

*They came to a place called Golgotha (which means The Place of the Skull). Matthew 27:33*

### **The Place of the Skull**

This year during Lent, we've focused on gardens. Again and again, we've pictured Jesus in a garden. Some of them were real gardens, like the Garden of Gethsemane or the Garden of Eden. Some of them were metaphors. But we've stuck to that metaphor because a garden is a place that appeals to us. Today, we leave the gardens behind. We're going to a place that has no peace or beauty about it, a place that was so grim and ugly that the people who lived in Jerusalem called it Calvary or Golgotha, both of which mean, **the place of the skull**. Now, no one knows for sure why it was called that because no one knows for sure where it was. Since ancient times, there have been attempts to identify it, but scholars disagree. But the two leading theories for the name are that it was a hill shaped like a skull or that it was a place where so many crucifixions took place that the name just fit.

#### **I.**

I kind of like the second theory, although I can't prove it. It seems logical that there would've been a place where executions took place, especially given Jewish laws about contact with dead bodies and uncleanness. Certainly, the soldiers must've known where they were going as they marched Jesus out to crucify him. It was a logistical nightmare to kill prisoners like that. It often took days. You needed lumber and nails and ropes. You had to guard the prisoners round the clock and provide for your guards basic needs while it was going on and control the inevitable crowds. So, whatever the shape of the hill might've been, it seems quite likely that Jesus wasn't the first or the last person to die there. **The place of the skull was a place of death.**

In that sense, we could probably call any place on earth Golgotha, because death hangs over all of this life. You might disagree with that. You might say that cemeteries are places of death, hospital emergency rooms are places of death, nursing homes are places of death, but most places aren't. It's probably true that no one has ever died in most of our homes or in most of our places of work or shopping or recreation. Yet, every person around us is dying, wherever they are. If you're a senior citizen, you probably know that better than the rest of us. You go to too many funerals for family and friends. So many important people in your life are gone.

But you're not alone. Even though the child mortality rate in America today is a fraction of what it once was, children still die. You don't have to walk very far in a cemetery to find their grave stones. Teenagers die, too. A girl I went to high school with died of cancer the summer after we graduated. I've seen many high school yearbooks with a page remembering some classmate who died in a car accident or through some other tragedy. Young adults die. Middle aged people die. People who have so much to live for don't always have the chance to see their opportunities and the potential joys of their lives played out.

We are all going to die. That is an inevitable reality of life. In our society, we try to sanitize that truth by talking about death with dignity. We try to make our cemeteries beautiful gardens and we even give them names like Glen Eden. We tell ourselves over and over again that death is the natural end of life. But that simply is not true. Sure, it's true that all people die. But it's not what God planned when he made us and God does not want that to be our final destiny.

Death is an unnatural intrusion into the life that God has given us. That's why it's so shocking. Even when we know that a death is coming and that it will be a blessing for our loved one to die, it still hurts. There are still tears at the funeral. I remember when my grandmother died. She had spent years in a hospital bed in her home, cared for by my aunt, but lost to us in a fog of dementia. When I spoke to my aunt about it, she said, "This is what we've been praying for." So I was surprised the next day at the funeral that even my father wept. In fact, it's the only time I can remember my father crying. The tears, even when death is a blessing, show that we don't take naturally to death, any more than we take naturally to sickness or pain or loss.

That really does follow from the way that God made us. In the Garden of Eden, he planted the Tree of Life to give eternal life to all mankind. If we had lived there, we would never lose anyone. Our relationships would only grow. Our families would get bigger and our lives would get richer forever. But we didn't stay in that garden. God cast us out when sin entered our hearts. He placed an angel with a flaming sword at the entrance of the garden to keep Adam and Eve from eating from the Tree of Life and living forever in their sinful

state. Death means that we are broken. Death rips apart relationships that were designed to last forever. Death destroys and hurts, because it just isn't supposed to happen.

And death shows that we are not OK with God. Several times over the years, I've been asked to minister to someone who was not a member of my congregation as they were dying. Of course, I always do what I can. I always share the gospel with that person and promise them Christ's forgiveness and eternal life. If that person makes a good confession of faith, even if they weren't my member, if I'm asked, I usually conduct the funeral service. But that hasn't always gone well because the lesson of death is that you and I are sinners. Every person who ever died (except for Jesus) is a sinner. I usually make a statement along those lines when I preach a funeral sermon. Sometimes, when I've said that this person was a sinner, I've seen people at the service start with surprise. And occasionally, I've gotten some negative feedback for saying it.

But that is God's testimony. St. Paul says that the wages of sin is death. Death is a part of God's judgment for sin. But it's only the first part. The next part is even worse. God sends all sinners to hell. The fact that every human being dies should warn us about just how real and how terrible that judgment is. If we were perfect, we would never die. The fact that even we Christians die, shows that we are sinners. Now, someone might point out that Jesus died, and he wasn't a sinner. I would say, "That's exactly the point!" Jesus took our place in death. He died because that's what we sinners deserve. In fact, his death is the heart of his work and the heart of the message he came to proclaim. St. Paul says that we preach Christ crucified. We preach the death of Christ because we must preach the truth of what death is and what it means. It is the inevitable result of sin in this world. It is the inevitable price we all have to pay.

## II.

Or would have to pay, if it weren't for Jesus. He went to the place of the skull to keep us from paying that price. Jesus was truly perfect. He didn't deserve to die. He could've lived forever. But he did die in our place. He died to set us free. Of course, that happened at Golgotha. **The place of the skull became the place of life.**

The miracle of the cross is the miracle of substitution. Many other great miracles took place on the first Good Friday. One is the way that God directed all of the events of the story so that they ended there. The leaders of the Jews did not want to kill Jesus on the morning after the Passover meal. They wanted to wait until the crowds went home and they could get rid of Jesus quietly. But God made it happen on that day, just as God directed and controlled the history of Israel for two thousand years to bring Jesus to that cross. It was a miracle. The earthquake, the rising of the dead, the temple curtain being torn in two were all miracles. And it was a miracle that the man on that cross was truly perfect. He was more than just a man. He was the true Son of God. By the power of the Holy Spirit, he entered the womb of the Virgin Mary and became a part of our world. God did a miracle that was like putting the Pacific Ocean into a drinking glass. The infinite, almighty, all holy God was poured into the single cell of a human fetus. So God was born. God grew. God obeyed all of God's laws. And God suffered and died and paid.

That was a tremendous miracle. Perhaps the only miracle that could equal that one was the fact that God the Father sent his Son to take our place on that cross. God the Father let his Son be perfect for us. And he counted it for us. God the Father let his Son be punished with death and hell for us and he called that justice. God the Father raised his Son and declared that since he has paid our debt, we have no sin left, no guilt to pay for, no punishment to suffer. That's all very good news. But only a miracle of God could make it true.

Sometimes, I explain that miracle by comparing it to buying movie tickets. If you get to the ticket counter and you realize that you left your wallet at home and you have no cash and no credit cards, you're not getting in. But if I pay for your ticket, the person behind the counter doesn't care who paid. They just need to get the right amount of money. There is a sense in which we can say that God accepts Jesus' payment in our place. But the problem is that going to heaven isn't buying a ticket to the movie theater. The price of admission is perfection. The consequences of failing to be perfect are death and hell, because it's sin. God isn't a person behind a ticket counter who just needs to get the right price. He's a judge who must acquit the innocent and condemn the guilty. And Christ was innocent and we are guilty.

The miracle is that the love of God not only sent Christ to stand in our place, but the love of God allowed him to transfer all our sin to Jesus. It truly is like Jesus did all the things we are guilty of. His death and the hell he suffered on the cross, really do pay for what we are guilty of. The miracle that I will never be able to make clear to you or even to myself, is that God's love made his justice accept the death of Christ in our

place. So now when God looks at us, he sees our debt as paid. He sees us as holy and perfect and he invites us to enter heaven as our right.

Jesus died and he set us free. In the process, he changed what death means for us. It is still true that we die because we're sinners. But now, our death is the doorway to eternal life. When we die, we are set free from the pain and sorrow of this life. We go to live with Jesus and to wait for him to return and raise our bodies and purify our world. The place of the skull would've been a grim and horrible place to visit, and maybe that's why God has not preserved for us where it really was. Because today, Golgotha is a place of life. It's the place where Jesus stepped in and set us free. It truly is a place where we encounter the death defeating love of God. Amen.