

The title of this morning's sermon is "The One True Story." The wonderful thing is, we already know the ending of this story, and it's a happy one, a very happy one! We heard about this Last Sunday in our Scripture readings. God's promises are fulfilled on that day of final resurrection. One day, Jesus will come back. On the Last Day, everything will come to an end. One second, we're eating a meal or driving a car or at work, and the next instant we'll see Jesus in all His glory. Those who have died will have their physical bodies rise up and live again. On this Judgment Day, those who have believed in Jesus enter into the final glorious heavenly life forever, with body and soul reunited. From God's Word, we know the happy ending of the one true story.

The 1970's TV series Columbo, had the twist that the viewers knew who committed the crime right from the start. The suspense was watching Detective Columbo figure out **who** it was and **how** to catch the criminal. But we knew that in the end, this particular person would be arrested. That's how it is for us when it comes to our point of view of "The One True Story."

Now, there **is** conflict in the one true story: We are mocked by others and by death. Jesus is mocked too. The happy ending is ridiculed. "How can you believe Jesus is actually coming back? This life is all there is, and you make the most of your life now because this is all there is."

Death makes even a greater mockery of our faith. The lungs stop breathing; the heart stops beating. Death mocks us: "I'm it. I'm all you have to look forward to. I'll swallow you up and take you away from everything you love and want and hope for. Jesus can't do anything about it. I will claim every one of you sooner or later. You better believe **that** and not that **Jesus** stuff."

Even the strongest Christians struggle with death's mockery, the grave's ridicule. When one of our friends or loved ones die, it hurts. Even if we know that he or she had strong faith in Jesus, their Savior, death still seems like a mockery, a defeat, at least for right now.

Jesus was mocked. *The soldiers mocked Jesus.* They don't care what's happening to Him. They have a job to do, and they do it efficiently. A little

gambling under the cross gives them some diversion, but it shows they don't think much of Jesus, other than he's another criminal to crucify. But they also **mock** Jesus. He does get a reaction from them. Except for the centurion later on (v 47), the soldiers are having some fun at Jesus' expense. They ridicule Him as the King of Jews who can't even save Himself. Mean laughter, derision, and crude humor provide dramatic irony: Jesus hangs naked and open to the mocking, but by not saving Himself He is saving them, for they are included in His words of forgiveness (v 34).

The Jewish leaders also mocked Jesus. Unbelieving and vindictive, smug and confident, their fear is turned into bravado. This King isn't so dangerous anymore. They see Jesus as weak and pathetic, a fraud who claimed to be the Christ. Their mocking is the same as the soldiers, an ironic denial of Christ as the Chosen One of God because He doesn't save Himself. You can see them wagging their heads (Mk 15:29). But you have to wonder if **fear** isn't still lurking under the surface. They've heard about and even seen Jesus' miracles. If He were suddenly to break free in power, no amount of Roman military might could save them. Yet their hatred and open rejection of the Christ is just as evident as the women's grief and love.

The criminals crucified with Jesus mocked Him: Both of them revile Jesus at first (see Mt 27:44). In Luke, just the one speaks against Jesus, and you can hear the contempt in his voice. He is defiant, angry, and sarcastic as he joins in with the mocking. But the second criminal is broken and beaten. He sees himself as the lost and condemned man he truly is. Honest admission of his guilt leaves him with only one hope. He turns to Jesus and sees more than a dying man, more than the blood and agony. Others see a failed and fallen messiah, but he sees the Messiah. How difficult that had to be. His eyes look at Jesus in moments of complete humiliation and utter torment. But in an act of faith, he places himself into the outstretched arms of the Christ. He sees Jesus as innocent, as the One who can save him. He confesses Jesus as the King, someone who has a kingdom he wants to live in. He receives more than he could imagine—paradise.

In any narrative, a prop is often a key for interpretation. Clearly, the cross is central here. But don't lose sight of the sign above Jesus' head. The words are the fourth bit of mockery directed at Jesus: "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews" Again, they deride Him for being the King who couldn't save Himself. But in a clear visual irony, they declare what is true. Jesus *is* the King of the Jews, of all people, who saves us all because He did not save himself!

The sudden reversal in the one true story is that the criminal receives *paradise*, and so do *we*. The criminal is broken and asks for Jesus to remember him. Jesus answers the criminal's request, giving him paradise, by turning the mockery of the sign into a sign announcing the one true story for all to believe. The criminal's request is granted. "Today you will be with me in Paradise" (v 43). His happy ending is assured. The mockery can't take Jesus' words away. Death is swallowed up in this gift of paradise. On the cross, the criminal sees the sign, 'The King of the Jews' (v 38) and believes. The One who doesn't save Himself saves others by His death. It's not that Jesus *couldn't* save Himself as the mockers claimed, but that He *wouldn't*. He needed to take our punishment on the cross, so that on the Last Day we would be judged innocent, free to enter into His presence with body and soul joined together forever. The sign is not ridicule, but the one true story. Jesus is the King who saves us because He did not save Himself.

Three days later, the women who had watched Him die are the first ones to see *Him* mock death. The grave is empty. It could not hold Jesus. He destroys the power of death over us. Death is swallowed up in victory, and because His body rose from the dead, so will ours on the Last Day. He silences those who make fun of Him. Their mockery will die away and never be heard again. But Jesus lives, and His words will never fade away.

This is The One True Story: Jesus gives paradise from the cross by saving others instead of Himself, and so we look forward to that day of fulfillment when He silences all mockery with our final resurrection from the dead.

We enjoy the rest of the story as we listen to Jesus' words of promised paradise. A wise prayer for every day is "Lord, remember me in your

kingdom” (see v 42). Jesus answers our prayer the same way He did the criminal. Listen to Him promise us paradise.

At the baptismal font: “I baptize you. . . . We receive you in Jesus’ name as our *brother(s)/sister(s)* in Christ” (*LSB*, pp. 270–71). These are words of promise, of paradise given, and of the final resurrection to come.

At the beginning of the service: You admit, just like the criminal, that you are broken and helpless. Defiance drops away and deep down you want to be saved. “Almighty God, have mercy upon us, forgive us our sins, and lead us to everlasting life.” (*LSB*, p. 203). Then come words of promise, of paradise given, of the final resurrection to come: “Almighty God in His mercy has given His Son to die for you and for His sake forgives you all your sins. As a called and ordained servant of Christ, and by His authority, I therefore forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. ” (*LSB*, p. 203)

At the altar: You kneel and take a small wafer and a sip of wine. “Take, eat; this is the true body of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, given into death for your sins”. These are words of promise, of paradise given, of the final resurrection to come.

Even though death mocks us, even the Christian, death does not get to have the final word. Everyone who dies with faith in Christ are waiting just as we are for the final chapter of this true story to be written. One day Jesus will return. Souls in paradise will be rejoined with their bodies. Those who believe will stand before Jesus in perfect peace and joy. And we will enter into his kingdom forever and fully.

We know the end of the story, and until then, we keep praying just as the criminal did, “Lord, remember me.” He promises paradise, then a final resurrection and an eternal kingdom with Him, with Jesus, with our King. Amen.