

They Call Him Savior - Part 1

by Max Lucado

The sermon emphasizes the importance of understanding the cross and its significance in the Christian faith, highlighting its power to forgive and redeem humanity.

Duration: 1:25:38

Scripture: James 1:2

Topics: "Savior"

Description

The video is a sermon that explores the nature of God and His love for humanity. It emphasizes that God's love is not based on passion and romance, but on a common mission and sacrifice. The speaker uses biblical examples, such as Jesus asking John to take care of Mary on the cross, to illustrate this point. The sermon also highlights the creative ways in which God communicates with His creation throughout history, culminating in the ultimate act of love - God becoming a man in Jesus Christ.

Transcript

I just want to know what counts. Deep Irish brogue, deep, deep eyes. The statement was sincere.

Don't talk to me of a religion. I've been down that road. And please stay off theology.

I have a degree in that. Get to the heart of it, okay? I want to know what counts. His name was Ian.

He was a student at a Canadian university where I was visiting. Through a series of events he found out I was a Christian, and I found out he wanted to be, but was disenchanted. I grew up in the church, he explained.

I wanted to go into the ministry. I took all the courses, the theology, the languages, the exegesis, but I quit. Something just didn't click.

It's in there somewhere, he spoke with earnestness. At least I think it is. I looked up for my coffee as he began to stir his.

Then he summarized his frustration with one question. What really matters? What counts? Tell me. Skip the periphery.

Go to the essence. Tell me the part that matters. The part that matters.

I looked at for a long time. The question hung in the air. What should I have said? What should I have said? I could have told him about church.

I could have given him a doctrinal answer, or read him something classic like the Twenty-third Psalm. The Lord is my shepherd. But that all seemed too small.

Maybe some thoughts on sexuality, or prayer, or the golden rule. No, Ian wanted the treasure. He wanted the meat.

Stop and empathize for a second. Can you hear his question? Can you taste his frustration? Don't give me religion, he was saying. Give me what matters.

What does matter? In your Bible of over a thousand pages, what matters? Among all the dos and don'ts and shoulds and shouldn'ts, what is essential? What is indispensable? The Old Testament? The New? Grace? Baptism? What would you have said to Ian? Would you have spoken on the evil of the world, or maybe the eminence of heaven? Would you have quoted John 3.16, or Acts 2.38, or maybe read 1 Corinthians 13? What really matters? You've probably wrestled with this question. Maybe you've gone through the acts of religion and faith, and yet found yourself more often than not at a dry well. Prayers seem empty.

Goals seem unthinkable. Christianity becomes a warped record full of highs and lows and off keynotes. Is this all there is? Sunday attendance, pretty songs, faithful tithings, golden crosses, three-piece suits, big choirs, leather Bibles.

It's nice and all, but where is the heart of it? I stirred my coffee. Ian stirred his. I had no answer.

All of my verses, so obediently memorized, seemed inappropriate. All my canned responses seemed timid. Yet now, years later, I know what I would share with him.

Think about these words from Paul in 1 Corinthians 15. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures. First importance, he says.

Read on. That He was buried, that He was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve. And there it is.

Almost too simple. Jesus was killed, buried, and resurrected. Surprised? The part that matters is the cross, no more and no less.

The cross. It rests on the timeline of history like a compelling diamond. Its tragedy summons all sufferers.

Its absurdity attracts all cynics. Its hope lures all searchers. And according to Paul, the cross is what counts.

My, what a piece of wood! History has idolized it and despised it, gold-plated it and burned it, worn and trashed it. History has done everything to it, but ignore it. That's the one option that cross does not offer.

No one can ignore it. You can't ignore a piece of lumber that suspends the greatest claim in history. A crucified carpenter claiming that he is God on earth.

Divine? Eternal? The death-slayer? No wonder Paul called it the core of the gospel. Its account is true. Its histories hinge.

Period. If not, its histories hoax. That's why the cross is what matters.

That's why, if I had that cup of coffee to drink again with Ian, I would tell him about it. I'd tell of the drama on that windy April day, the day when the kingdom of death was repossessed and hope took up the payments. I'd tell of Peter's tumble, Pilate's hesitancy, and John's loyalty.

We'd read about the foggy garden of decision and the incandescent room of the resurrection. We'd discuss the final words uttered so deliberately by this self-sacrificing Messiah. And finally we'd look at the Messiah Himself, a blue-collar Jew whose claim altered a world, and whose promise has never been equaled.

No wonder they call Him the Savior. I'm wondering if I might not be addressing some readers who have the same question that Ian had. Oh, the cross is nothing new to you.

You've seen it, you've worn it, you've thought about it, you've read about it, maybe you have even prayed to it. But do you know it? Any serious study of the Christian claim is at its essence a study of the cross. To accept or reject Christ without a careful examination of Calvary is like deciding on a car without looking at the engine.

Being religious without knowing the cross is like owning a Mercedes with no motor. Pretty package, but where's your power? Will you do me a favor? Get yourself some coffee, get comfortable, and give me an hour of your time. Take a good look at the cross with me.

Let's examine this hour in history. Let's look at the witnesses, let's listen to the voices, let's watch the faces, and most of all, let's observe the one they call the Savior, and let's see if we can find the part that matters. In a recent trip to my hometown, I took some time to go see a tree.

A live oak tree, my daddy called it, with the accent on live. It was nothing more than a sapling so thin I could wrap my hand around it and touch my middle finger to my thumb. The west Texas wind scattered the fall leaves and caused me to zip up my coat.

There's nothing colder than a prairie wind, especially in a cemetery. A special tree, I said to myself, with a special job. I looked around.

The cemetery was lined with elms but no oaks. The ground was dotted with tombstones but no trees, just this one. A special tree for a special man.

About three years ago, daddy began noticing a steady weakening of his muscles. It began in his hands. He then felt it in his calves.

Next, his arms thinned a bit. He mentioned his condition to my brother-in-law, who is a physician. My brother-in-law, alarmed, sent him to a specialist.

The specialist conducted a lengthy battery of tests, blood neurological and muscular, and he reached his conclusion. Lou Gehrig's disease, a devastatingcrippler. No one knows the cause or the cure.

The only thing sure about it is its cruelty and accuracy. I looked down at the plot of ground that would someday entomb my father. Daddy always wanted to be buried under an oak tree, so he bought this one.

Special order from the valley, he had boasted. Had to get special permission from the city council to put it here. That wasn't hard in this dusty oilfield town where everybody knows everybody.

The lump got tighter in my throat. A lesser man might have been angry. Another man might have given up, but Daddy didn't.

He knew that his days were numbered, so he began to get his house in order. The tree was only one of the preparations he made. He improved the house for Mom by installing a sprinkler system and a garage door opener, and by painting the trim.

He got the will updated. He verified the insurance and retirement policies. He bought some stocks to go toward his grandchildren's education.

He planned his funeral. He bought cemetery plots for himself and Mom. He prepared his kids through words of assurance and letters of love.

And last of all, he bought the tree, a live oak tree, pronounced with the accent on live. Final acts, final hours, final words. They reflect a life well lived.

And so do the last words of our Master. When on the edge of death, Jesus, too, got his house in order. A final prayer of forgiveness, a plea honored, a request of love, a question of suffering, a confession of humanity, a call of deliverance, a cry of completion.

Words of chance, muttered by a desperate martyr? No. Words of intent, painted by the Divine Deliverer on the canvas of sacrifice. Final words, final acts.

Each one is a window through which the cross can be better understood. Each one opens a treasury of promises. So that is where you learned it, I said aloud, as though speaking to my father.

I smiled to myself and thought, it's much easier to die like Jesus if you have lived like Him for a lifetime. The final hours are passing now. The gentle flame on His candle grows weaker and weaker.

He lies in peace, His body dying, His spirit living. No longer can He get out of bed. He has chosen to live His last days at home.

It won't be long. Death's windy draft will soon exhaust the flickering candle, and it will be over. I looked one last time at the slender oak.

I touched it as if it had been hearing thoughts, my thoughts. Grow, I whispered. Grow strong.

Stand tall. Yours is a valued treasure. As I drove home through the ragged oilfield patchwork, I kept thinking about that tree.

Though feeble, the decades will find it strong. Though slender, the years will add thickness and strength. Its last years will be its best, just like my father's, just like my master's.

It's much easier to die like Jesus if you have lived like Him for a lifetime. Grow, young tree. My eyes were misting.

Stand strong. Yours is a valued treasure. He was awake when I got home.

I leaned over his bed. I checked on the tree, I told him. It's growing.

He smiled. The dialogue that Friday morning was bitter. From the onlookers, Come down from the cross if you are the Son of God.

From the religious leaders, He saved others, but He can't save Himself. From the soldiers, If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself. Bitter words, acidic with sarcasm, hateful, irreverent.

Wasn't it enough that He was being crucified? Wasn't it enough that He was being shamed as a criminal? Were the nails insufficient? Was the crown of thorns too soft? Had the flogging been too short? For some, apparently so. Peter, a writer not normally given to using many descriptive verbs, says that the passersby hurled insults at the crucified Christ. They didn't just yell or speak or scream, they hurled verbal stones.

They had every intention of hurting and bruising. We've broken the body, now let's break the spirit. So they strung their bows with self-righteousness and launched stinging arrows of pure poison.

Of all the scenes around the cross, this one angers me the most. What kind of people, I ask myself, would mock a dying man? Who would be so base as to pour the salt of scorn upon open wounds? How low and perverted to sneer at one who is laced with pain! Who would make fun of a person who is seated in an electric chair? Or who would point and laugh at a criminal who has a hangman's noose around his neck? You can be sure that Satan and his demons were the cause of such filth. And then the criminal on cross number two throws his punch.

Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us! The words thrown that day were meant to wound, and there is nothing more painful than words meant to hurt. That's why James called the tongue a fire. Its burns are every bit as destructive and disastrous as those of a blowtorch.

But I'm not telling you anything new. No doubt you've had your share of words that wound. You've felt the sting of a well-aimed jibe.

Maybe you're still feeling it. Someone you love or respect slams you to the floor with a slur or slip of the tongue, and there you lie, wounded and bleeding. Perhaps the words were intended to hurt you, perhaps not, but that doesn't matter.

The wound is deep, the injuries are internal, broken heart, wounded pride, bruised feelings. Or maybe your wound is old. Though the arrow was extracted long ago, the arrowhead is still lodged, hidden under your skin.

The old pain flares unpredictably and decisively, reminding you of harsh words yet unforgiven. If you've suffered or are suffering because of someone else's words, you'll be glad to know that there is a balm for this laceration. Meditate on these words from 1 Peter 2, 23.

When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate. When he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.

Did you see what Jesus did not do? He didn't retaliate. He didn't bite back. He didn't say, I'll get you, come on up here and say that to my face.

Just wait until after the resurrection, buddy. No, these statements were not found on Christ's lips. Did you see what Jesus did do? He entrusted himself to him who judges justly.

Or said more simply, he left the judging to God. He didn't take on the task of seeking revenge. He demanded no apology.

He hired no bounty hunters and sent out no posse. He, to the astounding contrary, spoke on their defense. Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.

Yes, the dialogue that Friday morning was bitter. The verbal stones were meant to sting. How Jesus, with a body racked with pain, eyes blinded by His own blood, and lungs yearning for air, could speak on behalf of some heartless thugs is beyond my comprehension.

Never, never have I seen such love. If ever a person deserved a shot at revenge, Jesus did, but He didn't take it. Instead, He died for them.

How could He do it? I don't know. But I do know that all of a sudden my wounds seem very painless. My grudges and hard feelings are suddenly childish.

Sometimes I wonder if we don't see Christ's love as much in the people He tolerated as in the pain He endured. Amazing grace! The only thing more outlandish than the request was that it was granted. Just trying to picture the scene is enough to short-circuit the most fanciful of imaginations.

A flat-nosed ex-con asking God's Son for eternal life, but trying to imagine the appeal being honored, well, that steps beyond the realm of reality and enters absurdity. But as absurd as it may appear, that's exactly what happened. He who deserved hell got heaven, and we're left with a puzzling brittle.

What, for goodness sake, was Jesus trying to teach us? What was He trying to prove by pardoning this strong arm who in all probability had never said grace, much less done anything to deserve it? Well, I've got a theory, but to explain it I've got to tell you a tale that you may not believe. It seems a couple of prowlers broke into a department store in a large city. They successfully entered the store, stayed long enough to do what they came to do, and escaped unnoticed.

What's unusual about the story is what these fellows did. They took nothing, absolutely nothing. No merchandise was stolen, no items were removed, but what they did do was ridiculous.

Instead of stealing anything, they changed the cost of everything. Price tags were swapped. Values were exchanged.

These clever pranksters took the tag off a \$395 camera and stuck it on a \$5 box of stationery. The \$5.95 sticker on a paperback book was removed and placed on an outboard motor. They repriced everything in the store.

Crazy? You bet. But the craziest part of his story took place the next morning. You're not going to believe this.

The store opened as usual. Employees went to work, customers began to shop. The place functioned as normal for four hours before anyone noticed what had happened.

Four hours! Some people got some great bargains, others got fleeced. For four solid hours no one noticed that all the values had been swapped. Hard to believe? It shouldn't be.

We see the same thing happening every day. We're deluged by a distorted value system. We see the most valuable things in our lives peddled for pennies, and we see the cheapest smut go for millions.

The examples are abundant and besetting. Here are a few that I've encountered in the last week. The salesman who defended his illegal practices by saying, let's not confuse business with ethics.

The military men who sold top secret information as well as their integrity for \$6,000. The cabinet member of a large nation who was caught illegally dealing in semi-precious stones. His cabinet position? Minister of Justice.

The father who confessed to the murder of his 12-year-old daughter. The reason he killed her? She refused to go to bed with him. Why do we do what we do? Why do we take blatantly black and white and painted gray? Why are priceless mores trashed while senseless standards are obeyed? What causes us to elevate the body and degrade the soul? What causes us to pamper the skin while we pollute the heart? Our values are messed up.

Someone broke into the store and exchanged all the price tags. Thrills are going for top dollar, and the value of human beings is at an all-time low. One doesn't have to be a philosopher to determine what caused such a sag in the market.

It all began when someone convinced us that the human race is headed nowhere. That man has no destiny. That we're in a cycle.

That there's no reason or rhyme to this absurd existence. Somewhere we got the idea that we're meaninglessly trapped on a puny mud heap that has no destination. The earth is just a spinning mausoleum, and the universe is purposeless.

The creation was incidental, and humanity has no direction. Pretty gloomy, huh? The second verse is even worse. If man has no destiny, then he has no duty, no obligation, no responsibility.

If man has no destiny, then he has no guidelines or goals. If man has no destiny, then who's to say what's right or wrong? Who's to say that a husband can't leave his wife and family? Who's to say you can't abort a fetus? What's wrong with shacking up? Who says I can't step on someone's neck to get to the top? It's your value system against mine. No absolutes, no principles, no ethics, no standards.

Life is reduced to weekends, paychecks, and quick thrills. The bottom line is disaster. The existentialist, writes existentialist John Paul Sartre, finds it extremely embarrassing that God does not exist, for there disappears with him all possibility of finding values in an intelligible heaven.

Everything is indeed permitted if God does not exist, and man is in consequence forlorn, for he cannot find anything to depend on within or without himself. If man has no destiny or duty, the next logical step is that man has no value. If man has no future, he isn't worth much.

He is worth, in fact, about as much as a tree or a rock, no difference. There's no reason to be here, therefore, there is no value. And you've seen the results of this.

Our system goes haywire, we feel useless and worthless. We freak out, we play games, we create false value systems. We say that you're valuable if you're pretty.

We say that you're valuable if you can produce. We say that you're valuable if you can slam dunk a basketball or snag a pop fly. You're valuable if your name has a doctor in front of it or a PhD on the end of it.

You're valuable if you have a six-figure salary and drive a foreign car. Value is now measured by two criteria, appearance and performance. Pretty tough system, isn't it? Where does that leave the retarded or the ugly or uneducated? Where does that place the aged or the handicapped? What hope does that offer the unborn child? Not much, not much at all.

We become nameless numbers on mislaid lists. Now, please understand, this is man's value system, it's not God's. His plan is much brighter.

God, with eyes twinkling, steps up to the philosopher's blackboard, erases the never-ending, ever-repeating circle of history and replaces it with a line, a hope-filled, promising, slender line. And looking over his shoulder to see if the class is watching, he draws an arrow on the end. In God's book, man is heading somewhere.

He has an amazing destiny. We're being prepared to walk down the church aisle and become the bride of Jesus. We're going to live with Him, share the throne with Him, reign with Him.

We count. We are valuable. And what's more, our worth is built in.

Our value is inborn. You see, if there was anything that Jesus wanted everyone to understand, it was this. A person is worth something simply because he is a person.

That's why he treated people like he did. Think about it. The girl caught making undercover thunder with someone she shouldn't.

He forgave her. The untouchable leper who asked for cleansing. He touched him.

And the blind welfare case that cluttered the roadside. He honored him. And the worn-out windbag addicted to self-pity near the pool of Siloam.

He healed him. And don't forget the classic study on the value of a person by Luke. It's called the tale of the crucified crook.

If anyone was ever worthless, this one was. If any man ever deserved dying, this man probably did. If any fellow was ever a loser, this fellow was at the top of the list.

Perhaps this is why Jesus chose him to show us what he thinks of the human race. Maybe this criminal had heard the Messiah speak. Maybe he'd seen him love the lowly.

Maybe he'd watched him dine with the punks, pickpockets, and pot mouths on the streets. Or maybe not. Maybe the only thing he knew about this Messiah was what he now saw.

A beaten, slashed, nail-suspended preacher. His face crimson with blood. His bones peeking through torn flesh.

His lungs gasping for air. Something, though, told him he had never been in better company. And somehow he realized that even though all he had was prayer, he had finally met the one to whom he should pray.

Any chance that you could put in a good word for me? Loose translation. Consider it done. Now, why did Jesus do that? What in the world did he have to gain by promising this desperado a place of honor at the banquet table? What in the world could this chiseling quisling ever offer in return? I mean, the Samaritan woman, I can understand.

She could go back and tell the tale. And Zacchaeus had some money that he could give. But this guy? What's he going to do? Nothing.

That's the point. Listen closely. Jesus' love does not depend on what we do for him.

Not at all. In the eyes of a king, you have value simply because you are. You don't have to look nice or perform well.

Your value is inborn. Period. Now, think about that for just a minute.

You're valuable just because you exist. Not because of what you do or what you've done, but simply because you are. Remember that.

Remember that the next time you're left bobbing in the wake of someone's steamboat ambition. Remember that the next time some trickster tries to hang a bargain basement price tag on your self-worth. The next time someone tries to pass you off as a cheap buy.

Just think about the way Jesus honors you and smile. I do. I smile because I know I don't deserve love like this.

None of us do. When you get right down to it, any contribution that any of us make is pretty puny. All of us, even the purest of us, deserve heaven about as much as that crook did.

All of us are signing on Jesus' credit card, not ours. And it also makes me smile to think that there is a grinning ex-con walking the golden streets who knows more about grace than a thousand theologians. No one else would have given him a prayer.

But in the end, that's all he had. And in the end, that's all it took. No wonder they call him the Savior.

The gospel is full of rhetorical challenges that test our faith and buck against human nature. It is more blessed to give than to receive. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it.

But whoever loses his life for me will save it. Only in his hometown and in his own house is a prophet without honor. But no statement is as confusing or frightening as the one in Matthew 19:29. And everyone who has left houses, or brothers, or sisters, or father, or mother, or children, or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.

The part about leaving land and fields I can understand. It's the other part that causes me to, well, to cringe. It's the part about leaving mom and dad, saying goodbye to brothers and sisters, placing a farewell kiss on a son or daughter.

It's easy to parallel discipleship with poverty or public disgrace, but leaving my family? Why do I have to be willing to leave those I love? Can sacrifice get any more sacrificial than that? Woman, behold your son. Mary is older now. The hair at her temples is gray.

Wrinkles have replaced her youthful skin. Her hands are calloused. She has raised a house full of children.

And now she beholds the crucifixion of her firstborn. One wonders what memories she conjures up as she witnesses his torture. A long ride to Bethlehem, perhaps.

A baby's bed made from cow's hay. Fugitives in Egypt. A home in Nazareth.

Panic in Jerusalem. I thought he was with you. Carpentry lessons, dinner table laughter.

And then the morning Jesus came in from the shop early, his eyes firmer, his voice more direct. He had heard the news. John is preaching in the desert.

Her son took off his nail apron, dusted off his hands, and with one last look said goodbye to his mother. They both knew it would never be the same again. In that last look they shared a secret, the full extent of which was too painful to say aloud.

Mary learned that day the heartache that comes from saying goodbye. From then on she was to love her son from a distance, on the edge of the crowd, outside of the packed house, on the shore of the sea. Maybe she was even there when the enigmatic promise was made, anyone who has left mother for my sake.

Mary wasn't the first one to be called to say goodbye to loved ones for sake of the kingdom. Joseph was called to be an orphan in Egypt. Jonah was called to be a foreigner in Nineveh.

Hannah sent her firstborn son away to serve in the temple. Daniel was sent from Jerusalem to Babylon. Nehemiah was sent from Susa to Jerusalem.

Abraham was sent to sacrifice his own son. Paul had to say goodbye to his heritage. The Bible is bound together with goodbye trails and stained with farewell tears.

In fact, it seems that goodbye is a word all too prevalent in the Christian's vocabulary. Missionaries know it well. Those who send them know it too.

The doctor who leaves the city to work in the jungle hospital has said it. So has the Bible translator who lives far from home. Those who feed the hungry, those who teach the lost, those who help the poor all know the word goodbye.

Airports, luggage, embraces, taillights, wave to grandma, tears, bus terminals, ship docks, goodbye daddy, tight throats, ticket counters, misty eyes, write me. Question. What kind of God would put people through such agony? What kind of God would give you families and then ask you to leave them? What kind of God would give you friends and then ask you to say goodbye? Answer.

A God who knows that the deepest love is built not on passion and romance but on a common mission and sacrifice. Answer. A God who knows that we are only pilgrims and that eternity is so close that any goodbye is in reality a see you tomorrow.

Answer. The God who did it Himself. Woman, behold your son.

John fastened his arm around Mary a little tighter. Jesus was asking him to be the son that a mother needs and that in some ways he never was. Jesus looked at Mary.

His ache was from a pain far greater than that of the nails and thorns. In their silent glance they again shared a secret and he said goodbye. For those of us who endured it, the summer of 1980 in Miami was nothing to smile about.

The Florida heat scorched the city during the day and baked it at night. Riots, lootings, and racial tension threatened to snap the frayed emotions of the people. Everything soared.

Unemployment, inflation, the crime rate, and especially the thermometer. Somewhere in the midst of it all, a Miami Herald reporter captured a story that left the entire Gold Coast breathless. It was the story of Judith Bucknell, attractive, young, successful, and dead.

Judith Bucknell was homicide number 106 that year. She was killed on a steamy June 9th evening, age 38, weight 109 pounds, stabbed seven times, strangled. She kept a diary.

Had she not kept this diary, perhaps the memory of her would have been buried with her body. But the diary exists, a painful epitaph to a lonely life. The correspondent made this comment about her writings.

In her diaries, Judy created a character and a voice. The character is herself, wistful, struggling, weary. The voice is yearning.

Judith Bucknell has failed to connect. Age 38, many lovers, much love offered. None returned.

Her struggles weren't unusual. She worried about getting old, getting fat, getting married, getting pregnant, and getting by. She lived in stylish Coconut Grove.

Coconut Grove is where you live if you're lonely but happy. Judy was the paragon of a confused human being. Half of her life was fantasy, half was nightmare.

Successful as a secretary but a loser at love, her diary was replete with entries such as the following. Where are the men with the flowers and champagne and music? Where are the men who call and ask for a genuine actual date? Where are the men who would like to share more than my bed, my booze, my food? I would like to have in my life, once before I pass through my life, the kind of sexual relationship which is part of a loving relationship. She never did.

Judy was not a prostitute. She was not on drugs or on welfare. She never went to jail.

She was not a social outcast. She was respectable. She jogged.

She hosted parties. She wore designer clothes and had an apartment that overlooked the bay. And she was very lonely.

I see people together and I'm so jealous I want to throw up. What about me? What about me? Though surrounded by people, she was on an island. Though she had many acquaintances, she had few friends.

Though she had many lovers, 59 in 56 months, she had little love. Who is going to love Judy Bucknell? The diary continues. I feel so old, unloved, unwanted, abandoned, used up.

I want to cry and sleep forever. The clear message came from her aching words. Though her body died on June 9th from the wounds of a knife, her heart had died long before from loneliness.

I am alone, she wrote, and I want to share something with somebody. Loneliness. It's a cry, a moan, a wail.

It's a gasp whose origin is the recesses of our souls. Can you hear it? The abandoned child. The divorcee.

The quiet home. The empty mailbox. The long days.

The longer nights. A one-night stand. A forgotten birthday.

A silent phone. Cries of loneliness. Listen again.

Tune out the traffic and turn down the TV. The cry is there. Our cities are full of Judy Bucknells.

You can hear their cries. You can hear them in the convalescent home among the sighs and the shuffling feet. You can hear them in the prisons among the moans of shame and the calls for mercy.

You can hear them if you walk the manicured streets of suburban America among the aborted ambitions and aging homecoming queens. Listen for it in the halls of our high schools where peer pressure weeds out the have-nots from the haves. This moan in a minor key knows all spectrums of society from the top to the bottom.

From the failures to the famous. From the poor to the rich. From the married to the single.

Judy Bucknell was not alone. Many of you have been spared this cruel cry. Oh, you've been homesick or upset a time or two, but despair? Far from it.

Suicide? Of course not. Be thankful that it hasn't knocked on your door. Pray that it never will.

If you have yet to fight this battle, you're welcome to read on if you wish. But I'm really writing to someone else. I'm writing to those who know this cry firsthand.

I'm writing to those of you whose days are bookended with broken hearts and long evenings. I'm writing to those of you who can find a lonely person simply by looking in the mirror. For you, loneliness is a way of life.

The sleepless nights, the lonely bed, the distrust, the fear of tomorrow, the unending hurt. When did it begin? In your childhood? At the divorce? At retirement? At the cemetery? When the kids left home? Maybe you, like Judy Bucknell, have fooled everyone. No one knows that you're lonely.

On the outside, you're packaged perfectly. Your smile is quick. Your job is stable.

Your clothes are sharp. Your waist is thin. Your calendar is full.

Your walk brisk. Your talk impressive. But when you look in the mirror, you fool no one.

When you're alone, the duplicity ceases and the pain surfaces. Or maybe you don't try to hide it. Maybe you've always been outside the circle looking in and everyone knows it.

Your conversation is a bit awkward. Your companionship is seldom requested. Your clothes are dull.

Your looks are common. Ziggy is your hero and Charlie Brown is your mentor. Am I striking a chord? If I am, if you've nodded or sighed in understanding, I have an important message for you.

The most gut-wrenching cry of loneliness in history came not from a prisoner or a widow or a patient. It came from a hill, from a cross, from a Messiah. My God, my God, he screamed.

Why did you abandon me? Never have words carried so much hurt. Never has one being been so lonely. The crowd quiets as the priest receives the goat, the pure, unspotted goat.

In somber ceremony, he places his hands on the young animal. As the people witness, the priest makes his proclamation. The sins of the people be upon you.

The innocent animal receives the sins of the Israelites. All the lusting, adultery, and cheating are transferred from the sinners to this goat, to this scapegoat. He is then carried to the edge of the wilderness and released, banished.

Sin must be purged, so the scapegoat is abandoned. Run, goat, run! The people are relieved. Yahweh is appeased.

The sin-bearer is alone. And now, on Skull's Hill, the sin-bearer is again alone. Every lie ever told, every object ever coveted, every promise ever broken is on his shoulders.

He is sin. God turns away. Run, goat, run! The despair is darker than the sky.

The two who have been one are now two. Jesus, who had been with God for eternity, is now alone. The Christ, who was an expression of God, is abandoned.

The Trinity is dismantled. The Godhead is disjointed. The unity is dissolved.

It's more than Jesus can take. He withstood the beatings and remained strong at the mock trials. He watched in silence as those he loved ran away.

He didn't retaliate when the insults were hurled, nor did he scream when the nails pierced his wrists, but when God turned His head, that was more than he could handle. My God! The whale rises from parched lips. The holy heart is broken.

The sin-bearer screams as he wanders in the eternal wasteland. Out of the silent sky come the words screamed by all who walk in the desert of loneliness. Why? Why did you abandon me? I can't understand it.

I honestly cannot. Why did Jesus do it? Oh, I know, I know. I've heard the official answers, to gratify the old law, to fulfill prophecy, and those answers are right.

They are. But there's something more here, something very compassionate, something yearning, something personal. What is it? I may be wrong, but I keep thinking of the diary.

I feel abandoned, she wrote. Who is going to love Judith Bucknell? And I keep thinking of the parents of the dead child, or the friend at the hospital bedside, or the elderly in the nursing home, or the orphans, or the cancer ward. I keep thinking of all the people who cast despairing eyes toward the dark heavens and cry, Why? And I imagine Him.

I imagine Him listening. I picture His eyes misting and a pierced hand brushing away a tear. And although He may offer no answer, although He may solve no dilemma, although the question may freeze painfully in midair, He who also was once alone.

Understands. Several years ago, Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel enchanted us all with the song of a poor boy who went to New York on a dream and fell victim to the harsh life of the city. Penniless, with only strangers as friends, he spent his days laying low, seeking out the poorer quarters where the ragged people go, looking for the places only they would know.

It's easy to picture this young lad, dirty face and worn clothes, looking for work and finding none. He trudges the sidewalks and battles the cold and dreams of going somewhere where the New York City winters aren't bleeding me, leading me home. He entertains thoughts of quitting, going home, giving up, something he never thought he would do.

But just when he picks up the towel to throw it into the ring, he encounters a boxer. Remember these words? In the clearing stands a boxer and a fighter by his trade, and he carries a reminder of every blow that laid him down or cut him till he cried out in his anger and his shame, I am leaving, I am leaving. But the fighter still remains.

The fighter still remains. There's something magnetic in that phrase. It rings with a trueness.

Those who can remain like the boxer are a rare breed. I don't necessarily mean win, I just mean remain, hang in there, finish, stick to it until it's done. But unfortunately very few of us do that.

Our human tendency is to quit too soon. Our human tendency is to stop before we cross the finish line. Our inability to finish what we start is seen in the smallest of things.

A partly mowed lawn, a half-read book, letters begun but never completed, an abandoned diet, a car up on blocks, or it shows up in life's most painful areas, an abandoned child, a cold faith, a job hopper, a wrecked marriage, an unevangelized world. Am I touching some painful sores? Any chance I'm addressing someone who's considering giving up? If I am, I want to encourage you to remain. I want to encourage you to remember Jesus' determination on the cross.

Jesus didn't quit. But don't think for one minute that He wasn't tempted to. Watch Him wince as He hears His apostles backbite and quarrel.

Look at Him weep as He sits at Lazarus' tomb, or hear Him wail as He claws the ground of Gethsemane. Did He ever want to quit? You bet. That's why His words are so splendid.

It is finished. Stop and listen. Can you imagine the cry from the cross? The sky is dark.

The other two victims are moaning. The jeering mouths are silent. Perhaps there's thunder.

Perhaps there's weeping. Perhaps--perhaps there's silence. Then Jesus draws in a deep breath, pushes His feet down on that Roman nail, and cries, It is finished.

What was finished? The history-long plan of redeeming man was finished. The message of God to man was finished. The works done by Jesus as a man on earth were finished.

The task of selecting and training ambassadors was finished. The job was finished. The song had been sung.

The blood had been poured. The sacrifice had been made. The sting of death had been removed.

It was over. A cry of defeat? Hardly. Had His hands not been fastened down, I dare say that a triumphant fist would have punched the dark sky.

No, this is no cry of despair. It is a cry of completion, a cry of victory, a cry of fulfillment. Yes, even a cry of relief.

The fighter remained, and thank God that he did. Thank God that he endured. Are you close to quitting? Please don't do it.

Are you discouraged as a parent? Hang in there. Are you weary with doing good? Do just a little more. Are you pessimistic about your job? Roll up your sleeves and go at it again.

No communication in your marriage? Give it one more shot. Can't resist temptation? Accept God's forgiveness and go one more round. Is your day framed with sorrow and disappointment? Are your tomorrows turning into nevers? Is hope a forgotten word? Remember, a finisher is not one with no wounds or weariness.

Quite to the contrary, he, like the boxer, is scarred and bloody. Mother Teresa is credited with saying, God didn't call us to be successful, just faithful. The fighter, like our Master, is pierced and full of pain.

He, like Paul, may even be bound and beaten, but he remains. The land of promise, says Jesus, awaits those who endure. It's not just for those who make the victory laps or drink champagne.

No, sir, the land of promise is for those who simply remain to the end. Let's endure. Listen to this chorus of verses designed to give us staying power.

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now therefore there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day, and not to me only, but also to all who have longed for His appearing. Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

Thank you, Paul Simon. Thank you, Apostle Paul. Thank you, Apostle James, but most of all thank you, Lord Jesus, for teaching us to remain, to endure, and, in the end, to finish.

I'm tired, he sighed. So he stopped. You go on and get the food, I'll rest right here.

He was tired, bone-tired. His feet were hurting, his face was hot, the noon sun was sizzling. He wanted to rest.

So he stopped at the well, waved on his disciples, stretched a bit, and sat down. But before he could close his eyes, here came a Samaritan woman. She was alone.

Maybe it was the bags under her eyes, or the way she stooped, that made him forget how weary he was. How strange that she should be here at midday. I'm sleepy, he stretched, he yawned.

It had been a long day. The crowd had been large, so large that preaching on the beach had proved to be an occupational hazard, so he had taught from the bow of a fishing boat. And now night had fallen, and Jesus was sleepy.

If you guys don't mind, I'm going to catch a few winks. So he did. On a cloud-covered night on the Sea of Galilee, God went to sleep.

Someone rustled him up a pillow, and he went to the boat's driest point and sacked out. So deep was his sleep, the thunder didn't wake him, nor did the tossing of the boat, nor did the salty spray of the storm-blown waves. Only the screams of some breathless disciples could penetrate his slumber.

I'm angry. He didn't have to say it, he could see it in his eyes. Face red, blood vessels bulging, fists clenched.

I ain't taking this no more. And what was a temple became a one-sided barroom brawl. What was a normal day on the market became a one-man riot.

And what was a smile on the face of the Son of God became a scowl. Get out of here! The only thing that flew higher than the tables were the doves flapping their way to freedom. And angry Messiah made his point.

Don't go making money off religion, or God will make hay of you. We're indebted to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John for choosing to include these tidbits of humanity. They didn't have to, you know, but they did, and at just the right times.

Just as His divinity is becoming unapproachable, just when His holiness is becoming untouchable, just when His perfection becomes inimitable, the phone rings and a voice whispers, He was human. Don't forget, He has flesh. Just at the right time we're reminded that the one to whom we pray knows our feelings.

He knows temptation. He's felt discouraged. He's been hungry and sleepy and tired.

He knows what we feel like when the alarm clock goes off. He knows what we feel like when our children want different things at the same time. He nods in understanding when we pray in anger.

He's touched when we tell Him there's more to do than can ever be done. He smiles when we confess our weariness. But we're most indebted to John for choosing to include verse 28 of chapter 19.

It reads simply, I'm thirsty. That's not the Christ that's thirsty. That's the carpenter.

And those are words of humanity in the midst of divinity. This phrase messes up your sermon outline. The other six statements are more in character.

They're cries we would expect, forgiving sinners, promising paradise, caring for His mother. Even the cry, My God, My God, why have you forsaken me? is one of power. But I thirst.

Just when we had it all figured out, just when the cross was all packaged and defined, just when the manuscript was finished, just when we had invented all of those nice, clean Asian words like sanctification, justification, propitiation, and purification, just when we put our big golden cross on our big golden steeple, He reminds us that the word became flesh. He wants us to remember that He, too, was human. He wants us to know that He, too, knew the drone of the humdrum and the weariness that comes with long days.

He wants us to remember that our trailblazer didn't wear bulletproof vests or rubber gloves or an impenetrable suit of armor. No, He pioneered our salvation through the world that you and I face daily. He is the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, and the Word of Life.

More than ever, He is the Morning Star, the Horn of Salvation, and the Prince of Peace. But there are some hours when we are restored by remembering that God became flesh and dwelt among us. Our Master knew what it meant to be a crucified carpenter who got thirsty.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. That's what it says. God created the heavens and the earth.

It doesn't say God made the heavens and the earth, nor does it say that He Xeroxed the heavens and the earth, or built or developed or mass-produced. No, the word is created, and that one word says a lot. Creating is something far different than constructing.

The difference is pretty obvious. Constructing something engages only the hands, while creating something engages the heart and the soul. You've probably noticed this in your own life.

Think about something you've created. A painting, perhaps, or a song, those lines of poetry you'd never show to anyone, or even the doghouse in the backyard. How do you feel toward that creation? Good? I hope so.

Proud? Even protective? You should. Part of you lives in that project. When you create something, you're putting yourself into it.

It's far greater than an ordinary assignment or task. It's an expression of you. Now, imagine God's creativity.

Of all we don't know about the creation, there is one thing we do know. He did it with a smile. He must have had a blast painting the stripes on the zebra, hanging the stars in the sky, putting the gold in the sunset.

What creativity! Stretching the neck of the giraffe, putting the flutter in the mockingbird's wings, planting the giggle in the hyena. What a time he had! Like a whistling carpenter in his workshop, he loved every bit of it. He poured himself into the work.

So intent was his creativity that he took a day off at the end of the week just to rest. And then, as a finale to a brilliant performance, he made man. With his typical creative flair, he began with a useless mound of dirt and ended up with an invaluable species called a human.

A human who had the unique honor to bear the stamp in his image. At this point in the story, one would be tempted to jump and clap, Bravo! Encore! Unmatchable! Beautiful! But the applause would be premature. The divine artist has yet to unveil his greatest creation.

As the story unfolds, a devil of a snake feeds man a line and an apple, and gullible Adam swallows them both. This one act of rebellion sets in motion a dramatic and erratic courtship between God and man. Though the characters and scenes change, the scenario repeats itself endlessly.

God, still the compassionate Creator, woos his creation. Man, the creation, alternately reaches out in repentance and runs in rebellion. It's within this simple script that God's creativity flourishes.

If you thought he was imaginative with the sea and the stars, just wait until you read what he does to get his creation to listen to him. For example, a ninety-year-old woman gets pregnant. A woman turns to salt.

A flood blankets the earth. A bush burns, but it doesn't burn up. The Red Sea splits in two.

The walls of Jericho fall. The sky rains fire. A donkey speaks.

Talk about special effects! But these acts, be they ever ingenious, still couldn't compare with what was to come. Nearing the climax of the story, God, motivated by love and directed by divinity, surprised everyone. He became a man.

In an untouchable mystery, he disguised himself as a carpenter and lived in a dusty Judean village. Determined to prove his love for his creation, he walked incognito through his own world. His calloused hands touched wounds, and his compassionate words touched hearts.

He became one of us. Have you ever seen such determination? Have you ever witnessed such a desire to communicate? If one thing didn't work, he'd try another. If one approach failed, he'd try a new one.

His mind never stopped. In the past, God spoke at many times and in various ways, writes the author of Hebrews. But in these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son.

But as beautiful as this act of incarnation was, it was not the zenith. Like a master painter, God reserved his masterpiece until the end. All the earlier acts of love had been leading to this one.

The angels hushed, and the heavens paused to witness the finale. God unveils the canvas, and the ultimate act of creative compassion is revealed. God on a cross, the Creator being sacrificed for the creation, God convincing man once and for all that forgiveness still follows failure.

I wonder if, while on the cross, the Creator allowed his thoughts to wander back to the beginning. One wonders if he allowed the myriad of faces and acts to parade in his memory. Did he reminisce about the creation of the sky and sea? Did he relive the conversations with Abraham and Moses? Did he remember the plagues and the promises, the wilderness and the wanderings? We don't know.

We do know, however, what he said. IT IS FINISHED The mission was finished. All that the master painter needed to do was done, and was done in splendor.

His creation could now come home. IT IS FINISHED, he cried. And the great Creator went home.

He's not resting, though. Word has it that his tireless hands are preparing a city so glorious that even the angels get goosebumps upon seeing it. Considering what he's done so far, that's one creation I plan to see.

Were it a war, this would be the aftermath. Were it a symphony, this would be the second between the final note and the first applause. Were it a journey, this would be the sight of home.

Were it a storm, this would be the sun piercing the clouds. But it wasn't. It was a Messiah, and this was a sigh of joy.

FATHER The voice is hoarse. The voice that called forth the dead, the voice that taught the willing, the voice that screamed at God now says, FATHER FATHER The two are one again. The abandoned is now found.

The schism is now bridged. FATHER He smiles weakly. It's over.

Satan's vultures have been scattered. Hell's demons have been jailed. Death has been damned.

The sun is out. The sun is out. It's over.

An angel sighs. A star wipes away a tear. TAKE ME HOME Yes, take him home.

Take this prince to his king. Take this son to his father. Take this pilgrim to his home.

He deserves a rest. TAKE ME HOME Come, ten thousand angels. Come and take this wounded troubadour to the cradle of his father's arms.

Farewell, manger's infant. Bless you, holy ambassador. Go home, death slayer.

Rest well, sweet soldier. The battle is over. It's Friday morning.

The news is blazing across the Jerusalem streets like a West Texas brushfire. The Nazarene is being executed. From Solomon's Porch to the Golden Gate, people are passing the word.

Have you heard? They've got the Galilean. I knew he would go too far. They've got him? I don't believe it.

They say one of his own men turned him in. Nicodemus is about to go A-W-O-L. Graves are about to pop open.

An earthquake is about to shake the city. The temple curtains are about to be torn in two. Shock, bewilderment, confusion.

A few weep. A few smile. A few walk up the hill to watch the spectacle.

A few are irritated that the sanctity of the Passover is being violated by a bunch of social activists. Someone wonders aloud if this was the same man who was celebrated just a few days ago on a carpet of palm leaves. A lot can happen in seven days, he comments.

A lot can happen in just one day. Just ask Mary. Who could have convinced this mother yesterday that today would find her a few feet from the torn body of her son? And who could have convinced John on Thursday that he was twenty-four hours away from anointing the corpse of his hero? And Pilate? Who

could have convinced Pilate that he was about to pass judgment on the Son of God? A lot can happen in twenty-four hours.

Peter can tell you. If you had told this proud, devoted disciple yesterday that this morning would find him in the pit of guilt and shame, he would have proclaimed his loyalty. Or the other ten apostles can tell you.

For them, the same twenty-four hours brought both boasting and betrayal. And Judas? Pitiful Judas! Yesterday he was determined and defiant, this morning he is dead at his own belt. His dangling body eclipses the morning sun.

No one has been left untouched. No one. The immensity of the Nazarene's execution makes it impossible to ignore.

See the women arguing on the street corner? Lay odds that the subject is the Nazarene. Those two women at the market? They are giving their opinion on the self-proclaimed Messiah. The countless pilgrims who are entering Jerusalem for the Passover? They'll go home with a spellbinding story of the teacher who was raised from the dead.

Everybody has an opinion. Everyone is choosing a side. You can't be neutral on an issue like this one.

Apathy? Not this time. It's one side or the other. All have to choose.

And choose they did. For every cunning Caiaphas there was a daring Nicodemus. For every cynical Herod there was a questioning Pilate.

For every pot-mouthed thief there was a truth-seeking one. For every turncoat Judas there was a faithful John. There was something about the crucifixion that made every witness either step toward it or away from it.

It simultaneously compelled and repelled. Two thousand years later, the same is true. It's the watershed.

It's the continental divide. It's Normandy. And you're either on one side or the other.

A choice is demanded. We can do what we want with the cross. We can examine its history.

We can study its theology. We can reflect upon its prophecies. Yet the one thing we can't do is walk away in neutral.

No fence-sitting is permitted. The cross, in its absurd splendor, doesn't allow that. That's one luxury that God, in His awful mercy, doesn't permit.

On which side are you? Two types of people were touched by the cross. Those touched by choice and those touched by chance. Among the latter, some intriguing tales are still told.

Take Malchus, for example. As a servant of the high priest, he was only doing his job at the garden. Yet this routine raid would have been his last if he had not been quick to duck.

The torches gave just enough light for him to see the flash of the sword, and whoosh! Malchus leans back enough to save his neck, but not his ear. Peter gets a rebuke and Malchus gets a healing touch, and the event is history. History, that is, to everyone but Malchus.

Had it not been for the tell-tale bloodstain on his cloak, he might have awakened the next morning talking about a crazy dream he'd had. Some believe that Malchus was later numbered among the believers at Jerusalem. We don't know for sure, but we can be sure of one thing.

From that night on, whenever Malchus would hear people talk about the carpenter who rose from the dead, he wouldn't scoff. No, he'd tuck at his earlobe and know that it was possible. It happened too fast.

One minute Barabbas was in his cell on death row playing tic-tac-toe on the dirt walls, and the next he was outside squinting his eyes at the bright sun. You're free to go. Barabbas scratches his beard.

What? You're free. They took the Nazarene instead of you. Barabbas has often been compared to humanity, and rightly so.

In many ways he stands for us, a prisoner who was freed because someone he had never seen took his place. But I think Barabbas was probably smarter than we are in one respect. As far as we know, he took his sudden freedom for what it was, an undeserved gift.

Someone tossed him a life preserver and he grabbed it, no questions asked. You couldn't imagine him pulling some of our stunts. We take our free gift and try to earn it or diagnose it or pay for it instead of simply saying thank you and accepting it.

Ironic as it may appear, one of the hardest things to do is to be saved by grace. There's something in us that reacts to God's free gift. We have some weird compulsion to create laws, systems, and regulations that will make us worthy of our gift.

Why do we do that? The only reason I can figure is pride. To accept grace means to accept its necessity, and most folks don't like to do that. To accept grace also means that one realizes his despair, and most people aren't too keen on doing that either.

Barabbas, though, knew better. Hopelessly stranded on death row, he wasn't about to balk at a granted stay of execution. Maybe he didn't understand mercy and surely he didn't deserve it, but he wasn't about to refuse it.

We might do well to realize that our plight isn't too different than that of Barabbas's. We too are prisoners with no chance for repeal, but why some prefer to stay in prison while the cell door has been unlocked is a mystery worth pondering. If it's true that a picture paints a thousand words, then there was a Roman centurion who got a dictionary full.

All he did was see Jesus suffer. He never heard Him preach or saw Him heal or followed Him through the crowds. He never witnessed Him still the wind.

He only witnessed the way He died. But that was all it took to cause this weather-worn soldier to take a giant step in faith. Surely this was a righteous man.

That says a lot, doesn't it? It says the rubber of faith meets the road of reality under hardship. It says the trueness of one's belief is revealed in pain. Genuineness and character are unveiled in misfortune.

Faith is at its best. Not in three-piece suits on Sunday mornings or at VBS on summer days, but at hospital bedsides, cancer wards, and cemeteries. Maybe that's what moved this old crusty soldier.

Serenity and suffering is a stirring testimony. Anybody can preach a sermon on a mount surrounded by daisies, but only one with a gut full of faith can live a sermon on a mountain of pain. There's something striking in the simple fact that the disciples got together again.

I mean, they had to have been embarrassed. As they sat gawking at each other that Sunday, they must have felt a bit foolish. Only two nights earlier the kitchen had gotten hot, and they'd taken off.

It was as if someone threw a pan of scalding water on a bunch of cats. Pam! Off they scampered. They didn't stop until they had ducked into every available hole in Jerusalem.

Have you ever wondered what the disciples did that weekend? I have. I've wondered if any walked the streets or thought of going home. I've wondered what they said when people asked them what happened.

Well, you see, I've wondered if they stayed in pairs or small groups or alone. I've wondered what they thought, what they felt. Well, we had to run.

They would have killed us all. I don't understand what happened. I let him down.

He should have warned us. I've wondered where they were when the sky turned black. I've wondered were they near the temple when the curtain ripped, or near the cemetery when the graves opened? I've wondered if any of them even dared to sneak back up to the hillside and stand at the edge of the crowd and stare at the three silhouettes on the hill.

No one knows. Those hours are left to speculation. Any guilt, any fear, any doubts are all unrecorded.

But we do know one thing. They came back, slowly, one by one. They came back, Matthew, Nathaniel, Andrew.

They came out of hiding, out of the shadows, James, Peter, Thaddeus. Perhaps some were already on their way home, back to Galilee, but they turned around and came back. Perhaps others had given up in disgust, but they changed their minds.

Maybe others were flooded with shame, but still they returned. One by one they appeared at that same upper room. They must have been relieved to see others already there.

From all sections of the city they appeared, too convicted to go home, yet too confused to go on, each with a desperate hope that it had all been a nightmare or a cruel joke, each hoping to find some kind of solace in numbers. They came back. Something in their nature refused to let them give up.

Something in those words spoken by the Master pulled them back together. It certainly was an awkward position in which to be, caught on that uneven ground between failure and forgiveness, suspended somewhere between, I can't believe I did it and I'll never do it again. Too ashamed to ask for forgiveness, yet too loyal to give up, too guilty to be counted in, but too faithful to be counted out.

I guess we've all been there. I dare say that all of us have witnessed our sandcastle promises, swept away by the pouncing waves of panic and insecurity. I imagine that all of us have seen our words of promise and obedience ripped into ribbons by the chainsaw of fear and fright.

And I haven't met a person yet who hasn't done the very thing he swore he would never do. We've all walked the streets of Jerusalem. Why did the disciples come back? What made them return? Rumors of

the resurrection? That had to be part of it.

Those who walked next to Jesus had learned to expect Him to do the unusual. They had seen Him forgive a woman who had five husbands, honor a pint-sized thief disguised as a tax collector, and love a streetwalker whose reputation would have brought blushes to the faces of Bonnie and Clyde. They'd seen Him scare the devil out of some demoniacs and put the fear of God in some churchgoers.

Traditions had tumbled. Lepers had leaped. Sinners had sung.

Pharisees had fumed. Multitudes had been moved. You just don't pack up the bags and go home after three years like that.

Maybe He really had risen from the dead. But it was more than just rumors of an empty tomb that brought them back. There was something in their hearts that wouldn't let them live with their betrayal.

For as responsible as their excuses were, they weren't good enough to erase the bottom line of the story. They had betrayed their Master. When Jesus needed them, they had scampered, and now they were having to deal with the shame.

Seeking forgiveness but not knowing where to look for it, they came back. They gravitated to that same upper room that contained the sweet memories of broken bread and symbolic wine. The simple fact that they returned says something about their leader.

It says something about Jesus that those who knew Him best could not stand to be in His disfavor. For the original twelve, there were only two options--surrender or suicide. Yet it also says something about Jesus that those who knew Him best knew that although they had done exactly what they had promised they wouldn't, they could still find forgiveness.

So they came back, each with a scrapbook full of memories and a thin thread of hope, each knowing that it is all over, but in his heart hoping that the impossible will happen once more, if I had just one more chance. There they sat. What little conversation there is focuses on the rumors of an empty tomb.

Someone sighs, someone locks the door, someone shuffles his feet. And just when the gloom gets good and thick, just when their wishful thinking is falling victim to logic, just when someone says, how I'd give my immortal soul to see Him one more time, a familiar face walks through the wall. My, what an ending! Or better said, what a beginning! Don't miss the promise unveiled in this story.

For those of us who, like the apostles, have turned and run when we should have stood and fought, this passage is pregnant with hope. A repentant heart is all he demands. Come out of the shadows.

Be done with your hiding. A repentant heart is enough to summon the Son of God Himself to walk through our walls of guilt and shame. He who forgave his followers stands ready to forgive the rest of us.

All we have to do is come back. No wonder they call Him the Savior. I've always perceived John as a fellow who viewed life simply.

Right is right and wrong is wrong, and things aren't nearly as complicated as we make them out to be. For example, defining Jesus would be a challenge to the best of writers, but John handles the task with casual analogy. The Messiah, in a word, was the Word, a walking message, a love letter.

Be He a fiery verb or a tender adjective, He was, quite simply, a Word. And life, well, life is divided into two sections, light and darkness. If you're in one, you're not in the other, and vice versa.

Next question. The devil is the father of lies, and the Messiah is the father of truth. God is love, and you're in His corner if you love, too.

In fact, most problems are solved by loving one another. And sometimes, when the theology gets a bit thick, John pauses just long enough to offer a word of explanation. Because of this patient storytelling, we have the classic commentary, God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son.

But I like John most for the way he loved Jesus. His relationship with Jesus was, again, rather simple. To John, Jesus was a good friend with a good heart and a good idea.

One gets the impression that to John, Jesus was, above all, a loyal companion. Messiah? Oh, yes. Son of God? Indeed.

Miracle worker? Well, that, too. But more than anything, Jesus was a pal, someone you could go camping with or bowling with or count the stars with. Simple.

To John, Jesus wasn't a treatise on social activism, nor was He a license for blowing up abortion clinics or living in a desert. Jesus was a friend. Now, what do you do with a friend? That's rather simple, too.

You stick by him. And maybe that's why John is the only one of the twelve who was at the cross. He came to say goodbye.

By his own admission, he hadn't quite put the pieces together yet, but that didn't really matter. As far as he was concerned, his closest friend was in trouble, and he came to help. Can you take care of my mother? Of course.

That's what friends are for. John teaches us that the strongest relationship with Christ may not necessarily be a complicated one. He teaches us that the greatest webs of loyalty are spun not with airtight theologies or foolproof philosophies, but with friendships, stubborn, selfless, joyful friendships.

We're left feeling that if we could have been in anyone's sandals that day, we would have been in young John's and would have been the one to offer a smile of loyalty. To this, dear Lord. While Jesus was climbing up the hill of Calvary, Judas was climbing another hill, the hill of regret.

He walked it alone. Its trail was rock-strewn with shame and hurt. Its landscape was as barren as his soul.

Thorns of remorse tore at his ankles and calves. The lips that had kissed a king were cracked with grief, and on his shoulders he bore a burden that bowed his back, his own failure. Why Judas betrayed his master is really not important.

Whether motivated by anger or greed, the end result was the same--regret. So up the hill we trudge, weary, wounded hearts wrestling with unresolved mistakes. Sighs of anxiety, tears of frustration, words of rationalization, moans of doubt.

For some, the pain is on the surface. For others, the hurt is submerged, buried in a rarely touched substrata of bad memories. Parents, lovers, professionals, some trying to forget, others trying to remember, all trying to cope.

We walk silently and single-file with leg-irons of guilt. Paul was the man who posed the question that's on all of our lips. Who will rescue me from the body of this death? At the trail's end there are two trees.

One is weathered and leafless. It's dead, but still sturdy. Its bark is gone, leaving smooth wood bleached white by the years.

Twigs and buds no longer sprout, only bare branches fork from the trunk. On the strongest of these branches is tied a hangman's noose. It was here that Judas dealt with his failure.

If only Judas had looked at the adjacent tree. It's also dead, its wood is also smooth, but there's no noose tied to its crossbeam. No more death on this tree.

Once was enough. One death for all. Those of us who have also betrayed Jesus know better than to be too hard on Judas for choosing the tree he did.

To think that Jesus would really unburden our shoulders and unshackle our legs after all we've done to him. It's not easy to believe. In fact, it takes just as much faith to believe that Jesus can look past my betrayals as it does to believe that he rose from the dead.

Both are just as miraculous. What a pair, these two trees. Only a few feet from the tree of despair stands the tree of hope.

Life so paradoxically close to death. Goodness within arm's reach of darkness. A hangman's noose and a life preserver swinging in the same shadow.

But here they stand. One can't help but be a bit stunned by the inconceivability of it all. Why does Jesus stand on life's most barren hill and await me without stretched, nail-pierced hands? A crazy holy grace, it's been called.

A type of grace that doesn't hold up to logic. But then I guess grace doesn't have to be logical. If it did, it wouldn't be grace.

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