

Our Founding Event

Mark 14:1-10, 17-27a



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“Crucifixion” comes from the Latin word for “torture.” The Roman Cicero described crucifixion as “*suma supplicum*,” the most extreme form of punishment. Based on an extensive survey of evidence from the ancient world, it seems that the victim was first brutally whipped or otherwise tortured. Then his arms were attached to a crosspiece of wood, usually by nails, sometimes by rope. Finally, the victim was hoisted by way of the crosspiece onto a pole, and the crosspiece was attached to the pole so that his feet did not touch the ground. There the victim was left on public display until he died. Sometimes death came quickly through suffocation or thirst, but sometimes death was postponed by giving the victim drink. After the victim was dead, the Romans often left the body on the cross as a public display, rotting and eaten by birds. The point was not just to hurt and kill a person but to utterly humiliate a rebel or upstart slave, while terrorizing anyone who looked up to them. Crucifixion was empire-imposed trauma intended to shatter anyone and any movement that opposed Rome (David M. Carr, *Holy Resilience: The Bible’s Traumatic Origins*, 157-8).

This description of the Roman practice of crucifixion is very much what we find in the story of Jesus’ passion in the gospel of Mark. It is clear that Jesus was put to death by a time-tested method intended to devastate his followers and put an end to his movement.

For many in the Greco-Roman world, the movement led by Jesus had clearly failed and had no future. Even 200 years after Jesus’ crucifixion, Celsus, a prominent critic of the church, mocked Christians for following a figure who was “punished to his utter disgrace” (Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 6.10, translation Henry Chadwick, p. 324). Even the apostle Paul acknowledged the utter foolishness of the cross when he wrote in his letter to the Corinthians that the cross is “a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles” (1 Corinthians 1:23). As we heard in his own words, Jesus himself knew that there would come a time when even those who were closest to him, every single one of them, would scatter and desert him. Having no illusions about their vulnerability and his own, he said to his disciples, “You will all become deserters.”

In his book *Holy Resilience: The Bible’s Traumatic Origins*, biblical scholar David Carr reads the bible through the lens of trauma. The bible, as we know, is saturated with traumatic events. For Christians, Jesus’s crucifixion is the traumatic event that was supposed to have brought Jesus’ movement to an end. And yet, it didn’t. Instead of being terrorized and fleeing the cross, Jesus’s followers took up the cross themselves. They didn’t just survive the trauma and move on. They made the cross central to their worldview. The cross became Christianity’s founding event. The question Professor Carr raises is: How did the crucifixion become the church’s founding event and not its end?

Today, to the outside world, the birth of Jesus and the resurrection of Christ may seem to be the church’s defining events. Christmas and Easter are the Christian holidays that are most well-known to non-Christians. I think, however, that the event that provides the most insight into Christianity, is Jesus’s crucifixion. Really to understand why we follow Jesus, one has to walk with him through Holy Week. Only by doing that can one understand, truly feel, the passion of Christ. Vulnerable not only to the plotting and machinations of his opponents, vulnerable not only to the shallowness and fickleness of the crowds, vulnerable not only to the cruel imperial power of Rome, Jesus is vulnerable also to the betrayal, desertion, and denial by those in his innermost circle.

You see, the trauma that Jesus underwent is central to Christianity not only because Jesus has been a model for anyone who has suffered. To be sure, his crucifixion has served as such a model throughout the ages, from Christian martyrs in the very next generation to, centuries later, African slaves in the American South who saw in Jesus a man who suffered like they did and had the spiritual power to resist violence. The passion of Christ is essential to Christianity because it speaks truthfully to our full humanity: that while we may be victims vulnerable to suffering, we may also be guilty of causing others to suffer. Both can be true at the same time. The story of Jesus's suffering does not let anyone off the hook. We all cause Jesus to suffer.

It seems so very important to remember this. Too often, I suspect, we fool ourselves into thinking that if people are victims of suffering, then they are not also perpetrators of suffering. For three years, I participated in the Interfaith Dialogue Convening Table of the National Council of Churches. Our primary task was to set the agenda for the National Council of Churches' engagement in interfaith dialogue for the coming year. I soon learned that this was no easy task. Many participants wanted to continue discussing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with both Jewish and Muslim communities. Among them, some wanted to prioritize the plight and persecution of our Orthodox Christian brothers and sisters in the Middle East. At the same time, the Armenian Orthodox Christians questioned when we might ever prioritize the topic of the Armenian genocide in our dialogue with the Muslim community. From time to time, it seemed as though the attempt to set an agenda would spiral downward into a debate about who is the greater victim. Interestingly, in this particular arena, it was often our African American clergy who were able to interrupt the downward spiral by gently reminding the group that there are many victims in history.

What I learned from these discussions is that one doesn't really feel understood until one's trauma has been authentically acknowledged by others. I suspect that every religious community, if it has endured the test of time, has undergone some traumatic event and has survived it, overcome it, or made sense of it somehow. I suspect that every long-enduring religious community has something to teach humanity about resilience in the face of trauma, and whatever that lesson is, it is not accidental or incidental; it is essential to that religious community.

The suffering, crucifixion, and death of Jesus Christ is essential to Christianity not simply because it has given comfort and hope to millions of people over the ages and around the world who have also suffered victimization, but also because it gives comfort and hope to all who have caused others to suffer. Some of us may, more than others, be victims, but all of us are guilty. We all, perhaps the church more than the rest, have caused Jesus pain. After all, it was Jesus's disciple Judas who betrayed him, all the rest of his disciples who deserted him, and Peter, upon whom the church would be built, who denied him.

There is one person, however, whose actions stand in contrast to the rest. It is the woman who has brought a gift of precious ointment to pour on Jesus' head and hair. When the disciples criticize the woman for this extravagance, for wasting the precious ointment that could have been sold for more than 300 denarii to be used for the poor instead, Jesus says, "Leave her alone. Don't give her a hard time. She has done a beautiful thing to me." Jesus then says, "Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."

While this story of the woman with the alabaster jar was familiar to me, I did not know that it appeared in the passion narratives of Mark and Matthew. I never noticed it there before. And yet, what Jesus says about her action merits notice. He wants her action to be remembered by the whole world, wherever the good news is proclaimed. What is it about her act that merits remembrance?

Well, it certainly stands out from the rest of the passion narrative. With an economy of words, Mark tells us that the city is getting crowded, danger is closing in, and time is running out. The plots of the chief priests, scribes, and Judas are about to come to pass. Calculations have been made down to every move, maneuver, and minute, and Jesus will be caught, then categorically rejected. He will be humiliated, stripped down and hung. In contrast to all that is already underway and about to happen,

the woman's act of extravagance is stunningly beautiful. And yet those who observed it weren't able to see it. They missed the beauty.

This is the calculating and conditional mindset of which Jesus is critical. It is the kind of mindset that he knows will likely fail to see the beauty in what Jesus himself is about to do for us. Jesus is about to pour out his life for all of us. It is an extravagant act of love, and wherever the good news is proclaimed, we are to remember that Jesus gave his body and blood for us.

As gory and gruesome, as painful and pitiful as it must have been, Jesus's self-sacrifice is nevertheless a thing of beauty. Perhaps that is why Jesus's passion has been the subject of artists and musicians throughout the millennia. Whether ornate and sublime or simple and down-to-earth, the beauty of Jesus's extravagant love has made it possible for the world to behold Jesus crucified on the cross. Rome didn't have a chance, for wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what Jesus has done will surely be told in remembrance of him.