

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, April 21, 2011  
Maundy Thursday Service**

**THE GOD WHO HUNG ON A CROSS**

**Luke 23:33-43**

Led by Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge was the ruthless, brutal Communist regime that ruled Cambodia in the 1970s, inflicting terrible atrocities on the Cambodian people. Genocide reigned. Through mass executions, torture, starvation and forced labor, the Khmer Rouge was responsible for the deaths of approximately 1.5 million people, out of a population of 7.5 million in Cambodia as a whole: one-fifth of the entire population of the country. It was a terribly dark period in the history of Cambodia.

Twenty years later, in 1999, a Christian pastor set out to take the gospel to a rural province in northern Cambodia, where Christianity was virtually unheard of. Most villagers he encountered were Buddhist or practiced some kind of primitive spiritism. Much to his surprise, though, when this pastor arrived in one small village, the people warmly embraced him and his message about Jesus. When he asked the residents of this village about their interest in the gospel, an old woman shuffled forward, bowed, and grasped the pastor's hands as she said, "We've been waiting for you for 20 years." Then she told him this story.

In 1979, when the Khmer Rouge was in power, soldiers descended on this village and immediately rounded up the villagers, forcing them to dig their own graves. When they had finished, the villagers, knowing they were about to die, began crying out to Buddha, or to demon spirits, or to the spirits of their ancestors. One woman cried out for help based on something she remembered from her childhood – a story her mother had told her about a God who had hung on a cross. This woman prayed to that unknown God on a cross. Surely, she thought, if this God had known suffering, He would have compassion on her and her neighbors in their plight.

Almost instantly, what began as her solitary cry became one great wail as the entire village started praying to the God who had suffered and hung on a cross. As they stood there, facing their own graves, the wailing slowly turned to a quiet crying. An eerie silence now permeated the muggy jungle air. When they mustered the courage to turn around and face their captors, they discovered that the soldiers were gone.

As she finished telling this story, the elderly woman told the pastor that ever since that day 20 years ago, the villagers had been waiting – waiting for someone to come and tell them the rest of the story about the God who had hung on a cross. He did tell them the rest of the story. He told them about Jesus, and they believed. They embraced the gospel and became followers of Jesus. It is a true story, told in a book entitled *The God Who Hung on the Cross*, by Dois Rosser and Ellen Vaughn.

Tonight we remember, and worship, and give thanks to the God who hung on a cross for us. As Isaac Watts wrote (and as we will sing in a little bit):

Was it for crimes that I had done He bled upon the tree?  
 Amazing pity! Grace unknown! And love beyond degree.

Each of the four Gospels in the New Testament describes the crucifixion of Jesus and the events leading up to it. Their accounts of what happened are told from different perspectives. Matthew and John, both of whom were disciples of Jesus, were eyewitnesses. Mark was probably an eyewitness, too. He was just a young man, maybe still a teenager, but there is good reason to believe he witnessed at least some of these events. In any case, Mark's Gospel often reflects the recollections and perspective of Simon Peter. Luke was not an eyewitness to any of these events. He didn't hear or learn about Jesus until after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus into heaven. But Luke, in addition to being a physician, was a careful historian who wrote his Gospel after interviewing people who knew Jesus and thoroughly investigating the stories he was told. So, even if there are some differences in their accounts, with one Gospel writer highlighting this detail and another writer giving special attention to something else, they all recount real events that constitute what has been called "the hinge of history." The suffering and substitutionary death of Jesus on the cross, where the sinless Son of God took our sin, and the punishment for our sin, upon Himself, are, along with His resurrection from the dead on the third day, the central events in all of history. Not only *central*, but *transformative*. For, through His incarnation, sinless life, atoning death, and resurrection from the dead in triumph over Satan, sin and death itself, the Lord Jesus has transformed – and will transform – the lives of all who trust in Him alone for their salvation and seek to live all of life under His sovereign and gracious rule.

My hope – my prayer – is that I have just described the true heart condition and desire of every person here this evening. If it is not true in your life, if you have not experienced the transformative power of His saving and sanctifying grace, this grace is available to you. This transforming grace is available to anyone who calls on the Lord in true repentance and faith. Do not leave here tonight without opening your heart to the grace of this God who loves you so much that He hung on a cross for you.

Consider with me some of the details of what took place during the final hours of Jesus' life. He ate the Passover meal, His last supper, with His band of disciples, during which He instituted the Lord's Supper, telling the disciples to "do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19). After supper Jesus went out to the Garden of Gethsemane, where He agonized in prayer over the bitter cup of suffering He was about to drink. Judas, the betrayer, led the Jewish religious leaders and the temple police to Him while He was still in the garden, when they placed Him under arrest and led Him away to the house of the high priest. At daybreak, the Jewish council – the Sanhedrin – formally condemned Jesus and took Him to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, in the hope that Pilate would give his approval to their desire to have Jesus put to death. Pilate interrogated Jesus privately and concluded that He had committed no crime. Hoping to pass the buck, Pilate sent Jesus over to Herod, the governor of Galilee, who questioned Jesus and mocked Jesus before returning Him to Pilate. Pilate tried to bargain with the Jewish leaders and the crowd they had incited against Jesus. But Pilate finally gave in and handed Jesus over to be crucified, even though He had committed no crime, and there was no deceit in His mouth (Isaiah 53:9).

After they beat Him with a whip almost to within an inch of His life, they made Jesus carry His own cross up the hill to the place of crucifixion. In Aramaic, it is called *Golgotha*, which means “the place of the skull.” In Latin, it is *Calvaria*, from which we get the name “Calvary.” When, due to sheer exhaustion, Jesus could carry the cross no further, the Romans drafted a bystander named Simeon to carry the cross the rest of the way. Simeon had made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Passover. He had come all the way from Cyrene – a place better known to us today as Tripoli, in the north African country of Libya. Behind Jesus was a band of women weeping for Him. Jesus, however, urged them not to weep for Him but for themselves and for their children, because days of terror and judgment lay ahead for the Jewish people as a result of their rejection of God’s chosen Messiah.

When they got to Golgotha, “there they crucified Him” (Luke 23:33). There God incarnate hung on a cross, giving His life for the salvation of sinners like us. He was not crucified alone. Two criminals were executed with Him, confirming the prophecy of Isaiah that He would be numbered with transgressors in His death (Isaiah 53:12). Jesus was crucified in the middle, with one criminal on each side of Him.

The crowd which had gathered for the occasion stood there, watching. The Jewish leaders, in their glee, gloated and taunted and made fun of Jesus. The soldiers on the scene, who got to divvy up the clothes Jesus had been wearing, mocked Him, too. Even one of the criminals joined in the taunting and “hurled insults at Him” (Luke 23:39). There was no softening of that man’s heart, even as he was being executed. The other criminal, though, rebuked the first. He said that they deserved what they were getting, but not Jesus. It was obvious to him that Jesus was innocent. Then, in a simple but sincere expression of faith, this condemned thief affirmed the kingship of Jesus, and asked the crucified God to remember him and receive him into His kingdom.

The reply of Jesus? “Today – this very day – you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:42). *Paradise* is a Persian word meaning “garden,” which Jesus uses here as a description of heaven.

What took place between Jesus and this condemned man is a picture of grace, pure and simple. Grace in HD. It is by grace and grace alone that this man received forgiveness and the gift of eternal life through faith in Jesus and Jesus alone. It is all by grace. “Nothing in my hands I bring” – nothing! – “simply to the cross I cling” (A. Toplady, from “Rock of Ages”). It is also a reminder, dear friends, that as long as we live, as long as we still have life in these mortal bodies, it is never too late to turn to Jesus. It is not too late to come home to Jesus. It is not too late to trust in Him. If it wasn’t too late for that criminal next to Jesus, it is not too late for you. It is not too late for that family member or friend whose spiritual condition you are concerned about. It is not too late. Yet. The day will come when it is too late. But until the moment we die or Jesus returns, it is not too late for you or anyone to receive the gift of salvation which comes free of charge to people who don’t deserve it. Like me. Like the criminal next to Jesus.

Jesus and the others were crucified at about 9 AM. Jesus remained on the cross until 3 PM. From noon to 3 PM, there was a pall of darkness that fell over the whole land. It *was* a dark

day, the darkest of all dark days in all of history. It seemed like the defeat of God. It seemed like the devil had won. But in the death of the God who hung on a cross, the curtain in the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. This is the curtain which had blocked the access of the people to the Most Holy Place (the room which symbolized the presence of God in all His majesty and holiness). Now, in the death of Jesus, the curtain was torn. The barrier was gone. Jesus opened the way for us – for all who trust in Him – to enter into the presence of God, to approach the throne of grace with confidence, as it says in Hebrews 4:16, to receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. The God who hung on the cross has opened the door for us to have a personal, loving, trusting, grace-filled relationship with Him.

The God who hung on the cross did all that in His suffering and death for us. When Pilate had received assurance that Jesus was dead, he gave permission to Joseph of Arimathea to take the body of Jesus and give it a proper burial. Joseph was a member of the Jewish council, whose leaders and members wanted Jesus dead. Joseph, though, was a secret follower of Jesus (John 19:38), as was his friend Nicodemus (19:39). Taking the body of Jesus, they placed it in a tomb that belonged to Joseph (Matthew 27:59). Even though He would not be there very long, it was important that the body of Jesus be buried properly, as Warren Wiersbe notes. Why? Because God was going to raise Him from the dead on the third day. If there were any reasonable doubt about His death (did He *really* die?) or burial (had He *really* been buried properly according to Jewish customs?), it would call into question the claims of Jesus' disciples about His death, burial and resurrection, which lie at the heart of the gospel and the Christian faith. For this reason it was essential to establish the facts of His death on the cross and His placement in the tomb.

This message about the God who hung on a cross, who willingly sacrificed His life for the sake of a world full of sinners, who was crucified, dead and buried in a borrowed tomb, is not the end of the story. Praise God, there is more to the history of redemption.

It is only Thursday. Tomorrow is Friday. It was on Friday when the Son of God hung on the cross. It was Friday when they crucified my Lord and laid Him in the tomb. It was Friday. But Sunday was still to come.

Listen to this poem by Roy Clements:

It was on a Friday morning when they took me from the cell  
 And I saw they had a carpenter to crucify as well.  
 You can blame it on Pilate, you can blame it on the Jews,  
 You can blame it on the devil. It is God that I accuse.  
 It is God they ought to crucify instead of you and me,  
 I said to the carpenter hanging on the tree.  
 Now Barabbas was a killer, and they let Barabbas go.  
 But you are being crucified for nothing here below.  
 And God is up in heaven and He doesn't do a thing  
 With a million angels watching and they never move a wing.  
 It's God they ought to crucify instead of you and me,  
 I said to the carpenter hanging on the tree.

“It’s God they ought to crucify,” he said. It’s God they *did* crucify. It was God who hung on the cross to save the residents of an isolated Cambodian village. It was God who hung on the cross to save a criminal being executed next to Him. It was God who hung on the cross to save me. And you. It was God Himself who hung on the cross to save everyone who comes to Him in trusting faith, no matter what sins we have committed or how many times we have failed. It was God Himself who hung on the cross. His body was given, and His blood was shed, for us.

Thanks be to God, now and always. Amen.