

What They Didn't Know

by Jeff Strite

Matthew 27:11-27:26

OPEN: (We opened the sermon with a video by the group "CityALight" and their song "Jerusalem" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wX4ZCHRksBA> [fade at time stamp 1:51]).

I shared that video this morning, not only because I really like that song, but also because it dovetails with something I wanted to talk about this morning. One of the oddest things about the Easter story is how quickly the crowds turned against Jesus. As the opening verses of that song we just heard says:

"See him in Jerusalem walking where the crowds are
Once, these streets had sung to him, now they cry for murder

See Him there upon the hill, hear the scorn and laughter
Silent as a lamb He waits, praying to the Father."

The crowd cried for the murder of Jesus.

They mocked and scorned him and laughed at Him.

But just days before this, Jesus had entered the city of Jerusalem in triumph, and this same "crowd ... took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna!"

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

"Blessed is the King of Israel!" John 12:12-13

They sang His praises on that Sunday

They cried out Hosanna and blessed is the King of Israel.

But that was Sunday.

On Friday (just 5 days later) they cry out: "Crucify Him, crucify Him!"

They sang His praises ... but NOW they cried for His death.

It had been less than a week.

What could possibly have changed in that short a time?

Well, what had changed was their perception of who He was.

What they saw on Sunday was not the same man they saw on Friday.

On Palm Sunday Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem in triumph.

They'd seen and heard of Jesus before.
Jesus had done doing miracles.
He healed the sick.
He raised the dead.
He'd walked on water.
He'd fed 1000s with just a small amount of food.
And now He'd come in triumphal procession into their city... and so they
cried out "Blessed is the KING of Israel!"
They had seen Jesus as the answer to all their problems.
Here was the long awaited King.
A man of power.
A man of majesty.
A great leader who could throw off the hated shackles of Rome and make
them the great nation they always knew they could and should be.

But that was THEN.
This is NOW.
Just 5 days later He stands before them a broken man.
Once He seemed invincible.
Now He's under arrest - beaten, bloody and rejected.
Now He was just a pathetic loser.

It didn't take much for the Jews to be swayed by "the chief priests and the
elders (who) persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus
executed." Matthew 27:20
That was why they were persuaded to cry for His death.

But they had an excuse.
They didn't have all the information.
They didn't know what the last chapter of the story was supposed to be.
And it was what they didn't know that led to their asking for Jesus' death.
You could understand why they might turn away from Jesus.

But it's harder to comprehend how His disciples could run away from Him.
These men had been with Jesus for over 3 years.
They'd followed Him.
Listened to Him.
Ate with Him.
In fact, Jesus had made such a powerful impact on them, that (after the
resurrection) the ruling body of the Jews - the Sanhedrin - "saw the
courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary

men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus." Acts 4:13

Being with Jesus had had a powerful effect on these men.
And yet - when Jesus was crucified... they ran away.
And what's astonishing is that you'd think they'd KNOW better.

The Gospel of Matthew tells us of the time Jesus asked His disciples who they thought He was, Peter responded: "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God."

Then, Matthew's Gospel goes on to tell us:

"From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life." Matthew 16:21

In the Gospel of Luke we're told that Jesus told His disciples:

"The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life." Luke 9:22

In Mark Jesus declared: "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise." Mark 9:31

Jesus told His apostles over and over again: He'd be betrayed, killed and RISE again!!!

So why did they run away????

Well, Mark 9:32 tells us "... they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it."

They had the facts, they just didn't believe them.

And so when Jesus was condemned by the Sanhedrin and by Rome they ran away.

They hid in a room and locked the door.

They were convinced that the same Soldiers that crucified Jesus would soon come looking them too... and they would die a terrible death.

They'd heard what Jesus had said... they just didn't believe it.

They couldn't wrap their minds around it.

They'd heard how this story was going to end...they just didn't understand it.

There are a lot of people who don't understand Easter.
They've heard the story... they just can't wrap their minds around it.

ILLUS: Some years back I read of an informal survey a preacher took of 100 Christians from several churches. He asked them this question:

"Would it have made any difference in your life - as you are now living it - if Jesus had not died on the cross and risen from the dead?"

- 45% said they did not think it had made any difference in how they lived their lives.
- 25% said they thought so, but not sure how.
- 20% said it made all the difference in the world.
- And 10% said they had no idea.

Bear in mind - these folks all SAID they were Christians
And yet most of them just don't seem to know why.
They may have said they believed Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead.

But they apparently weren't living like they believed it.

Now, I'm going to ask you a question.

I hadn't planned to ask this question.

In fact, those of you who know me best know that I often don't know how a sermon is going to end until I get there.

I like to be surprised.

And often-times you folks are as surprised as I am.

But as I came into the pulpit a question entered my mind.

I'm not sure if it was God whispering the question to me or whether it was just an errant thought that just happened to land somewhere in my brain... but either way, here's the question:

Why are you here?

WHY are you here?

(This was Easter Sunday and a large number were visitors).

Is it because it's Easter?

Because you're family invited you?

Because... that's just what you do on a Sunday Morning?

Or are you here because Jesus' death, burial and resurrection have made a difference in how you live? If that hasn't happened, you've got a problem... and you need to do some serious soul searching, because without Jesus you

have no hope in this hopeless world.

You know, as a historical fact - the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ is perhaps one of the best documented events in human history. I'll just list 6 reasons for that here:

1st Every one of the Gospels tells us that Jesus predicted how He'd die and rise from the Dead. It's a consistent doctrine that is always set forth as the basis of our faith.

2nd Three days after His crucifixion, Christ's tomb was empty. It shouldn't have been.

There were Roman guards stationed at the tomb to make sure the body stayed put. Somebody had heard Jesus promise His body would rise and they intended to put a stop to any rumors. But three days later, the tomb is empty and no one could produce body.

What happened?

Did the disciples steal the body? That's unlikely. By their own admission the Apostles acted like cowards when Jesus died. They admitted that they ran and hid. If I were making up a story like that, I wouldn't tell people I ran away and hid. I'd want to be the hero of the story. I'd want to tell you of my courage in the face of danger. The Apostles never came close to claiming such bravado - they were cowards and they admitted it.

Did Jesus just NOT die?

Did He merely "look" dead and revive 3 days later?

ILLUS: Someone supposedly wrote to an answer column saying their liberal preacher had said "Jesus just swooned on the cross and that the disciples nursed Him back to health. What do you think? Sincerely, Bewildered."

The reply came back - "Dear Bewildered:

"Beat your preacher with a cat-of-nine-tails, nail him to a cross; hang him in the sun for 6 hours; run a spear through his heart; embalm him; put him in an airless tomb for 36 hours... and then see what happens."

The Tomb was EMPTY.

3rd The disciples were almost immediately transformed from cowards into men of courage and conviction...and they continually spoke of witnessing the resurrection His resurrection. They were so driven by that message that the Sanhedrin complained that the Apostles "filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood." (Acts 5:28)

They preached Christ crucified and risen from the dead even when it offended their audience. And ultimately they offended one too many people – most of them died martyr's death for what they preached (John was apparently the only one who didn't die as a martyr).

4th Paul claimed that not only had he seen the risen Christ, but that 500 others had seen him also, and many were still alive when he made this public claim. He claimed he saw Jesus alive after His resurrection... but if you didn't want to believe him, there were 500 other witnesses to the risen Christ. Most of them were still alive and Paul was willing to give you names and addresses if need be. You could go ask them.

Oh, and by the way... Paul also died because he preached a risen savior.

5th The New Testament witnesses had no ulterior motives.

- They had nothing to gain from their preaching
- There was no money to be made
- There were no worldly wealth to be gained
- And there was no popularity in being a Christian. Instead, they faced persecution, beatings and death.

Paul wrote: "Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked. I spent a night and a day in the open sea. I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked." II Corinthians 11:24-27

What man in his right mind would endure that kind of rejection and punishment for the sake of a lie? Of course - no one would! And that's why the Gospel story was true. Jesus DID rise from the grave.

So MOST of those 100 "Christians" who said the cross and resurrection had no effect on how they lived their lives - it wasn't because they didn't have evidence to believe in what the Bible says. They had a different problem. The problem was NOT in their mind. The problem was in their heart.

(PAUSE)

I've been thinking about this sermon all week long, and it occurred to me that...

The crowds didn't comprehend what Jesus had come to do.

The chief priests and the teachers of the Law didn't understand.

Even Jesus' disciples didn't have a clue.

BUT ONE PERSON GOT IT!

There was one man there that day who saw Jesus on the cross... and he **KNEW** what was happening. There was one man who understood what Jesus was all about and it changed who he was.

Do you know who that one man was that I'm thinking of?

Well, let's read his in Luke 23:40-43

"One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: 'Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!'

But the other criminal rebuked him. 'Don't you fear God,' he said, 'since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.'

Then he said, 'Jesus, **REMEMBER ME** when you come into your kingdom.'

Jesus answered him, 'I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.'"

Now think about this:

Jesus isn't dead yet.

He hasn't been buried in the tomb.

He has not yet risen from the grave.

He's **STILL** nailed to a cross ... just like this guy is.

And yet – this guy **GETS IT!!!**

The thief on the other cross can't do anything but make fun of Jesus

But this guy has **ONLY TWO** reasons to accept who Jesus really is:

1st – he recognizes that Jesus didn't deserve to be on that cross

2nd – he recognizes that **HE** does deserve to be on that cross.

And that's all he's got to work with.

But from those two facts - this man, who's been evil for much of his life and is now nailed to a cross - he's in a place he's not going to get out of.

He's going to die here on this cross... and it's all his fault.

His sin has gotten him where he was and that's where he's gonna die.

But he suddenly realizes that Jesus could fix what he'd broken in his life.

Some had turned away, and others had run away, but not this man. The thief on the cross didn't turn away and he didn't run away... he turned toward Jesus and sought His help. And that was what made all the difference in his life.

Until you realize THAT truth, the cross and the empty grave aren't going to mean anything to you.

Until YOU realize that you have sin in your life.

Until YOU realize that YOU have messed up your life

Until YOU realize you don't deserve God's love and you can't do it by yourself.

Until you realize that God so loved you that – even when you were not worth loving, even when you were covered with sin – He gave His only begotten Son so that your life could be changed.

But until you realize that... Jesus won't really mean anything to you.

Jesus will just be a man who died on a cross

I want to close with this story of a friend of mine named Hank. Hank had gone to Bible College with me and he was the nicest man. But... well, how many of you have ever seen the TV sitcom "Taxi?" You remember the guy named Jjim who was always spaced out (played by Christopher Lloyd)? He was always saying things like "wow"... that was Hank.

Hank had messed his life up with drugs years before. He'd been an "A" student, he could have been anything he wanted and done anything he desired with his life. The world lay at his feet... and he blew all away for drugs and alcohol. He preferred spending his time getting high or drunk with his "friends" and literally fried his brain.

Then one night, in a drunken stupor, he'd gotten to the point where he couldn't even remember his own name and he felt a wave of despair rolling over him. It was at that point he remembered what he'd heard in church years before... that God cared for him.

And so, in the midst of his misery he did the only thing he could think to do – he called out to God. And he said "God if you'll just get me out of these drugs and let me live, I'll serve you for the rest of my life."

He woke the next morning and suddenly had no desire for drugs. He sought out a church and was baptized into Christ a few days later.

(close with the last verse of "Jerusalem")

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wX4ZCHRksBA>. Begin fading IN at time stamp 3:02)

Let me close with asking that question I asked earlier:

Why are you here?

If you're here because you believe Jesus can make a difference in your life then we offer a time of invitation for you to accept God's offer of love to you.

INVITATION