

LENT 6 - HE CHOSE THE NAILS - GOOD FRIDAY
I WILL LOVE YOU FOREVER / I CAN TURN YOUR TRAGEDY INTO TRIUMPH
JOHN 3:16; 19:38-40; 20:2-8
2025/04/18

We're into the final week of Lent, continuing our series on Max Lucado's book, *He Chose the Nails*. The main emphasis throughout, as we explore the gifts of the cross, is that it leaves us astonished—**You did this—for me?** And we can hear His answer: **“I did it just for you”**.

The first thing I want to explore with you this morning is how can God be both just and kind? Can a holy God overlook our mistakes? Can a kind God punish our mistakes? From our perspective neither of these outcomes appear to be anywhere close to satisfactory. But, from God's perspective there is a third possibility. No surprise, it's called the “Cross of Christ”

The cross. Crosses—they're everywhere—on our lectern, on church spires, carved in graveyard headstones, engraved in a ring or suspended on a chain. There's a huge lighted cross atop Mount Royal in Montreal visible around the whole city. The cross is the universal symbol of Christianity. Isn't it strange that a tool of torture would come to embody a movement of hope? The symbols of other faiths are more upbeat: the six pointed star of David, the crescent moon of Islam, a lotus blossom for Buddhism. So why an instrument of execution. Would you wear a tiny electric chair around your neck or suspend a hangman's noose on the wall? Would you print a picture of a firing squad on a business card? Yet, we do these things with the cross. Some even make the sign of the cross as they pray. Would we make the sign of a guillotine instead of the triangular touch of the head and shoulders, like a karate chop on the palm?

Why is the cross the symbol of our faith? The design couldn't be simpler. One horizontal beam and one vertical beam. One reaches out—like God's love. The other reaches up—like God's holiness. One represents the breadth of His love; the other reflects the height of His holiness. The cross is the intersection. The cross is where God forgave His children without lowering His standards. How? In one sentence: God put our sin on His Son and punished it there.

One verse has been following us throughout this series. It has been lingering with us. It has been leading us: “God made Him who had no sin, to become sin for us, so that through Him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Corinthians 5:21). Christ never sinned. But God treated Him as a sinner so that Christ could make us acceptable to God. Picture this: God on His throne, you on the earth. And between you and God, suspended between you and heaven is Christ on His cross. Your sins have been placed on Jesus. God, who punishes sin, releases His rightful wrath on your mistakes. But it's Jesus who receives the blow. Since Christ is between you and God, you don't. The sin is punished but you are safe—safe in the shadow of the cross.

This is what God did, but why would He do it? For God is required to do nothing. Yet consider what He did. He gave His Son. His only son. Would you do that? Would you offer the life of your child for someone else? I wouldn't. There are those for whom I would give my life. But ask me to make a list of those for whom I would kill my daughter. The sheet will be blank. I don't need a pencil. The list has no names.

But God's list contains the name of every person who ever lived. This is the vastness of His love. And this is the reason for the cross. He loves the world. I think there's a verse somewhere in the Bible that has something to say about that.

As boldly as the centre beam proclaims God's holiness, the crossbeam declares His love. Think how wide that love reaches. Aren't you glad the verse doesn't read "For God so loved the rich" or "the famous" or "the thin". Nor does it say "the Europeans" or "the Africans" or "the sober" or "the successful" or "the young" or "the old". No, you can confidently put your name right in the place where it says "the world". How wide is God's love? Wide enough for the whole world? Are you included in the world? A big yup on that. Then you are included in God's love.

It's nice to be included. You aren't always. Universities exclude you if you're not smart enough. Businesses exclude you if you're not qualified enough, and sadly, some churches exclude you if you aren't good enough. But though they may exclude you, Christ includes you. When asked to describe the width of His love, He stretched 1 hand to the right and the other to the left and had them nailed in that position so you would know He died loving you.

But isn't there a limit? Surely there has to be an end to this love. You'd think so, wouldn't you? But David, the adulterer, never found it. Paul, the murderer, never found it? Peter, the liar, never found it. When it came to life, they hit bottom. But when it came to God's love, they never did. They, like you, found their names on God's list of love.

Now, what about a chat about grave clothes? Make a list of depressing topics and this might be pretty close to the top. No one discusses grave clothes. A great dinner conversation: what are you planning to wear in your coffin? Have you ever seen a store specializing in burial garments—"clothes to die for"?

But John tells us how burial garments came to be a symbol of triumph. On the first Easter Sunday God took clothing of death and made it a symbol of life. Can He do the same for you? We all face tragedy. You can fill in the blanks—death or illness of a loved one, a disastrous medical situation for yourself, a relationship that somehow becomes irreconcilable, a court subpoena, a financial mountain that's irresolvable... Like a junkyard these issues clutter up our hearts.

Could God use such things for something good? How about Romans 8:28: "All things work together for good for those who love God and have been called according to His purpose." How far does that go. As well as providing us with 1 of the greatest promises of God, it's also a

verse that gets mangled more than every other, when someone spouts it at a time of grief and it just sounds so insensitive and out of place for someone who needs your presence, not your platitudes. In spite of that, God can turn any tragedy into triumph, if only you will wait and watch. Think about one Friday in particular:

“Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate if he could take the body of Jesus. Joseph was a secret follower of Jesus, because he was afraid of some of the leaders. Pilate gave his permission, so Joseph came and took Jesus’ body away. Nicodemus, who earlier had come to Jesus at night, went with Joseph. He brought about 75 pounds of myrrh and aloes. These 2 men took Jesus’ body and wrapped it with the spices in pieces of linen cloth, which is how they bury the dead (John 19:38-40).

Reluctant during Christ’s life but courageous at His death, Joseph and Nicodemus came to serve Jesus, to bury Him. The 75 pounds of burial anointments was typically only used for kings. The linens were a picture of Friday’s tragedy. As long as there were no grave clothes, no tomb, there was hope. But their arrival meant the departure of any hope.

Could there have been a greater tragedy for John (or us) than a dead Jesus (John’s best friend, the disciple “Jesus loved”)? John had abandoned his career to follow Jesus, had been with Him through all His ministry, most recently with Him in a parade of parades—then the ones who called Him “King” on Sunday called for His death five days later. These linens were a reminder that his friend and his future were wrapped in cloth and sealed behind a rock. John didn’t know that Friday’s tragedy would be Sunday’s triumph. Later, he revealed (John 20:9) that he didn’t yet understand from the Scriptures that Jesus must rise from the dead.

We don’t know anything about what happened on Saturday. Think about that. But when Sunday came John was still present. Jesus was dead. But John had not left. He wasn’t expecting a Sunday surprise. So, why was he here. Mightn’t those who crucified Christ also have come after him? He could have been in very real danger.

Perhaps he was taking care of Jesus’ mother or had nowhere else to go or lacked energy or direction. Maybe he lingered because he loved Jesus. Yes, Jesus was the hope of Israel, a miracle worker, a master teacher, but to John He was a friend, and you don’t abandon a friend. What about you? When you’re in John’s position, what do you do? When it’s Saturday in your life, how do you react? When you’re somewhere between yesterday’s tragedy and tomorrow’s triumph, what do you do? Do you leave God or do you linger near Him. Because John lingered on Saturday, he was around on Sunday to see the miracle.

“So Peter and the other follower started for the tomb. They were both running, but the other follower ran faster than Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down and looked in and saw the strips of linen cloth lying there, but he did not go in. Then following him, Simon Peter arrived and went into the tomb and saw the strips of linen cloth lying there. He also saw the cloth that had been around Jesus’ head, which was folded up and laid in a different place from the

strips of linen. Then the other follower, who had reached the tomb first, also went in. He saw and believed. (John 20:2-8).”

Very early on Sunday morning Mary gave Peter and John the urgent news that Jesus’ body was missing. She thought Jesus’ enemies had taken his body away. Instantly Peter and John raced to the tomb. What John saw stunned him so that he froze. Strips of linen cloth. He saw the cloth that had been around Jesus’ head...folded up and laid in a different place from the strips of linen. He saw “cloth lying”. The word in Greek means “rolled up”, “still in their folds”. The burial wraps had not been ripped off and thrown down. They were still in their original state—undisturbed! How’s that possible? If friend or foe had taken the body, they would have taken the clothes too. But, if neither friend nor foe, then who took the body? Same question John had and it led him to, “He saw and believed”. Through the rags of death, John saw the power of life. God even used something as sad as a burial wrap to change a life. But not unique for God, who used empty wine jugs as a symbol of power; a manger as a symbol of devotion; a tool of death as a symbol of love.

So, could God do something similar in your life, turning what is today a tragedy and turn it into a symbol of triumph? Let your scars become a picture of Christ’s sacrifice Do what John did. Don’t leave. Hang around. Back to Roman’s 8:28—the second half of the passage: “God works for the good of those who love Him.” That’s how John felt about Jesus. He loved Him. He didn’t understand Him or always agree with Him, but he loved Him. And because he did, he stayed near Him. If God can change John’s life through a tragedy, could it be that He will use a tragedy to change yours? You could be only a Saturday away from a resurrection, only hours away from that precious prayer of a changed heart: “God, did you do this for me?”