

Good Friday sermon, 4/15/2022, St. David's Episcopal Church (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

On Good Friday, we focus on the cross. Even though we stripped the altar, we still have our wooden cross right here, and we have the cross in our rose window. Crosses are all over our grounds: the one in the memorial garden. The new one for the stations of the cross. The one in the labyrinth. The one on top of the steeple.

On Good Friday, we remember the cross, but Jesus was not the first nor the only person to be executed on a cross by Rome. The cross, unfortunately, was a common form of execution. On Good Friday, Jesus was crucified between two other men. Luke's Gospel is the only one to include dialogue between Jesus and one of those criminals. He rebukes his fellow criminal and says to Jesus, "Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom." Jesus replies, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

In her book *Witness at the Cross*, Dr. Amy-Jill Levine writes about how when she works with prison inmates, they express interest in these two criminals. What were their names? They do have names according to tradition—Gestas and Dismas—but the Bible doesn't name them. How many such unnamed people are in Bible? Can you imagine only being known as a criminal?

Can you imagine only being known by something you had done? Being just an adulterer. Just a thief. Just an embezzler. Just a criminal.

Dr. Levine reports that the inmates she teaches also ask, What did they do? Why were they condemned to death?

If you have been involved in prison ministry, then you know that "why did they do" is not considered an appropriate question. What would it be like to be known by the worst thing you've ever done? And yet, it's natural for us to wonder. Why were these two men condemned to die? We know that the system was completely messed up. We know that Jesus did not receive a fair trial. We know that Pilate could not find anything that he had done wrong. And yet, this prefect with the power to save Jesus' life declined to do so. He buckled under the pressure. And now he is in our Nicene Creed that we recite on Sundays: "He was crucified under Pontius Pilate." If it weren't for Jesus, Pilate would not be a universally known name today.

What did these two men who were crucified with Jesus do? I am confident that it was not a crime for which they would be executed today. And even if it were, I know that Jesus would have loved them. Jesus loved Judas. Jesus loved Herod and Pilate and the Pharisees. I cannot fathom how. I know that I will never be able to love and forgive the way that Jesus did, the way that Jesus calls me to. But I will try.

Dr. Levine's incarcerated students also ask about these two men: Where were their friends? Who cared for their bodies?

We know something about Jesus' journey to the cross, and about the women who remained, and his beloved disciple. But what about these other two? Were there mothers there, crying—or were they alone? When Jesus' body was wrapped and taken away, what about their bodies?

Jesus was abandoned by many of his closest friends, but not all of them. He was wrapped and placed in a borrowed tomb. What happened to these men after their crosses came down?

We worship a savior who truly died on Good Friday: it wasn't that he appeared to die, but he died. Today, we stay in this place. It's not Sunday yet. Tonight, we remember and mourn.

But we can also remember those two men, known only as criminals. We can remember them and know that Christ loved them, and would call on us to love them.

We can remember that one of those men stood up for Jesus, saying that he had done nothing wrong, and asking to be remembered when Christ came into his kingdom.

Tonight we are called to remain at the foot of the cross.