

## A Saviour among us

*Luke 23:33-43; Colossians 1:11-20*  
(November 20, 2022)

by Paul Matheson

Today we come to the last Sunday of the church year. It's known as Reign of Christ Sunday, a day we acknowledge that Christ is Sovereign over all creation. "He is Lord," we say, in the Church's earliest confession of faith.

It's a good day to think about our loved ones who have died. What does the Lordship of Christ mean when we speak of death? Death pronounces the end of all the life and love that we have ever treasured. On this last Sunday of the church year, can we *protest* that claim? Can we see through death's darkness to find some brighter light?



Perhaps our Gospel reading today can help us with that. It's an odd reading, you may think. Why are we visiting the scene of Jesus' crucifixion? Shouldn't we be saving it for Good Friday? Isn't this out of place? But there is great wisdom in reading it today. Let me explain.

Today we gather with an awareness of our loved ones who have died. The five people in whose memory we lit candles at the front of the sanctuary: we remember them as part of this worshipping community. We remember the things that made them who they were, the special gifts they shared with us.

And there are others we remember today as well, whose names are not printed in this morning's bulletin. Each one of us carries within our heart a special memory of someone who touched our lives in a profound way. A brother, or sister. A parent. A son, a daughter. A former spouse. A beloved friend. If I ask you to name that person, the one you are holding in your heart right now, who would it be?

Death, you see, is part of all our lives. Sometimes it comes uncomfortably near to us. Sometimes we're able to hold it at a distance. Sometimes it whispers to us of our own mortality.

Death was part of Jesus' life too! He also grieved the loss of loved ones: Think of his good friend, Lazarus. Were there others as well?

In our gospel reading, we see that Jesus, *himself*, will die. He does not bypass death. He does not escape this part of our common humanity. If this Christ has come from God to live among us, then among us he will be. Even in death, among us, he will be!



And I guess you know, already, that Jesus' death was not an easy one. Is death ever easy? Do you ever wish that, when the time comes, you would just close your eyes and go to sleep, and not wake up? I think I do. We would love for death to be peaceful and pain free. And sometimes it is. When it happens like that we're mostly thankful.

But death, like birth, can sometimes be difficult and prolonged. It can be hard, both for the one who is dying and also for their loved ones.



Jesus' death was *not* an easy one. The Gospel writer, Luke, paints for us a vivid scene. "When they came to a place that is called The Skull," he says, "there they crucified him." The very name of that place – The Skull – reeks of death.

Crucifixion was a gruesome business: a method of torture favoured by the Romans when they wanted to make an example of someone. "Don't *you* go trying what this person did!" they said. Thousands of people – slaves, foreigners, especially activists and insurrectionists, those who opposed the regime – were killed this way. Among them was Jesus.



Look who else was there. Two criminals, one on either side. One taunts Jesus, questioning whether he really is the Messiah. He echoes the words of religious leaders who scoffed at him. There are soldiers who mock him. There are those throwing dice to see who can take his clothing. There is a crowd, standing by, and doing nothing. None of them with courage to intervene. I imagine, if there were cell phones, someone would be posting it on YouTube.

Such a painful, public, humiliating death. The kind that none of us would ever want to experience for ourselves or our loved ones. But there is Jesus, in our midst. Christ, the Sovereign Lord of all creation, is truly among us.



Enough, for now, of this gruesome scene.

There is an affirmation of faith that I have found quite moving. I wonder if you are familiar with it. In part, it goes like this:

"We are called to be the Church:  
to celebrate God's presence,  
to live with respect in Creation,  
to love and serve others,  
to seek justice and resist evil,  
to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen,  
our judge and our hope."

"In life, in death, in life beyond death,  
God is with us.

We are not alone ...."<sup>1</sup>

We are *not* alone. Don't you find that to be a wonderful promise?

Have you ever felt that terrible loneliness: At the end of a relationship perhaps? In the waiting room of a doctor's office? At a funeral home?

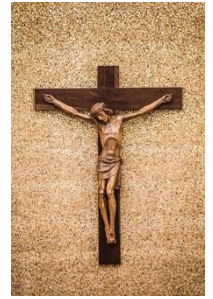
I remember being wheeled into surgery, lying almost naked beneath a sheet on a cold, hard gurney, having said to Lindsay "I love you," then leaving her.

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<sup>1</sup> [A New Creed \(1968\) | The United Church of Canada \(united-church.ca\)](#)

And I remember looking up and seeing a crucifix pinned on the wall. It was a Catholic hospital.

Crucifixes were not really part of my growing up. In fact, *we* sometimes viewed them with suspicion. Why would we want to show Jesus suffering on a cross, when we know that he is risen? Yet at that lonely, vulnerable moment, I felt his presence with me in a special way. And I knew *then* why we would show such a thing.



God is *with* us. There is nowhere we can be where the presence of our tender, loving, powerful, healing, saving God is not right there with us! In times of loss and grief and sorrow. In fear and confusion and chaos. In our frailty and falling apart. In our moments of struggle and failure, in our feelings of remorse and shame.

And *also*, I should say, in our moments of laughter and joy and success and celebration. When everything is going fine. Because sometimes we forget to look for God there too. We may turn to God in time of crisis. But do we watch for God when everything's A-OK?

In life, in death, in life beyond death – at every single moment of our existence – we are not alone. There is a loving presence to accompany and guide us on our way.



Did you happen to notice how many times there is talk of a Saviour in our reading today? Everyone wants to know, *if* Jesus is the Saviour, why won't he save *himself*? The religious leaders, the Roman soldiers, one of the criminals hanging there by his side. Why won't he do it? And so might *we* ask.

But Jesus is committed to something much bigger than himself. He's in it to save the world. Including the priests and the soldiers and all the poor souls who've ever hung with Jesus on any cross that ever was. He wants to gather them up. He will gather our loved ones up. He will gather all of us up. So that where he is, there we may be also.

The world is hell-bent on Jesus' destruction. But what does he do? Jesus prays for our forgiveness! And to that one lonely criminal who pleads for help, he gives this promise: "Today you will be with me in Paradise." See what love and mercy flows from this Saviour, even when others show contempt? "Forgive them. You will be with me." What wonderful Good News!



Jesus offers us hope. And surely that is something we could use more of these days! Hope in the midst of life – whatever it brings. And hope that goes even *beyond* this life.



There's a story, you see, that lies *behind* our Gospel reading. A grand over-arching story that says nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Not even death can stand in the way.

The picture in our Gospel reading is one of crucifixion. But the story that lies behind that picture declares that God will raise Jesus from the dead. That life and love will triumph over every evil. That goodness wins. That sin is not all powerful.

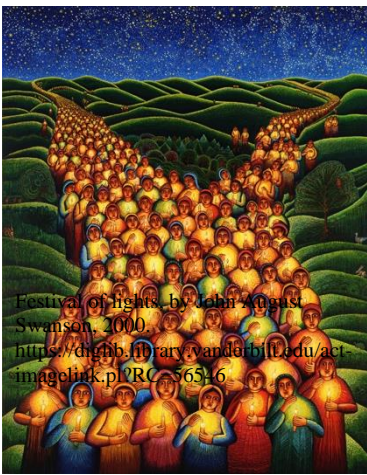
Mercy, love, forgiveness, grace – at the end of the day, these are the things that matter. The very things that Jesus died for.



We read another passage of scripture this morning. Think of those great soaring words from the letter to the Colossians.

Some say this New Testament poetry was sung by the early Christians, as an expression of their worship and praise. It's a hymn. It speaks of the supremacy of Christ. "He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together."

Now imagine those words, behind and above and beyond that terrible scene of crucifixion: Jesus "is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything." (Colossians 1:18b)



Jesus will be raised from the dead! And he will bring the whole world with him. He is the firstborn, and now others will follow: Including the ones we named in our service earlier this morning. Including you and me. Everyone who puts their trust in Jesus and his love.



Sometimes, I think, death is all we can see. We're so overwhelmed by the darkness of our lives, that we cannot see God's light. Turn on the news: More death and destruction, injustice and cruelty, hopelessness and despair. But behind *that* picture of our world there is another story. A song that we sing here in church every Sunday morning, and especially on this Reign of Christ Sunday.

We have a Saviour, whose name is Jesus. And he is with us. No matter what we face in this world – whether sorrow or joy. He is with us. And he is Lord! He will never leave us. He will embrace us in love, and lead us to life with him in the Reign of God.