

Sermon for Easter 2011 – “A Soldier’s Story”

Text: Jeremiah 31:1-6; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; Matthew 28:1-10

First, let me state for the record – I never liked Judea and I never intended to come here. It was a third-class province – unimportant in terms of revenue – and terms of size – very small. Far from being the ‘garden spot of the Middle East’ or the ‘jewel in the crown of the empire’ – it’s hot, dusty, crowded and the people don’t appreciate anything you do for them. Even after bringing them better sanitation, medicine, education, irrigation, public health, roads, a freshwater system (the aqueduct), baths and public order...we still hear them say: “what have the Romans ever done for us?”

Still, having said that – my time there has changed me permanently. And for the better. But I’m getting ahead of myself. Maybe I should start at the beginning.

Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Marcus Speratus Aequitas. I’m a centurion in the Roman cohort assigned to the Judean province – or at least I **was**, but I’ll explain what I mean later. Our job was to keep order – not an easy thing to do in these parts. I first heard about this Jesus while I was on ‘John the Baptist’ detail – stationed at the Jordan River. The day that Jesus showed up with the regular crowds to be ‘baptized’ – John referred to him as the ‘Lamb of God.’ John and Jesus were like night and day – but they both had a way about them...something that made you want to listen to them. After being baptized – Jesus disappeared for a bit. When he turned up again, he went around teaching, healing and doing all sorts of miracles. He developed quite a following.

The first time I actually met him was when my servant – my best and most faithful servant – got sick. Having heard about all the things he was doing and hearing him teach a few times myself – I went to some Jewish elders to see if they could persuade him come and heal my servant. I figured if anyone could heal the man, Jesus could. Well, they must have pled my case pretty well, because Jesus agreed to come. While he was on his way here – I sent some friends to meet him. I told them to tell Jesus not to trouble himself – that I wasn’t worthy to have him come under my roof – but to only give the word and let the servant be healed. Well, let me tell you, the servant was cured before they even got back to the house. Jesus told them that he’d never seen such faith.

I ran into him several times after that and saw him do lots of amazing things. He fed 5,000 people with just 5 loaves of bread and two fish. He cured lepers and – if you can believe it – cast out demons. And then there was raising of Lazarus – who people said had been dead for four days.

As for me, things were going pretty well career-wise – that is, until I ended up got punished for letting some Galilean peasant carry my pack an extra mile. See, you could get them to carry it one mile, but that was it. More than that could get you in trouble. Anyway, I got sent to Jerusalem and got stuck on the one detail that everyone dreaded – crucifixion. It was unpleasant to say the least. It isn’t that I’m squeamish – after all, I’m a Roman soldier and had seen my share of blood and death in war. But this was different. I’ll spare you the details – but trust me – this was downright cruel. Yeah, it was truly awful – but it was here that I met Jesus again. I was surprised – shocked, actually – to see him. I know that he’d managed to upset a lot of people – but he really hadn’t done anything to deserve this. What’s more – it was only a few days before, that he’d ridden into town to the shouts of “**Hosanna**” and “**blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.**” Now they were shouting “crucify him.”

I guess that between the raising of Lazarus and the incident with the money-changers in the temple – well, I suppose that Jesus angered the wrong people. It didn't help that Pilate was having a particularly bad day. So there I was, watching Jesus go through what we put all would-be 'messiahs' and enemies of Rome through. As I watched, he looked right at me and despite the fact that his right eye was completely swollen – he seemed to recognize me. It was strange. I couldn't look at him. I had to turn away.

When we got to the place the locals called Golgotha – we nailed him up like all the others. There was so much was going on – it was like a nightmare.

Still, I remember everything that happened.

I remember everything Jesus said from the cross.

It was burned into my brain.

There were people taunting him and spitting on him – we were crucifying him – but he still asked God to forgive us – because we didn't know what we were doing. There were two thieves crucified with Jesus. One was getting on him for not saving himself and them. The other asked Jesus to remember him when he came into his kingdom. Jesus promised him they'd be together that very day in paradise.

Then he cried out something in his native language. Some thought he was calling for one of the old Jewish prophets – but a guy standing next to me translated. Jesus had cried out, **“my God, my God, why have you forsaken me.”** I don't blame him. I guess it must have seemed that way. I'll admit – this really shook me. So much so that when they gambled for his cloak – I wanted no part of it. None whatsoever. Then, standing at the foot of the cross, Jesus said, **“It is finished. Father, into Your hands I commend my Spirit.”**

Just then, we'd gotten word that the Jewish leaders wanted us to speed things up, since the Jewish Sabbath was about to start. We broke the legs of the two thieves, as we usually did – and though Jesus appeared to be dead, somebody stuck a spear in his side to be sure. It seemed then that all hell broke loose. Literally. First, there was the darkness – and I mean total, pitch black darkness. Then there were earthquakes – which caused graves to open up and which ripped the veil of the temple in half! Finally – I couldn't bear it any longer. I must've gone crazy, because before I knew what I was saying, I blurted out that this really must've been God Son! I don't know if anyone heard me.

Soon, some friends of Jesus came for his body and buried him. I thought that'd be the end – but I was wrong. It was – in fact – only the beginning. Apparently the chief priests and the Pharisees were afraid that Jesus' disciples would steal the body, then lie and say he'd been raised from the dead as Jesus had said he would. So they went to Pilate, asking him to seal the tomb and post a guard, so it would be secure until Sunday. To my horror – I was put in charge of this duty. I took a small group of men with me and we camped out in a cemetery. There we sat – from sundown Friday into Sunday morning. It wasn't so bad during the day – but at night it was terrible. We couldn't build a fire, so there we sat – bored and shivering – watching and waiting for potential grave robbers. \

We didn't think anything would happen – after all, tampering with a sealed tomb was punishable by death! But just before dawn on Sunday morning – two women showed up. No sooner do they get there, when there was another earthquake. Then something – no, more like someone – it looked like a man – rolled back the stone – the one and a half stone! – and sat on it. The best way to describe him was like lightning – he was so bright

– and his clothing was white as snow. I won't lie to you – it scared us. The others passed out. I heard the man say something to the women. I could barely hear it, but he told them not to be afraid – that this Jesus wasn't there – that he'd been raised as he said! They went **into** the tomb – briefly – then left with what seemed like a mixture of fear and great joy and ran to tell his disciples. And though my own fear was growing every second – I felt compelled to follow them. It seemed that no sooner that I'd done so when – if you can believe it – Jesus appeared. Jesus – alive! And with only the holes in his hand, feet and side as any indication of what had happened to him. He said greeted the women– who promptly fell to the ground.

I couldn't hear what he said to them, but they left quickly – I assume to go and tell the rest of his friends. I remained there behind a rock – too stunned to move. I couldn't believe my eyes. A million questions raced through my brain. What had I just witnessed? What had happened? Could it be true? Could the man I saw crucified, dead and buried – only days before – really have been raised? Could what people've been saying about him been true? Could what **I'd** said about him be true? Maybe this man truly **was** the Son of God. I thought back to my first meeting with Jesus. I began to think about all that I'd heard and witnessed since then. The more I thought – the more afraid and confused I became. If Jesus was the Son of God – did I really believe it? If I believed it – what then?

Pilate had asked Jesus a question: “**what is truth?**” Was Jesus – all his teaching – all his miracles – the truth? Was my way of thinking – the Roman way of thinking – all wrong? Was my life up to that point a lie? What else could I think? What would I do? What **could** I do? Trembling, I went home. I had some thinking to do. When the other guards came to, they ran away.

There's a rumor floating around that they went to the chief priests – who then went to the elders. They supposedly they bribed the guards and told them to say that Jesus' disciples came and stole the body while we were asleep. They said that if Pilate found out they'd corroborate their story and keep them out of trouble. The bribe part's probably true – but that's it. Don't believe the rest. No one came and took the body. We were wide awake.

I spent the better part of the next few days and weeks thinking about it. I wandered the city and heard stories of Jesus appearing to people. To the two guys on the road to Emmaus and to his disciples – even in that locked upper room. Yeah, the more I thought about it – the more I believed – the more certain I was that Jesus was alive – that he had been raised. The more convinced I was that what I'd witnessed was indeed the truth. My life was changed forever – the **truth** changed my life forever. I've quit being a centurion. I took early retirement. I'm moving to the city of Ephesus – to join a group there. The group – what they call a 'church' – was started by a man named Paul – who we knew back in the day as Saul and who had an amazing encounter with the risen Jesus of his own.

Look, I know I'm a Roman. The Jews hate us. Most countries we conquer hated us. But I was there. At the foot of the cross. I saw what I saw. I heard what I heard.

What I don't get is why everyone else around that cross didn't recognize the same divine truth I did. The people there saw and experienced the same miracles. They heard the same words proclaimed from the cross. What's more – they'd known Jesus longer and knew him better. That goes especially for Jesus' friends – his disciples. As soon as trouble reared its ugly head, they scattered like mice. They were guilty of missing what was right in front of them. If you're completely honest, you're guilty of missing it too.

In our better moments, we admit that when the truth is staring us in the face, we tend to turn away. But I'm not claiming to be better, or smarter, or more observant than anyone else. In fact, this has **nothing** to do with **me** as a person. It has **everything** to do with God and something that Paul calls grace. The miraculous nature of God's grace is that it's **real** and it **works**. It accomplishes that which God purposes. It brings new life and makes all things new. I beheld the very Word of God and couldn't help but confess the truth right before my very eyes. That's what faith is. It's not something we **do** for God. It's not something we can somehow go out and get more of. Faith is simply a response. But it's more than simply a way of speaking – or believing – or thinking about something – so much more. It's a way of acting – of being – a way of living in a restored, renewed relationship with God. A god more powerful than all the gods of Rome – or any other god for that matter.

Faith is a miraculous gift – given as we accept the divine truth of Jesus – of what he did – and allow it to transform us. And the divine truth is that all sin, all guilt, all condemnation – death itself – is swallowed up in the work and person of Jesus Christ.

Is He risen? I'll say. He is risen indeed! So, I'll say it again – as often as I need to...

I'll say it again, as long as there's breath in my body...

I'll say it again, praying that our heavenly Father would continue to bless us with this miraculous gift of faith...

I'll say it again, until the day that our actions – our very lives – echo the truth which our voices proclaim...

I'll say it again, because this news is too good to remain hidden...

I'll say it again, that truly this is the Son of God...our Lord, our Savior, and our Redeemer!

Thanks be to God. Amen.