

The familiar Easter icon of the three crosses is illustrated in this passage. Jesus is on the cross in the middle with one cross on each side. The passage tells us two criminals were executed at the same time as Jesus on these crosses. This type of punishment was used by the Romans as a deterrent to crime. Not only did the convicted die a slow, painful death, but they did so in shame and humiliation. The executions were performed on a hill, so everyone could see.

Today, we are looking at the second saying of Jesus while he was on the cross as part of our Lenten sermon series. If you weren't able to hear the set-up of the series from last week, there are copies of the sermon in the Narthex, and videos are on the website. Likewise, if you aren't able to come all seven weeks, you can still follow along to see how these sayings tell a bigger story.

Let us explore Luke 23:39-43, when Jesus says, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." He is talking to one of the criminals. The mocking crowd, the women's wailing, and the soldier's gambling are going on below them, yet the three of them have a conversation. All three are suffering and experiencing the same pain and humiliation, and all three know they are in the last moments of their life.

When people come face-to-face with their own mortality, they tend to either put their affairs in order, or they deny it to the end. We see this in this passage as well. One has a "coming-to-Jesus moment," but the other doesn't. One realizes what is true and lasting, yet the other approaches death the same way he approached life. I've experienced this when ministering to people

on hospice including my own grandmothers.

One of my grandmothers was told that there wasn't anything more they could do for her, that they were referring her to hospice. She said, "Well, I guess that's it," and she was gone two days later. She accepted her death and let go of this life because she was eager for what was next. She always approached life that way. Even though she lost three husbands in her lifetime and three children, she was always open and moving forward to what was next.

Another grandmother had a different experience. When she was moved from the hospital to the care facility then to hospice, she hung on for weeks. She lived her life in constant fear, so it seemed as though she was fearful of letting go, even though she was a Christian. She believed she was going to heaven, but there was something that prevented her from moving forward. She held on to the bitter end.

I see that in this passage. One of the men who approached life with anger and hostility was hostile to Jesus to the end. He said, "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" (v.39). The man's motivation wasn't belief in who Jesus is, but in how he could benefit from it. His selfishness was still center stage. In this most humbling time, he did not humble himself. He saw it as another failed opportunity to get himself off the hook.

Jesus never responds to the man's insults. It was the other one who spoke up, who argued on Jesus' behalf. Something happened while he was on the cross, when he came face-to-face with his mortality. Perhaps he heard about Jesus before this, what the people had said about him or how they had been healed. Perhaps he was in a

crowd that heard Jesus preach some time. And, now, as he sees Jesus up close and personal, he realizes that Jesus is who he says he is. Perhaps it was the way Jesus was facing his own death, accepting it and welcoming what is next. We don't know, but he had a change of heart. He admits that he is getting the punishment he deserves, but he recognizes that Jesus is innocent, that Jesus is what is real and true.

What is truth? Jesus said, "I tell you the truth" in the beginning of this verse. He says variations of this phrase, nearly seventy times in the New Testament. Why does he say that? We're all searching for what is true and lasting in this life. He says it to assure us that he is truth, and we can count on what he says. He is assuring us that his way of living is what is certain even when we're engulfed in our hopeless situations.

What was probably the most hopeless time of this man's life, Jesus is with him in his suffering, right by his side. The moment he asks for mercy, "Remember me," (v.42) Jesus gives it. He assures the man that something better is coming, that transformation is coming. The man's expression of belief wasn't about saving himself. He didn't feel that he deserved to be saved. He said, "Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom" (v.42). He didn't say, "Take me with you!" He accepted his fate and humbled himself, realizing, what is real and true.

This one small statement expressed his belief in Jesus. And, that's all it takes to be with Jesus in paradise. He didn't get baptized, he didn't go through confirmation, he just believed. It's that simple. Don't get me wrong, baptism and confirmation are great rituals and symbols of our faith, to

help us grow our faith, but it all comes down to believing in Jesus.

This passage shows us that it's never too late to follow Jesus. Our lives will be much more useful and fulfilling if we turn to God earlier in life, but it's never too late, even if we turn in the last moment. That's what grace is all about.

The three crosses, the familiar Easter image, reminds us that Jesus is in the center and we always have a choice. We can choose to be hostile and distant from Jesus, or we can humble ourselves and believe that Jesus is the way and the truth. During this season of Lent, will you be the one who remains in your old ways, or will you be the one who has a change of heart? Amen.