

**Series: The Journey to the Cross**  
**#6: “The Shame of the Cross” (Good Friday)**  
**Hebrews 12:1-3 NRSV (also Isaiah 53:3-12 – responsively)**

As I was preparing this series of sermons, I have become keenly aware of all the crosses I see around me every day. Take notice sometime of all the ways you see the cross displayed – especially on people. One of the things that has caught my attention more than anything is the way people seem to love to wear the cross as jewelry. Next time you are out at a public place, try a little experiment: sit for a while and just watch the people. You’ll be amazed at how many will be wearing crosses. You’d think that everyone in America had suddenly “got religion!”

And, it’s not just sweet old ladies – crosses are “the fashion” right now. Kids with blue hair and a ring through their nose or tongue might also be wearing large gold crosses on big chains. Rough biker-types will have crosses tattooed on their arms. Youth wearing demonic tee shirts may choose to wear a cross that hangs down right in front of the offensive words or images. And large numbers of “respectable looking” people sport crosses of every shape and size, gilded with gold, silver, and jewels.

Now of course, it IS possible that all those people ACTUALLY are believers and are in worship each and every Sunday, - but (call me a skeptic) – I doubt it.

I dare say that many of the people we see every day wearing crosses wouldn’t be caught dead in a church, much less have the foggiest notion what the cross represents. Many of those who like to sport a cross do so simply because they think that it “looks neat.” For them, the cross has become merely an adornment, not a Christian symbol. It’s a fashion accessory – not a statement of faith.

Yes, it seems that we in our society have lost touch with what the cross really represents. 21<sup>st</sup> century people may believe the cross is “neat,” and nonchalantly wear one around their neck, but anyone living in Jesus’ day would think twice before wanting anything to do with a cross. You see, the cross is no innocent gold trinket you buy at the jewelry store. In ancient times, it was the most horrible gruesome instrument of torture, humiliation, and death the Roman’s could dream up.

If someone in the days of the New Testament were to walk around wearing a cross, their friends and neighbors would have had the same reaction as if someone today were to go to a fancy party wearing a noose around their neck – and you know how offensive that symbol has become in our culture! Or if, in the first century, a non-believer were to walk into one of the house-churches and see a cross on the altar table, they would experience the same shock as you would, if you came into this sanctuary one Sunday morning and found that someone had taken down all the crosses, and replaced them with models of an electric chair.

Are you beginning to get the picture? The cross was nothing to admire or proudly display. It was the ultimate instrument of execution. In fact, it was SO horrible and disgraceful that I have

had lots of trouble coming up with something that would be a modern equivalent. The best I can do is this: Combine the public shame of a tar-and-feathering, with the injustice of a lynching, and the social stigma of an electrocution in the electric chair – all rolled into one. And then, add in all the instruments of torture found in the dungeon of the Tower of London, and you'll BEGIN to get the idea of what it meant to suffer crucifixion.

Until the 1960s, about all we knew about crucifixion was what we gleaned from pictures of the scene that were painted many centuries after the fact by Western European artists. But in 1968, an archeological excavation near Jerusalem made a great find – for the first time in history they uncovered the bones of a man who had actually died by crucifixion. And what they learned has suggested that the traditional assumptions we have about crucifixions may not be entirely accurate. At least, now we know how ONE man was crucified.

Based on that evidence and what the Bible tells us, just consider all that Jesus endured: He was subjected to a mock trial and humiliated by the soldiers. He was flogged to within an inch of his life with a whip made of multiple strips of leather, each with a sharp piece of metal or bone at the end that would slice through the skin into the back muscles. A crown of thorns was shoved on Jesus' head. Then he was forced to carry his own cross (probably just the cross-bar), to the place of execution along a public road where crowds would jeer and spit on the condemned. He was stripped naked as the ultimate humiliation, especially for a modest Jewish man.

The soldiers laid Jesus on the cross and stretched his arms out. They took long spikes and with hammers, drove them through his forearms between the two bones just above the wrists, because that was the best way to make sure Jesus was firmly pinned to the wood (a nail through the flesh of the hands would easily tear). As they did this, the soldiers were very careful not to puncture Jesus' veins – they didn't want Jesus to simply bleed to death – they wanted to make sure that he would suffer there for hours – even days – before death came as a relief.

Next (if the archeological evidence is correct), Jesus – hanging by his wrists from the cross bar was hoisted to the top of an olive tree-trunk and mounted there. Then, with his legs bent, they hammered one spike through both of Jesus' ankles. The legs were bent so that, as the pain of his bleeding wrists or the joints of his shoulders became too much, or if he was having trouble breathing, Jesus could lift himself up by his ankles by pushing against his ankles spike. Again, this was to drag out the torture.

In fact, most of those crucified didn't die by bleeding to death, they died when their lungs finally filled with fluid and they suffocated. (Remember what happened when the soldiers pierced Jesus' side, and water poured out?)

When the soldiers decided that a person had suffered enough, they would take a large mallet and break the legs so that they would finally be allowed to die. (As you recall, this didn't happen to Jesus – he died too quickly, if you can call six hours on the cross “quick.”)

The final humiliation for those condemned to die on the cross was that their body would be left there for days, or even weeks, as a reminder to the population what happens to those who threaten Roman authority. (Mercifully, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus took custody of Jesus' body and buried him in the tomb.)

My friends, I tell you all this NOT to gross you out on this Good Friday, nor to make you depressed or feel guilty. I'm describing the crucifixion in all its grizzly details so that you will realize just exactly what Jesus went through to win your salvation, and mine.

You know, we in the Protestant church sometimes are critical of our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters who have in their churches crucifixes – crosses with Jesus hanging on them, and we say, “that’s awful – Jesus isn’t on the cross!” And so, we Protestants have stripped the “cross of Christ” – of Christ! We’re very proud of the clean, polished, sanitized, Jesus-less crosses that we display in our churches. And it’s true, Jesus ISN’T on the cross now. But I’ve come to believe that crucifixes have their place. Now and then, we Protestants need to be reminded that the cross was a gruesome and horrible thing so that we never forget the price Jesus had to pay to redeem us from sin.

Holy Week was an emotional roller-coaster for Jesus – as it is for us. It began with the triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. For Jesus, Palm Sunday must have been a day of conflicting emotions – a bitter-sweet day. There he was, riding victoriously into the Holy City, surrounded by adoring crowds. It SHOULD have been the greatest day of his life – but it wasn’t. The Scriptures tell us that, in the midst of all the joy, Jesus wept.

He knew exactly what lay ahead. The week that began with such an honorable reception would end in shame – the shame of the cross.

On that Palm Sunday, he could have turned around and fled, but he didn’t. He marched right into Jerusalem – and to his death. When I think about that, I find myself wanting to shout, “Watch out Jesus, you’re walking into a trap! Turn your donkey around, Jesus! Get out while you still can!”

But Jesus doesn’t listen. He knows what has to be done – and he does it.

But WHY did he do it? (Yeh, yeh – because he loves us – sure.) But what gave him the strength to face the shame of the cross?

Our scripture lesson tells us the answer: Jesus, “who for the sake of the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.” Jesus endured the shame of the cross, not merely because he loves us. He was willing to face the cross “for the sake of the joy that was set before him.”

In other words, Jesus could face the crucifixion and all that that would mean, because he knew that the cross was not his ultimate destination! The road he was traveling didn’t end at the

cross, but at an empty tomb! He could see BEYOND the cross to what waited on the other side: he faced sorrow and saw joy – he faced death and saw eternal life – he faced defeat and saw victory.

And that's the Good News for you and me on this Friday we call "Good," because each of us travels down roads that are filled with trials and hurdles and difficulties. Like Jesus, we might feel like turning around and running away, afraid to confront the crosses that loom in our future. But we need to take heart and learn from Jesus' example. None of us face anything like what Jesus had to deal with, yet he was able to endure it – why? Because he could see beyond the cross to the promise that lay on the other side.

My friends, what "cross" are you facing today? Sorrow – pain – illness – defeat – even death itself? Take heart! You are not alone! Look to the cross of Calvary and see the sorrow of Jesus dying in shame there. He knows your pain.

But also, look beyond the cross this "Good Friday" to the promise of the joy of an empty tomb, and know that, just as Christ was able to be victorious over HIS cross – you can be, too!

As King David wrote in Psalm 30: "Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning." Or as one of the great African-American preachers put it: "It's Friday. But Sunday's coming!"<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> S. M. Lockridge Listen to the author sharing the his poem  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZRilpsbJW8o>

## Benediction

To mock your reign, O dearest Lord, they made a crown of thorns;  
Set you with taunts along that road, alone your cross be borne.  
They could not know, as we do now, how glorious is that crown;  
That thorns would flower upon your brow, a cross would be your throne.

In mock acclaim, O gracious Lord, they snatched a purple cloak,  
your passion turned, for all they cared, into a soldier's joke.  
They did not know, as we do now, that though we merit blame  
you will your robe of mercy throw around our naked shame.

A sceptered reed, O patient Lord, they thrust into your hand,  
and acted out their grim charade to its appointed end.  
They did not know, as we do now, though empires rise and fall,

your Kingdom shall not cease to grow till love embraces all.

Vs. 1 – Fred Pratt Green (adapted by John Gill)

Vs. 2-3 – Fred Pratt Green