go on for another day; it was society’s way of “sleeping on it” before a man was sentenced to be executed.

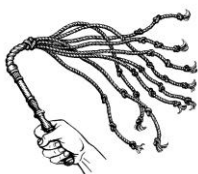
But none of this was followed!!!

In one sense we don’t want to be too hard on the Roman and Jewish leaders of the day, because “it” was supposed to happen this way. And yet the mystery is they are responsible for their actions. God knew it was going to happen this way; but he used the evil of human beings for his purpose.

The irony of the situation was that if Jesus was to be executed for violating Jewish Law, he would not have been crucified; he would have been stoned to death; that was the Jewish way. Convicted criminals were taken to a pit or cliff at the edge of the city, pushed over the edge and then stones would have been hurled at them until they died.

It is hard to believe, but this was a more humane form of the death penalty than crucifixion that was designed as much for the torture and pain it inflicted as the eventual death.

When a man was crucified, he was first stripped of his clothing and beaten with “cat-o-nine tails.” This was a leather whip that had 9 leather tails.



At the end of each tail was a nail, or a broken piece of glass or a stone. It ripped away skin and muscle with every stroke. 39 lashes would be administered across the person's back. They would stop at 39 because they believed 40 or more would kill a person and they wanted them alive... to experience the agony of the cross.



In great humiliation his naked body was laid across a timber on the ground, and nine-inch nails were driven through each wrist and then they would cross the victim's feet and drive a third nail through both feet. When the Roman soldiers righted the cross and dropped it into the socket in the ground... flesh would often tear.

At this point the agonizing dying began. It took as long as 6 hours for a victim to die. It took days if they provided a board to stand on as depicted in some paintings of the crucifixion.

For awhile the victim could boost themselves up with their arms and legs pushing and pulling against the nails to catch a breath, but that produced searing pain. Eventually, though, fatigue would set in and their weary bodies would slouch, their chest muscles cave in, and their windpipe would be choked off. Death would come from suffocation.

The Journal of the American Medical Association described crucifixion in the following manner, which sadly the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq uses against Christians and even Christian children to this day. And remember crucifixion for Jesus began with scourging with a cat-o-nine tails.

Quote: *"Scourging produced deep strip like lacerations and appreciable blood loss, and it probably set the stage for hypovolemic shock, as evidenced by the fact that Jesus was too weak to carry his*

own crossbar to Golgotha. Accordingly, death resulted primarily from shock and exhaustion asphyxia. Jesus' death was ensured by the thrust of a soldier's spear into his side." From "On the Physical Death of Jesus," *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, March 21, 1986

When it was obvious that Jesus was dead, a Pharisee named Joseph, a wealthy man, received permission from Pilate to take Jesus' body down from the cross on Friday night.



The Jewish Sabbath was about to begin and if Jesus' body was not taken down on Friday, it would have had to hang there until Saturday afternoon. Joseph wanted to remove Jesus' body respectfully as soon as possible.

Joseph then brought Jesus' body and placed it in his own burial tomb. A large stone was rolled in front of the entrance of the grave, not only to close the grave respectfully, but also to prevent grave robbers from stealing Jesus' body and falsely claiming a resurrection. It was the final stone.



The stone as you can see was a rather large disk, set into a groove at the entrance to the grave, and then rolled into place after the body was inside. The resounding crash of its closing, as it rolled into place, echoed the finality of Jesus' death. It is finished indeed!

These are the historical facts of Jesus' death. Though it is graphically ugly, we can keep it at a distance and that way it is not so difficult for us to consider. But the death of Jesus Christ was never intended to be taken historically...or in a detached manner of any sort. It was meant to be taken personally.

And this is where Good Friday takes us...personally to the foot of the cross...to a grave loudly closed...to a day when even hope died. For the truth is Jesus died because of you!!!.....

Because all the stones that you and I have laid at the foot of the cross this Lenten season have finally taken their toll. All the greed, all the hatred, all the vulgarity, all the selfishness, all the violence, unfaithfulness, gossip, slander, anger...they have not only covered the base of this cross they have littered and stained our lives.

And what lies here doesn't even begin to represent all our sin, the secret sins known only to us and God.

But...God invites us to lay all of our sins here at the foot of the cross. Jesus takes the entire load of them pressing down on his body, pulling his torn hands and legs against the nails. Jesus takes our stone, our sins, His cross, His sacrifice. And now it is finished!!! **He bore our grief and by his stripes we are healed.**

The final stone is the one which is rolled over the entrance of Jesus' tomb. It was sealed and guarded by the Romans.



It is a final barrier, if you will, between us and the One who loved us so, who loved the world so much that he would die in such a manner even separated from God the Father.

When the final stone was rolled into place, it gave tangible expression to our sins. The sum of them is so enormous; they block us from God... God become flesh is Jesus Christ. They keep us from the kindest, most loving man who ever lived. And hard as we may try we cannot remove the stone of sin that separates us from God.

Not even the stones at the base of that cross...not the stone that seals Jesus' grave. We are helpless on our own: a helpless, hopeless people, bloody partners in the Good Friday crucifixion of Jesus.

You hold in your hands today/tonight, one final stone, too. This one is different from all the other stones of the season, because this one is marked with a black cross. It is also different in that we will not be leaving this stone in the sanctuary; rather, we will take it home with us. Let it be a reminder of the stones that keep us from loving God. Let it be a reminder of the stone that stands between us and a Savior.

I ask you to carry it with you through the sorrow of tomorrow. Carry it with you through the anguish of Sunday's darkness. Perhaps bring it with you to worship on Sunday so that we may never forget the final stone that actually changed the course of human history.

It is finished, indeed!!

And if you bring your stone with you on Easter it will be replaced with a stone of hope and life.

3pm We are going to join together now in the Sacrament of Holy Communion as we remember Jesus' death on our behalf.

6pm We are going to follow the Christ Candle and acolyte out of the Sanctuary in silence, the silence of a cold stone tomb. Sunday the acolyte will bring the candle in as the Light of Life returns from the dead.