

“Surely this was a Righteous Man”

John 23:44-56

Have you ever noticed how when people tell you directions, they tend to either use landmarks or science? The landmarkers are the ones who tell you what you “can’t miss.” “Just turn right at the big oak tree, and then go down the street until you come to the big white fence. If you turn right, you’ll see an old ranch house with another big oak tree leaning across the front yard.” “You can’t miss it,” they say. These are directions for the landmarkers.

On the other hand, you have the scientists. “Just go north on 24th street 4 miles until you reach Hwy 24. Turn right. The highway will take you northeast gradually arcing to the north. When the turn to the north is nearly complete, Hwy 24 turns to the east. Do not turn there. Continue to travel north for five miles on Hwy 96 until you reach Ursa.

Using landmarks or science, either way people seek to give you directions. But what they don’t know is that how they give directions creates a certain kind of following. For the scientists, you need a compass and street signs and a numbering system. For the landmarkers, however, you only look to what is obvious and you clearly find your way. (By the way, I am more of a scientist.)

In his Gospel, Luke has been rather scientific in his approach. As he tells us about Christ’s birth, he opens for us the world of kings and

kingdoms. It was in the days of “Caesar Augustus . . . while Quirinius was governor of Syria” that “all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem” (2:1–4).

It is Luke who tells us approximately when Jesus began His ministry: it was around the time of John the Baptist, “in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being the governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of Ituraea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas” (3:1–2). That is all in the first three chapters of Luke. This creates a certain kind of following. We recognize these events as part of history. We read the Gospel, aware of the dynamics of the political situation. We try to discern the division of the kingdoms and the position and relative importance of the cities in the land.

But notice the difference tonight. When Luke moves to the crucifixion, he begins to use landmarks. He points to creation and to the temple. What he tells us touches the very foundation of life on this earth and eternal life with God. “It was now about the sixth hour,” he writes, “and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun’s light failed. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two” (23:44–45). You don’t need a map of the Holy Land to know what is happening at the crucifixion. You don’t need to be able to tell the difference between a governor and a tetrarch. No, Luke uses what is obvious so that anybody in the world can see what is happening and all will believe in the graciousness of God.

If you have ever been lost, listen to Luke. He points to something as important and central to religion as the temple. He says, to understand

what is happening at this crucifixion, think about worshiping where a huge curtain separates the people from their God. When that temple curtain is ripped, you know something has happened. The way of worship has changed. God is no longer hidden from His people, needing to be reached by the blood of sacrifice.

He comes to us and forgives us by the death of His Son. Here is God's simple love: on the cross, He opens the door to eternal forgiveness. Jesus suffers the punishment of sin that you might receive the love of God.

Do you still need directions? Luke points to something as universal as creation. He says that to understand what is happening at this crucifixion, you simply need to have lived in a world where the sun rises in the morning and makes its way from one side of the sky to the other. When it is the middle of the day, between the sixth and ninth hours, when the sun is in the middle of the sky and that sun stops shining, you know something has happened.

The way of the world has changed. The power of darkness has come close to Jesus and, for a moment, creation bows its head and closes its eyes. There is night like no other: when Jesus dies for a fallen creation. But then there will be a morning like no other: when Jesus rises and brings about a new creation and a never-ending age. Jesus comes to you this night, takes the wrath of God for you, that you might awaken in a new creation. There, you will never faint or grow weary, for your God is alive. When Luke tells of the crucifixion of Jesus, he uses landmarks as important as worship and as universal as creation so that no one can miss the significance of this event.

But for those who need words, Luke offers one more landmark along the way. As Luke tells the story, there are many reactions to our Lord's death. The crowds beat their breasts. The women stand afar off. And Joseph, a member of the council, asks Pilate for the body. Yet, in the midst of all of these, you have one strange reaction. The Roman centurion. "The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, 'Surely this was a righteous man' " (cf. v. 47). This is the only spoken word that Luke records between the crucifixion and the resurrection. When the lips of Jesus are silent in death, Luke records one voice. One voice in the face of deadly silence. You can't miss it. And what does Luke call it? He calls it a word of praise. The centurion praised God.

Praise is what happened whenever Jesus performed miracles. And, now, when you would think that the time for miracles has passed; now, when you would think that all wonders are over; now, when Jesus is dead on a cross, Luke records a word of praise. Why? Because Luke wants you to see a wonder beyond all wonders. God has made a marvelous exchange. In exchange for your sin, He has given you His righteousness and, in the place of all sinners, He has punished a righteous man. Regardless of the complexity of your life, regardless of your decisions and indecisions, one thing remains certain: the righteousness of Jesus saves you from sin. The cross has become for us a place of praise. God looks at our lives, sees our sin, and yet chooses to call us righteous for the sake of His Son. This is His work, not ours. His obedience, not ours. His love, not ours. His grace, not ours. Only one voice is speaking, and it shares one simple truth: this was a righteous man and by His righteousness we are saved. Amen.