

St. John Evangelical Lutheran Church – Center, WI  
Pastor Mark Gartner  
Sermon for Good Friday – April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2021

**Luke 23:32-34 – (EHV)**

**Two other men, who were criminals, were led away with Jesus to be executed. <sup>33</sup> When they came to the place called The Skull, they crucified him there with the criminals, one on his right and the other on his left. <sup>34</sup> Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” They cast lots to divide his garments among them.**

Dear children of our heavenly Father who are burdened and in need of God’s eternal rest,

Throughout this Lenten Season we have been using the theme: Hands of the Passion. We have looked at various people and have seen hands that we have admired – like the repentant tax collector and the disciples and crowds who praised Jesus on Palm Sunday. But mainly we have seen hands that were sinful, like Judas, Caiaphas, Pontius Pilate and the soldiers. Today on this day we call Good Friday, we will be taking our eyes off the people who were sinners and look mainly at Jesus’ nail-marked hands. In order to see Jesus’s nail-marked hands more clearly, we will want to focus on the fact of why Jesus’ hands had to be nail-marked in the first place.

Were you there? It’s the title of one of the Lenten hymns in our hymnal. This hymn is based on the question that is repeated again and again which we will sing after the sermon. The hymn asks, Were you there on the day we call Good Friday? Were you there when they crucified my Lord . . . when they nailed him to the tree . . . when they laid him in the tomb? Before you answer, I want you to remember some of the people who were there at Calvary and who played prominent roles in our Savior’s passion using the theme:

**Theme: Nail-Pierced Hands - Jesus**

Some Roman soldiers were there. They had to be. It was their job, and they sadly were very good at their job. None of them realized that when they drove home the nails and divided up Jesus’ clothes, they were fulfilling prophecies that were hundreds of years old. But one of the soldiers, a centurion, did recognize that the man hanging on the middle cross was different. He confessed that Jesus was the Son of God.

Two other criminals were there, and they didn’t have a choice either. They were being punished for their crimes. One of them even acknowledged that they were getting what their deeds deserved. But after he confessed his sins, he also confessed his faith by asking Jesus to remember him. And Jesus assured him that they would soon be reunited in paradise.

The Jewish leaders were there, perhaps to make sure that Pilate would follow through on his pledge to execute Jesus. They had waited a long time for this. They were going to enjoy this. In their minds they had won a great victory, but instead of being gracious winners they got nasty. They taunted and ridiculed Jesus and even challenged Jesus to come down from his cross, totally oblivious to the fact that at any moment he could descend and destroy them all.

Even if Pontius Pilate was not physically present at Golgotha, he made his presence known by having a sign posted above Jesus’ cross. It read, “JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS”. When some wanted him to change what he wrote, the Roman governor suddenly grew a backbone and denied their

request. But for Pilate it was too little, too late.

It would be nice to be able to say that all the disciples were there to give support to their Lord in his dying hours, but they weren't. They had deserted Jesus the night before in the garden. They had abandoned him in his time of need, just as Jesus had predicted. Only one disciple, John, had come to Calvary. And another person Jesus dearly loved stood by his side.

Jesus' mother was there on Good Friday, and what Mary witnessed must have made her heart break. As a young girl she had received the amazing news from the angel Gabriel that God had chosen her to give birth to the promised Messiah. But not long after that child was born, she received some news that wasn't so good. In Jerusalem, in the temple, while holding her perfect child in his arms, Simeon predicted that a sword would pierce Mary's soul. And as she watched her son slowly dying before her eyes, Mary could fully understand what those words meant.

Working through a list like this helps us remember the people and places and events of Good Friday, but it doesn't answer the original question: Were **YOU** there? The obvious answer is no. We weren't there. You and I are separated from that day by thousands of miles and thousands of years, so unless we have access to a time machine it would be impossible for us to be there.

There is another way to look at that question, however, and there is another hymn that suggests a different answer. The title is "God Was There on Calvary," and it can be found in the Good Friday section of our hymnal. Listen carefully to what the hymn writer says in stanza 2: "All the world on Calvary, crucified the Prince of life, pierced the hands of God's own Son, there on Calvary."

If those poetic words are true, if the entire world was there on Calvary on Good Friday, then you and were there. And so was I. We didn't come up with the charges that were used to convict Jesus. We didn't hand down the order to crucify Jesus. None of us wielded the hammer that drove the nails through his hands, but we were there because our sins were there. Jesus carried them there, and on the cross he bore the crushing burden of the sins of humanity.

That means our sin is the reason God's Son had to suffer and die. That means you and I are no less guilty than the people who were directly responsible for Jesus' death. If you are having a hard time accepting that, if you want to put that charge to the test, don't look around and compare yourself with the Roman soldiers or the Jewish leaders or the fearful disciples or anyone else who was there on Good Friday. Look up at the cross. Look deep inside and examine your heart and compare yourself with Jesus.

What do you see when you compare ourselves to Jesus? It is pretty obvious, isn't it? We see that we are lost and condemned sinners. We see people who have broken God's commands more times than we can count. We see people who have much of their lives to please themselves rather than living for God. We see people whose lives are littered with sinful thoughts, word and actions. As we start drawing comparisons to our own lives, the perceived slights and petty squabbles, the hurtful things we have said and the vengeful things we have done. we start thinking about the times—way too many times—when we withheld forgiveness and held on to grudges instead. Our minds come to the logical, condemning conclusion: We are guilty and have not even close to following in Jesus' footsteps. We are not at all deserving of God's love and we are in desperate need of a miracle to be rescued from our sins.

The man who performed so many miracles during his ministry didn't look like a miracle worker on Good Friday. He looked weak and helpless. Stripped of his clothing. Stripped of his dignity. Bloodied and Beaten. Unable to carry his cross. Barely able to stand. Jesus had been defeated. The devil had won the day. The hymns writers puts it well, "The foe was triumphant when on Calvary the Lord of creation was nailed to

the tree. In Satan's domain did the hosts shout and jeer, for Jesus was slain, whom the evil ones fear" (Christian Worship 143:2).

But the celebration in hell turned out to be short-lived. The evil ones had good reason to be afraid because the Messiah was about to perform his greatest miracle of all. To declare his final victory over the devil, to demonstrate his power over death, to announce to the world that reports of his demise had been greatly exaggerated and assure you that all your sins have been forgiven, Jesus holds out to you his nail-pierced hands.

It was a couple days after Good Friday. The disciples, the same people who were nowhere to be found on Calvary, were gathered together behind locked doors. They were confused about what had just happened. They were fearful about the future. They became even more afraid when what they thought was a ghost appeared among them, but this was no ghost. It was the Lord, and he brought them a message of peace. And then Jesus did something else, something special, something personal, something that instantly allayed their fears. He showed them his hands.

Scars are not usually attractive, but for the disciples those nail marks were the most beautiful thing they had ever seen. And the beauty of those scars is not lost on us either. Those wounds remind us of the high cost of our redemption. Jesus took on our flesh. Jesus felt our pain. Jesus endured the wrath of God in our place. Jesus prayed for our forgiveness on the cross, and he suffered and died on the cross to earn it.

The unconditional, sacrificial love of Jesus is what makes this day good. When your sins condemn you, he intercedes for you. When Satan seeks to devour you, Jesus will defend you. When you are feeling guilty, spiritually empty, totally unworthy of God's love, remember what Jesus has done to save you. Remember that he will never leave you or forsake you. Remember that he has ascended into heaven to prepare a place for you.

If all of this sounds too good to be true, if you are looking for proof that it is indeed true, all you need to do is look up. Look to the cross. Look to Jesus. Look at your living Savior's nail-pierced hands. Amen.