**REFLECTION, IS. 53:4-12, JN. 10:14-18, LK. 23:39-43, GOOD FRIDAY, APR. 7/23.**

In October 1944 an Allied soldier in Europe was poking around a vacant farmhouse during a down time. He discovered a pair of skis leaning against a wall & thought nostalgically about his skiing outings back home. He had to test drive those skis! Alone. In a combat zone.

Gliding quietly through the wooded Belgian countryside he was thrilled. Then approaching a clearing, he foolishly slid into the open. A split second too late he spotted a bone chilling sight. Across the glade was the glint of a machinegun barrel protruding from the trees, backed by the distinctive outline of a German helmet. He was done. But he wasn’t. Was he instead to spend the rest of the war in a POW camp? He didn’t dare reach for the rifle slung across his back. And there he remained, frozen. Then it dawned on him: he hadn’t been noticed.

Slowly, painstakingly, he inched his skis backwards to the safety of the trees. What exhilaration when he slipped out of the sight of the machine gun. This isn’t the end of the story. The soldier was curious enough to circle around in the woods behind the gunner, now with his own rifle ready—only to discover the frozen form of the German soldier.

Have you ever had a close brush with death? Such experiences have a way of clarifying what really matters in life. In discovering the death of his enemy that winter day, the soldier understood in a new way that he was alive. His views of God grew in importance from that day. God became more personal, more relational to him.

Decades later as he lay in a hospital bed he knew there would be no retreat into the safety of the woods, no exhilarating escape, no dramatic deliverance. Death had him in its crosshairs at last. Yet as he talked with his family the old man drew immense comfort from his faith in Jesus.

Is the desire to be with Jesus just a pipe dream that we concoct to make us feel better? A way to cope with saying goodbye forever to all we love? Straight up, is the faith of that old man worth anything?

Jesus Himself knew that He would face death & He told His followers about it many times. He said to them, “I am the good shepherd; I know My own sheep & they know Me, just as My Father knows Me & I know the Father, so I sacrifice My life for the sheep.”

So why, you ask, did Jesus need to sacrifice His Life? For those who are not Christian it seems to be the hardest thing for them to understand. What does Jesus have to do with me?

To be sure, His sacrifice is the great plot twist. Jesus would do something we could not do. In Jn. 10 Jesus says “I lay down (sacrifice) My life so I may take it up again. No one can take My life from Me. I sacrifice it voluntarily. For I have the authority to lay it down when I want & also to take it up again. This is the great news of the story Jesus tells us: He’s conquered death for us. Because He lives, He offers us a rich, full life with Him, both here on earth & in the next life as well. Throughout Lent here, we have been talking about Hope-Full living. Jesus gives us real, meaningful hope.

Just before Jesus’ death He told His disciples, “There is more than enough room in My Father’s home. If this were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? He added, “I am the Way, the Truth & the Life. No one can come to the Father except through Me.” But the disciples had trouble understanding what Jesus was talking about. Even after He rose from the dead they didn’t believe it at 1st. Luke’s account of the resurrection tells us that some women visited the tomb on Sunday morning & discovered it empty. They were puzzled. Two men suddenly appeared to them clothed in dazzling robes. Of course, we hear their famous line, “Why are you looking for the living among the dead? He isn’t here! He is risen from the dead! Now that’s Sunday’s story. But the point for this morning is that when the women returned to tell the disciples this great news it “sounded like nonsense to the men, so they didn’t believe it.” In time they came around.

But, we don’t get to Easter Sunday without Good Friday—the terrible part of the story where Jesus is murdered. The crucifixion sums up our human condition in all its ugliness. Right after the soldiers nailed Him to the cross, Jesus prayed, “Father forgive them, for they don’t know what they’re doing.” The soldiers’ response? They gambled for His clothes while the leaders who orchestrated His crucifixion mocked Jesus, and so did the crowd watching.

Things started to change significantly after He died. We see the 1st sign of this when the Roman centurion in charge of the crucifixion had a change of heart. He worshiped God, saying “surely this man was innocent.” And there’s more. When the crowd left the place of the cross, they went home in deep sorrow, only now having 2nd thoughts about what had just happened.

Then there are the 2 criminals crucified alongside Jesus. Initially, both mocked Jesus, then 1 suddenly reconsidered & rebuked the other: “Don’t you fear God even when you have been sentenced to die? We deserve to die for our crimes, but this man hasn’t done anything wrong. Then he turned to Jesus, saying, “Remember me when you come into Your Kingdom.”

Wow! That man couldn’t do anything to show his belief. He couldn’t make any amends for his crimes; he was powerless to do anything to help himself. He didn’t even ask to be forgiv-en. He recognized Jesus for who He is & simply asked Jesus to remember him.

There is death-shattering power in Jesus’ answer: “I assure you, today you will be with Me in paradise.” Even in the midst of dying on the cross, Jesus redeemed that undeserving man. That’s the kind of love Jesus has for each of us!

Back to the soldier-skier—now an old man dying in the hospital, who though initially agitated, listened peacefully & calmly as his son read:

“Our earthly bodies are planted in the ground when we die, but they will be raised to live forever. Our bodies are buried in brokenness, but they will be raised in glory. They are buried in weakness, but they will be raised in strength. They are buried as natural human bodies, but they will be raised as spiritual bodies.” 1 Cor. 15:42-44

It’s no pipe dream. The story is real. Because Christ lives this soldier & each of us can step into a reality of no more war, no more goodbyes, no more death. Death didn’t have a bead on the old man after all. And, if you trust in Jesus with all your heart, neither will it on you. Share that news of great joy—the Gospel—today!