How Deep the Grave Memory Verse: Gen. 50:20 (ESV)

March 24th, 2024 Scripture Reading: Luke 19:29-40

 Today is Palm Sunday! It’s the part of the story in which Jesus enters into Jerusalem with great fanfare and excitement. People are hailing him as “the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” It’s quite the title, and well deserved. Jesus has earned this status. He has spent three years healing people, casting out demons, raising people from the dead and many other miracles. He has blessed people, forgiven people and has spoken unheard of things about the Kingdom of God. This Jesus was one of kind: All Hail the King!

**SLIDE 2: ALL HAIL THE KING!**

There some other things though…some things he said in secret, only to his disciples. He said he would have to suffer and die. What could he have meant by that? To suffer and die at the hands of your enemies would be an extremely unkingly thing to do. And his disciples may have thought, “Sure, as King, Jesus is a bit out of the norm…I mean, why did he choose a donkey to ride in on? I would have chosen a regal looking horse, maybe a decked out camel…but He is here now and his followers are with him. Momentum seems to be growing. It looks like we are on to something great here!”

 But all the excitement died away pretty quickly. In a mere five days, Jesus would be handed over into the power of his enemies. We would succumb to what he calls, “The hour when darkness reigns.” Last week, we looked at Jesus’ harrowing experience on the cross, we considered his deep wounds, his eternal wounds; the same wounds by which we are healed.

We have walked with Jesus to the cross and as a result, we have endured some tough Sundays. We Began this series on a high note talking about our Heavenly Father’s Love for us…but as the gospel goes, we had to stop and do the hard work of shedding light on our sin and shame, which leads to separation from God and ultimately death. But God’s response to our sin and shame culminated in sending his only begotten Son to be born as one of us, to live a perfect life and to suffer and die in our place. And so we have had to dive into the reality of Christ’s death, the reality of the Father’s searing loss, about the wounds which mar the Chosen One. We would not categorize these topics as “fun” or “light” and certainly not easy, but they are essential. If we are going to call Jesus our Savior, we need to know what we need saving from. If we are going to bow before Jesus as Lord, we need to know what kind of king he is.. IF we are going to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus on Easter morning, we need to know about his death. So that is what we come to today: How Deep the Grave.

**SLIDE 3: How Deep the Grave**

 Death, of course, is something we all try to avoid each and every day. We try to eat right and we pay attention to safety precautions and we check labels for hazardous material warnings and we drive carefully. We try to take care so that in a given situation nothing bad happens and we can wake up tomorrow to avoid death again. We don’t want to die! And this is as it should be. Life is the ultimate gift of God. Yes, it has it’s share of hardships and struggles, but overall, each day we conclude: this life is worth living. The people in my life are worth loving. And, even if I have nothing and no one, I can use this life to praise my God and faithfully serve him. Life, in and of itself, is good and death, therefore, is the enemy. The bible mentions, in 1 Corinthians 15:26, that death is our final foe. Death is against us!

**SLIDE 4: Death is our final foe**

 In fact, biblically speaking, we can say that death is unnatural.

**SLIDE 5: death is unnatural.**

Though we all eventually die, this outcome is not what God originally intended.

**SLIDE 6: It is not what God originally intended.**

Yet, here we are, overcome by sin and separated from the God who gives life…this is an unnatural state of affairs.

 I know our sermon timeline has not strictly followed the events of Holy Week, but last week, we talked about how Jesus took on our sin, how he bore the weight of our sin and took upon himself the righteous wrath of God. Our life is found in his blood. As we said, by his wounds, we are healed. That’s Good Friday.

 But what about Saturday? Jesus died on Friday and resurrected on Sunday…what happened on Saturday? We read the story in Matthew’s gospel: READ Matthew 27:57-66

**SLIDE 7 & 8: Matthew 27:57-66**

 The first thing we must take away from this account is the actual, historical, physical death of Jesus Christ. The ancient Romans may not have had the medical technology we do today, but they understood when a body was dead. The excruciating process of crucifixion coupled with the intense beating Jesus had already received, make the definitive case that we are talking about a dead man. This is an important point to make, because on this very fact, rest the entirety of our faith. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthains 15 that if Jesus did not rise from the dead, than our faith is in vain…a complete waste of time and everyone ought to feel sorry for us poor suckers who believed such an outrageous lie. And if Christ did not actually die, then he did not actually rise.

**SLIDE 9: And if Christ did not actually die, then he did not actually rise.**

There is a school of thought out called the “swoon Theory” which states that Jesus did not actually die, but merely was unconscious…he swooned and eventually revived. But this is not what we read in scripture. The Bible tells the story of a dead Jesus of Nazareth being buried in the fresh tomb of a wealthy Pharisee named Joseph from Arimathea.

 I mentioned earlier that death is unnatural…we are not supposed to end in this way. This is why we can rightly refer to death as…the end. The end of life, but also the end of community and our relationships. It’s the end of our personhood and identity. It is the end of faith. In Isaiah 38, King Hezekiah falls ill and is about to die, but in an answer to prayer, God grants him 15 more years to his life. Hezekiah worships the Lord with a song of thanksgiving and he ends his song with these words: “The underworld can’t thank you, nor can death praise you; those who go down to the pit can’t hope for your faithfulness. The living, the living can thank you, as I do today.”

**SLIDE 10: The underworld can’t thank you, nor can death praise you**

Death is the end. We cannot even praise God or hope in him. Death renders our existence, and our history as meaningless.

 We humans are good at sugar-coating death. We might refer to it as just a doorway or we say that people have passed away. But in our hope-filled phrasing, we should not forget that Death is the foe who brings the end. What did Jesus experience on that Holy Saturday… nothing…. nothing!

**SLIDE 11: What did Jesus experience on that Holy Saturday… nothing…. nothing!**

Because he was dead. The eternal, infinite, unending God, ended! The God of life, through whom all creation came into Being, and initiator and animator of all of life did nothing and could do nothing. Jesus, the healer, the hope bringer, the life giver, did nothing and could do nothing. Jesus, the perfect sacrifice, the Savior of the world, the way to eternal life, did nothing and could do nothing. God was dead. That Holy Saturday was a day like any other; the grave had claimed another one. The unnatural consequence of sin had claimed the sinless God.

**SLIDE 12: The unnatural consequence of sin had claimed the sinless God.**

 Most any death is tragic. We have all endured the experience of saying goodbye to loved ones or friends. We know something about the process of grief and loss. It’s causes a deep pain and I think in our heart of hearts, we know it’s not natural. Life is not meant to end this way. Imagine the grief and sorrow of those who followed Jesus. They believed and had hope that this man was truly the Messiah, that he would really set things right and restore God’s people. But now he was gone, buried behind a stone, in a grave just like everyone else. Not only do the disciples mourn their best friend and leader, their teacher and mentor, but they also mourn for their dashed hopes. They feel foolish in their sorrow, like their faith was in vain. God’s chosen One had come to nothing, and so will the kingdom he had proclaimed. Truly this was a Saturday of mourning.

 For the chief priests and the Pharisees, the leaders of the Jewish people, this Holy Saturday, the Sabbath no less, was a busy one! It seems they were up to quite a bit of business on this supposed day of rest. They set up a meeting with Pilate and asked for permission to seal the tomb out of the paranoia that the disciples were scheming to play a trick. Pilate granted them the use of some soldiers and they then go and make sure the site of the tomb was sealed and secured. After running all these errands, you can almost imagine them wiping the sweat from their brows and letting out a long sigh of relief. “Thank God that is over…now on to our Sabbath rest.” We should not miss as well the descriptor these Jewish leaders use when they refer to Jesus…they call him “that deceiver”.

**SLIDE 13: The Jewish leaders call Jesus “that deceiver.”**

I tell you, my heart breaks for anyone who is going to peg Jesus as a deceiver. *Planos* is the word in Greek, and while it means “deceiver” it carries with it another connotation…one who tries to get others to veer off of God’s path. Now who comes to mind when given this definition? Satan, the Father of lies. He deceives so that we will veer of course. These priests and Pharisees are literally doing the devil’s work, blaspheming Jesus as they cast him in Satan’s role

**SLIDE 14: That is Satan’s role!**

and all the while thinking that they are shielding the people from some great harm. Jesus was right when he earlier called these men children of the devil.

 But this brings up my last point: While it was God’s plan for Jesus to die in this way, these events were also a Satanic victory. We ought not to take death lightly…Yes, we believe and affirm that through Christ, our victory over death has been secured, but we must remember that that victory came at the highest cost, the very life of God! And as Jesus lay in that deep grave, we see the words of scripture come alive: Way back in the book of Genesis, we see a Hebrew born Joseph ruling as second in command over Egypt. He is speaking to his estranged brothers, brothers who years ago sold him off into slavery. Joseph almost speaks on behalf of Jesus when he says, “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive.” What the Romans meant for evil, what the chief priest meant for evil, what Satan meant for evil, what I, in my sin, meant for evil…God meant for good.

**SLIDE 15: what I, in my sin, meant for evil…God meant for good.**

Our good. Our eternal good. To bring it about that many people should be kept alive, eternally alive, redeemed and restored because our God was willing to lie down in the cold darkness of the deep grave. It’s a truth that ought to cause us to tremble. How blessed are we to know a God that can repurpose evil into good, a God that can turn death into life.

 I realize we have jumped the gun on the storyline here. Today the people celebrate Jesus as he enters triumphantly into Jerusalem. This coming Friday, we will take time to commemorate Good Friday, the day Jesus was crucified. And, I hope we all know what Sunday entails…But again, before the mountaintop, we must pass through the valley of the shadow of death. We cannot have Easter morning without the deep grave.

SLIDE 16: We cannot have Easter morning without the deep grave.

Would you pray with me as I close?