

Easter Sunday
Matthew 28:1-10

Slide 1

Since Palm Sunday, we've looked at how all the events leading up to this point were orchestrated by the religious and political powers of the day, with a predetermined outcome, Jesus had to die.

For those who collaborated in the plan, and those who watched from afar, it seemed fairly straight forward. Jesus was guilty!

On that Good Friday so many years ago, Christ was declared guilty. Just as guilty as those who were found guilty and later exonerated by the Innocence Project.

He had fought the good fight, but he had lost. In the eyes of the world, in the eyes of His followers and in the eyes of His enemies, Jesus Christ, the carpenter from Nazareth, had been proven guilty.

Everything He said about being God, everything He said about His Kingdom, everything He said about His power had been shown to be a lie because Jesus was declared guilty. Guilty of claiming that he was God, when apparently, He wasn't.

If Jesus had lived, it would've been different, but He died and because He died everyone believed He was guilty.

Slide 2

The Jewish leaders testified to his guilt. It was Jesus who was marching out of step, not them. He was considered a liberal, trouble-making activist.

Think about it, things had been happening the same way in Israel for thousands of years. What right did this young upstart have to come in and try to change things?

He wasn't a Rabbi, He wasn't a Levite, He wasn't a scribe or a Pharisee. He was just a carpenter. He was a newcomer to Jerusalem, only thirty-three years old and He was wrong.

Why should they change? After all, the Sadducees were the lawmakers, not Jesus. He just didn't understand how things were done.

What right did He have to tell them, as He did in Matthew 22:29b, "*You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God.*"

Well, they had shown him, because they were right and He, on the other hand, was wrong. How dare He call them vipers, how dare He call them fools, how dare He call them hypocrites.

Who did He think he was? Then He had the gall to claim to be the equal to Jehovah God. In their eyes He was guilty.

Pilate testified to Jesus' guilt because he was every inch a politician. He saw trouble coming and he already had too much trouble in Jerusalem as it was since the Jews were on the brink of revolt.

Perhaps it was because he had put the images of Caesar on the flag standards in direct defiance of the Jewish law about graven images.

Maybe it was because he financed the municipal water supply with money he had seized from the temple treasury.

I mean Pilate had enough troubles; even with all the authority of the Roman Empire behind him, he still feared the trouble that the Jews could raise with his superiors

Pilate didn't need the additional problems associated with this young Nazarene carpenter, but then again there were his superstitions about this man who called Himself God.

So, what should he do, please the religious leaders or set Him free?

But then this young peasant had the nerve to stand in front of him and say in John 19:11, *"You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin."*

Well Pilate proved Him wrong. He allowed Him to be crucified, but it was okay, since Jesus was guilty.

Barabbas testified to Jesus' guilt. According to custom, each year at the Passover celebration the Roman Governor could set one prisoner free.

Pilate had asked the crowd, *"Should I release Jesus the Christ or Barabbas the murderer?"*

It would've been easy for Pilate to release Jesus if the crowd had asked him to, but no! The crowd yelled, *"Free Barabbas, crucify Jesus, free Barabbas, crucify Jesus,"* and so he did.

Barabbas was released and Jesus was declared guilty. So, who was this Barabbas? Well, his name was probably Bar Rabbis which in the Greek means Son of the Rabbi.

I'm sure some people are thinking, typical preacher's kid. Maybe his father was one of the leaders who called for the death of Jesus.

What we do know is that Barabbas was one of the Zealots, those who wanted to rid Israel of Rome. The Zealots didn't care what it took, murder, robbery or terrorism.

Now tradition tells us that Barabbas was not this man's first name. Remember Peter? Sometimes in the Gospels he's referred to as Simon Bar Jonah, or Simon the Son of Jonah.

Tradition has it that Barabbas had a name that he shared with a young carpenter from Nazareth. Tradition tells us that the Zealot's complete name was Jesus Bar Rabbis.

Two Jesus', one who preached love, and one who preached hate. One who preached peace and one who preached war. One who preached forgiveness and one who preached vengeance.

Two Jesus, as different as day and night. One walked away a free man and one died on a cross.

Slide 3

The Roman guards testified to Jesus' guilt. These men represented the power of Rome; they were impartial and interested only in doing their job.

They had probably been brought in from Caesarea Philippi to help keep the peace in Jerusalem during the Passover celebration.

They didn't know who Jesus was and, if they had of known, they wouldn't have cared.

If Pilate declared Jesus was a criminal and deserved to be crucified, then as far as they were concerned, he was a criminal and deserved to be crucified.

So, after they nailed Jesus to the cross, they split his clothing among themselves. Because as far as they were concerned Jesus was guilty.

His disciples testified to His guilt. Was there any reason now for all of them to die? Self-preservation is nothing to be trifled with. God Himself put that survival instinct in each one of us.

Think about it. If Jesus was wrong, then He must have been wrong all along. Maybe He really didn't know what He was talking about. Turn the other cheek; indeed, look where it had gotten Him.

The disciples were right when they chose to lay low for a while. What would they have accomplished by taking a stand? Why should they all have to die.

If Jesus had just showed them that He was innocent by calling down an army of angels, well that would've been a horse of a different color, but it was all in vain.

Jesus wasn't God and they were just fishermen. Because they hadn't stood up to defend the One they called Lord and friend, they were proclaiming for all to see that they thought Jesus was guilty.

Popular opinion testified to His guilt. On Palm Sunday the crowd sang hosanna and waved palm branches. At that time, if a Roman or a Jew had laid a hand on Jesus, there would've been a riot.

They were right about Jesus on Sunday, but then, on Friday, they shouted, "*Crucify Him, Crucify Him.*"

Just like today, how many people praise His name and sing Hosanna on Sunday but on Monday live for themselves and take His name in vain?

Popular opinion had proclaimed Christ a king. Now it was proclaiming Him a criminal. He was crucified, because popular opinion decided that Jesus was guilty.

Slide 4

Good Friday ended on a final note. Jesus was gone. Dead, buried and silenced forever.

For two days, everything Jesus had said, everything Jesus had taught, everything Jesus had done was gone and would be forgotten, because on Friday Jesus died.

Jesus clashed with all the selfish distorted values and morals of a fallen society, and He died because nobody can fight a monster that big and win.

He took on the sins of the world; the collective evil from creation onward and, from all outward appearances, He had failed. But you know what, that was the plan!

On Palm Sunday we looked at how the day Jesus rode triumphantly into Jerusalem had a dark side.

It was that day during the celebration that the Jewish leaders decided Jesus must die. They were afraid of what it would mean if the people were to embrace this radical young leader.

More importantly, they were afraid of what it would mean to their authority. For them there was only one solution, and they were willing to do whatever had to be done to make it happen.

For Judas it was the day he decided that things with Jesus weren't going the way he wanted them to go.

We'll never know for sure if Judas was looking for Jesus' death or if he was just trying to give Him a push to force his hand, but the results were the same. They led to the cross.

On Good Friday, a flawed arrest led to several flawed trials. Trials where rules and regulations were set aside to ensure the religious leaders' justice was served.

Their sacred laws were flaunted, ignored and broken for one end... so Jesus would be found guilty, guaranteeing that He would die. While the verdict on Friday was guilty, was that the reality?

If we go back to the story, we read in Matthew 27:3-4, *"When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. "I have sinned," he said, "for I have betrayed innocent blood." "What is that to us?" they replied. "That's your responsibility."*

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Judas testified to Jesus' innocence. Judas had spent three years with Jesus. He had seen the miracles. He had eaten the fish and loaves by shore of Galilee.

He heard Jesus preach on love, grace and forgiveness. Regardless of what Judas had done in the garden, he knew Jesus was innocent.

On Friday we discovered that while the religious leaders were the ones who demanded that Jesus must die, they didn't have the authority to have Him executed, so they turned to Rome.

Jesus was sent to the Roman governor, Pilate, for sentencing, and while the result was that Jesus was crucified, it was a flawed verdict delivered under pressure because Pilate wasn't really convinced of Jesus' guilt.

We read in Luke 23:13-14, *"Pilate called together the chief priests, the rulers and the people, and said to them, "You brought me this man as one who was inciting the people to rebellion. I have examined him in your presence and have found no basis for your charges against him."*

Pilate testified to His innocence. Pilate may have given in to the pressure of Caiaphas and his cohorts, but he knew in his heart that Jesus was innocent.

We read this little act of defiance in John 19:19-22, *“Pilate had a notice prepared and fastened to the cross. It read: Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews. Many of the Jews read this sign, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and the sign was written in Aramaic, Latin and Greek. The chief priests of the Jews protested to Pilate, “Do not write ‘The King of the Jews,’ but that this man claimed to be king of the Jews.” Pilate answered, “What I have written, I have written.”*

The place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and the sign was written in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek, so all could read it.

Then the leading priests objected and said to Pilate, *“Change it from ‘The King of the Jews’ to ‘He said, I am King of the Jews.’”* Pilate replied, *“No, what I have written, I have written.”*

But it wasn't just Pilate, you'll remember from the story of Good Friday that Pilate had sent Jesus to the puppet king Herod so he wouldn't have to deal with the religious leaders and their demands.

Herod examined Jesus and sent him back to Pilate with his findings. We read in Luke 23:15, Pilate said, *“Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us; as you can see, he has done nothing to deserve death.”*

So, Herod testified to His innocence. Herod, who had killed John the Baptist at the insistence of his wife, Herod whose father had had the infants of Bethlehem slaughtered in an attempt to kill the newborn Jesus.

Even Herod knew that Jesus had done nothing to deserve to die. But despite the fact that Pilate and Herod both knew Jesus was innocent of the charges, they allowed Him to be mocked, beaten and ultimately crucified.

Then, as Jesus hung on the cross between two thieves, we read this account.

Luke 23:39-41, "One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."

This thief testified to Jesus' innocence. Tradition has named this thief Dismas. Maybe Dismas had been in the crowd and heard Jesus preach, or maybe a loved one had been healed by Jesus.

We'll never know. We don't know what brought Dismas to his conclusion, but the one thing he was sure of was that Jesus was innocent and he wasn't.

One of the Roman's who executed Jesus testified to His innocence. I'm sure this man had seen plenty of people declare their innocence or the innocence of loved ones, but he had a job to do.

Though, at the end of the day, he realized that some of the blood he had shed had been innocent blood.

While Jesus' body was being removed from the cross, we see this closing scene in Luke 23:47, *"The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, "Surely this was a righteous man."*

So, the trial and death of Jesus was a travesty and a crime, and that's the biggest failing of capital punishment, it's so hard to undo.

But it really didn't matter if Jesus was guilty or innocent, at the end of the day on Friday His enemies had won because He was dead. They believed that they had been right, and Jesus had been wrong.

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However, the story doesn't end with the crucifixion, that was Friday, but this is Sunday. The miracle of Easter is that the empty tomb testified to His innocence.

On the third day, when Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to the tomb to prepare their master with the spices donated by Nicodemus, instead of finding Jesus, they found Angels.

But wait, if Jesus was guilty and dead why wasn't He still in the grave? If Jesus wasn't the Messiah He claimed to be, then where was He?

For two days the world proclaimed itself right. For two days they had declared that Jesus was guilty of falsely claiming to be God.

But on that third day, and for eternity, Jesus Christ was proclaimed to be innocent and proven to be God. Jesus was right and the rest of them were wrong.

If Jesus had remained in the ground He would've been just as wrong as Mohammed, Confucius or Buddha. If Jesus had remained dead, He would've remained just another misguided prophet who thought he was right.

But, because Jesus of Nazareth was right on Easter day, fifty days later on Pentecost those first 120 Christians were filled with the Holy Spirit and Christianity was proven right.

On Good Friday, Christianity heard the bells of Hell ring out the death toll of Jesus Christ and the movement He founded.

On Good Friday, Simon Peter cowered under the gaze of a little servant girl. On Good Friday, the believers were interested only in their own welfare; each Christian concerned with their own salvation.

But Christianity didn't lose because Jesus Christ didn't lose, and because Christianity didn't lose, good won't lose.

There are times that it looks like Christianity is beaten, but time and time again we struggle back to the surface and emerge victorious.

Our doctrine may fail us, our leaders may disappoint us, but Christianity will not be kept down.

As we look around at the evil in this old world sometimes it appears that Satan has the upper hand, sometimes it appears that Satan is victorious.

We see abortion, hunger, war and deceitfulness. We see illness, pain and suffering. We see scandals from inside and outside the church.

As the world looks on and chants; "*Jesus was guilty, Jesus lost,*" we have only to look beyond Friday, to Sunday when Jesus Christ rose triumphantly from the grave, throwing off the shackles of death and proclaiming Himself right for eternity.

Slide 7

Conclusion

Jesus was innocent. He was innocent on Palm Sunday. He was innocent on Good Friday and He was innocent on Easter Sunday. Why? Because He not only claimed to be God, He was God!

Because Jesus Christ didn't lose, we won't lose.

In winning the victory over death on Calvary's mount so many years ago, Jesus won the victory for us. When Jesus won over death, He offered us the same power to win over death.

Jesus didn't win on the cross so we could have the Easter Bunny. Jesus didn't win on the cross so we could have chocolate eggs. Jesus didn't win on the cross so we could have a long weekend in the spring.

Jesus Christ won on Calvary for one reason and one reason only, and that was to give us the opportunity to have eternal life.

I suspect that if you gave Jesus a list of things He would like to have been doing over the Easter weekend that dying on a cross would've been somewhere near the bottom.

But Christ died on the cross so we wouldn't have to, and He rose again to demonstrate that He was even in control of death.

Because He lives, we can face tomorrow. Because He lives, all fear is gone. Why? Because we know He holds the future, and life is worth the living because He lives.