

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
Good Friday – April 3, 2026
Luke 23:32-33, 39-43
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There were three men crucified that day. In the account we just heard from John's Gospel nothing is said about the two others crucified on either side of Jesus. But Luke offers us more. "Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.... One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding [Jesus] and saying, 'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!' But the other rebuked him, saying 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.' Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' He replied, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'"

One of the criminals joined the crowd in mocking and deriding Jesus. "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" This man, in his dying hours, held Jesus in contempt. He looked down on him. He must have thought, what sort of savior would so desperately need to be saved himself, bound to a cross to die? But, if there was any chance that Jesus was the Messiah, this criminal put in a last request: "Save yourself and us!" He didn't think Jesus was who he really was, but on the off chance, no harm in asking Jesus to get him off that cross. A man thinking of himself to the end.

The other criminal rebuked him with one truth he knew for certain: "Do you not fear God? ... we indeed have been condemned justly, ... but this man has done nothing wrong." This man, in his dying hours, told the truth: he and the other criminal had broken the law and were being punished for their crimes; Jesus was innocent. This criminal looked up to Jesus as a good man, and perhaps he realized that this good man might, after all, be the Messiah, the king of the Jews. "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He had faith that Jesus would "come into his kingdom." He believed in the goodness of the man dying next to him. He asked to be remembered. Not saved from the horrible death on the cross,

only remembered. And Jesus replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” In Jewish belief, Paradise was the place of the righteous dead before the final resurrection of the dead. This criminal’s faith in Jesus restored his connection with God. How often did Jesus tell those whom he healed, “Your faith has made you whole?”

God has given us free will to make moral choices, choices for God’s ways or against God’s ways, for light or for darkness, for good or for evil, for the truth or for lies. Jesus said, “This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light” (John 3:19). Here at the place that is called The Skull we see the truth of Jesus’ words. He is the light that came into the world. God’s light. In his light we see the judgment of the two criminals.

Jesus had nothing to say to the first criminal who spoke to him with contempt and derision. The man had no fear of God, no respect for God. His attitude was clearly not one of humility before God his Creator and Judge. There was no time left for Jesus to teach him to be in right relationship with God. In those last minutes of his life, Jesus turned away from this man and turned toward the other man. He listened to this criminal’s request to be remembered by Jesus. Not saved from death, but simply remembered by the man he believed would “come into his kingdom.” Yes, this criminal wanted something for himself – of course, we all want the blessings that God may grant us – but there is humility in his request because he admitted his guilt and looked up to Jesus, an innocent man who did not deserve death on the cross.

Today for a few minutes, we look on what the darkness can do to the light, what evil can do to the good, what lies can do to the truth. Truly Jesus had done nothing wrong, yet he was cruelly mocked and killed. Today our hearts go out to the innocent one, the Holy One of God, hanging on a cross. In the light of Christ we see the darkness of human sin in this world, then and now.

But I think we need not despair but find hope in the encounter between Jesus and the second criminal. We have all sinned. We have all turned away from God and God’s ways. But if we confess our guilt and turn to Jesus with a humble spirit, we have faith that our connection with God will be restored. The Holy One of God is full of compassion and mercy, and by his Cross we are healed. Amen.