

I come in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today, is a day of loss, emptiness, and even anxiety. Even though I know how the story goes, the empty tabernacle, and stark, cold, barrenness of the church, leaves me squirming a little. I am unnerved because I have a sense of faith.

Without faith, the execution of Jesus of Nazareth would have no meaning for me.

In faith, I am acutely aware of what the absence of God feels like. There is a void in my soul.

I wonder what the scene may have looked like from the perspective of a passerby walking by on that Friday afternoon on their way to Jerusalem for the Passover festivities. It is early afternoon on Friday, and Passover will begin at sundown.

I tried to imagine what might have been going through his mind.

As I near the gates of Jerusalem, there is the usual lineup of criminals, beaten and humiliated, hanging on rustic timbers cobbled together - strong enough to hold the weight of a dead man. It is hard to imagine the agony these men experienced – kicked, beaten, flogged. Laying his raw and torn body on the bark of that post must have been beyond excruciating, especially for the one in the middle.

Being beaten nearly to death, and having no resistance left, metal spikes were pressed between the bones of his wrists and driven through into the hardwood of the cross with the deliberate and forceful swing of a mallet. I can't even imagine what that felt like. Driving the spike between the bones in the wrists ensures the victim is securely attached to the crossbeam, preventing his flesh from being torn away.

I must admit that it is clever of the Romans to secure the prisoner's feet at a place in which he cannot support himself in an upright position, leaving a slight bend at the knees. This configuration requires that the criminal must hoist himself up with his arms in order to breathe, his tortured back rubbing up and down on the rough textures of his cross. Over time, the victim becomes too weak to hoist himself up, and ultimately dies of asphyxiation. I know that the Romans like to make sure that the condemned will experience a long, painful, and humiliating death.

I stand here, gazing upon these three criminals hanging there. At first glance, there is nothing remarkable about any one of them. They have all been stripped of their clothing, strength, and dignity. They have been reduced to nothing but human garbage. The smell of death is in the air.

As unremarkable as they all are, there is somehow something different about the man in the middle. His tag reads, "This is the King of the Jews." I think I remember hearing about some guy, by the name of Jesus of Nazareth, going around the countryside and towns claiming to be the Son of God, performing miracles, and ignoring many of the Laws of Moses. The word on the street was that he was a trouble-maker, stirring up the status quo. If this is him, and he is the "King of the Jews", he doesn't look much like a king. I heard that the Jewish leadership was so nervous about his actions, they figured they better get rid of him to save their own skins. The Romans don't take kindly to troublemakers. Looking at him, I can't figure out why they were so worried. There are plenty of crazy people around claiming to be God.

Whether this guy is a God or a king, his followers have made themselves scarce. There are only a few women and a couple of men nearby. You'd think he'd have an army of people coming to his rescue, or a host of angels to save him. I guess that he has either been abandoned, or must be delirious about who he thought he was. I can't help but feel something unsettling about this.

I overheard some centurions talking. Pilate didn't find him guilty of anything, but regardless, his own people cried out for his execution. The centurions thought it was hilariously funny that he just stood there, and never even attempted to defend himself. He only talked about some kingdom beyond this world, and some kind of God. I haven't seen any statues of his God in the pantheon, the Roman temple. If you ask me, this God of his doesn't appear to be of much help.

Perhaps what causes me the most uneasiness, this Jesus of Nazareth, 'the King of the Jews,' forgives his executioners rather than cursing them. I heard that he even told one of the other criminals that he will be with him in Paradise. How does he know that? How can he promise that?

So, here is this innocent man, nailed to a tree, beaten and humiliated. No one seems to care. As a matter of fact, for some there is a sense of relief. I guess this is a problem solved. It's nearing three o'clock, and Passover is about to start. They can't allow these criminals to be hanging there during Passover. After all, how abhorrent will it be when the dead bodies are getting picked apart by birds during our Passover festivities?

I see the centurions break the legs of the two guys on either side of Jesus. That will ensure that they die sooner than later. The 'King of the Jews' appears to be dead. The centurion makes sure by stabbing Jesus with his sword.

Having blood and water spill out is a good indication that he is truly dead.

No need to break his legs.

It is hard to imagine that anyone has ever suffered more than Jesus of Nazareth. I can't think of any words that can describe the intensity of his agony. I guess it doesn't really matter. Lots of people experience intense pain and suffering.

I think about those afflicted with cancer, prisoners and victims of war, the battered spouse, sex-trafficked children, those who were/are enslaved, or those suffering excruciating pain due to emotional illness. There is no shortage of pain and suffering. Pain and suffering are real.

Maybe the intensity of the pain and suffering of Jesus is not the point? Could the significance be something deeper? Is it possible that this Jesus, the King of the Jews, **really is the Son of God** who came to live with us, as one of us, is completely human? If he really lived as one of us, he would have experienced all that it means to be human. Physical, emotional, and yes – spiritual pain. It is obvious that Jesus did not grant himself any favors in order to avoid the human condition. After all, look at him, hanging there! I am beginning to think that this man, although like us, is still different than us. There must be more of the story to be told.

But how can there be more? Humans die. Death is final. Dead. Nothing more. And death is unavoidable. Death cannot be beaten.

I can't but wonder what this uneasy feeling inside me means. He's dead – gone – final, right? Yet, this King of the Jews, although rejected and executed by the Jews, gives me some sense that he was/IS a King beyond my understanding. But the story HAS to end here, there can't be more to it. How could there be? Dead is dead. His body will decay, and any legacy will decay away with it. It'll be just another fantasy that will fade away, and be forgotten. Won't it?