

## **“Grief and Gratitude”**

**John 19: 16b-24**

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### **Communion Devotion**

This morning our attention is drawn to the crucifixion of Jesus. It began around nine o'clock on a Friday morning after a busy night filled with intrigue, drama and tension.

About twelve hours before Jesus began carrying his cross, he was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane by a detachment of Roman soldiers and group of religious officials representing the High Priest. He was immediately taken to the Temple where he was questioned by Annas, the former High Priest who was still the power behind the throne, by Caiaphas, the current High Priest and son-in-law of Annas, and by the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court.

Their anger boiled over that night, and their true motives for insisting Jesus be crucified were revealed. They wanted Jesus' prophetic voice silenced because he threatened their livelihood and hold on power.

Throughout Jesus' public ministry, he had been critical of the leadership and lifestyle of some of Jerusalem's most powerful leaders. He uncovered corruption and self-indulgence at the highest levels of authority. He held those responsible accountable for their abuse of power and called on them to repent.

These religious authorities had no intention of listening to Jesus, just as their ancestors refused to listen to the prophets God sent their way. Instead, they devised a plan to discredit Jesus and disgrace him by having him crucified. Their plan worked, and now Jesus was on his way to the place of the skull, Golgotha.

Jesus had to carry his own cross, which would be a challenge for any man because that cross was heavy. It was even more of a challenge for Jesus, though, because he had been beaten unmercifully an hour or two before this.

We know from the other gospel accounts of the crucifixion that Simon of Cyrene was compelled to help Jesus carry his cross. Evidently, Jesus' struggle to carry that cumbersome cross convinced the soldiers accompanying him that he did not have the strength to get that cross through the streets and up that hill.

After Jesus had been nailed to the cross, a notice was attached above his head that read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." This did not sit well with the Chief Priests, especially since this notice was written in the three great languages of the ancient world, Hebrew, Latin and Greek. When the Chief Priests expressed their displeasure to Pilate, he rebuked them and refused to take it down or alter it.

Sometime during the day, the four soldiers charged with crucifying Jesus divided up his clothing. This was a common practice among those who carried out executions.

Often, the clothing would be ripped with each one getting an equal share, or they would agree upon what piece each would take. Jesus, however, had a seamless inner garment that the soldiers decided not to rip. They chose instead to gamble for it, a practice referred to in Psalm 22:18.

Beyond our text, the fourth gospel goes on to describe three of the seven sayings of Jesus on the cross. He entrusted the care of his mother, Mary, to the beloved disciple, John. He told those standing close to the cross he was thirsty, and sometime that afternoon he voiced his final words, "It is finished."

Because it was Friday, the Chief Priests appealed to Pilate to expedite the death of Jesus and the two criminals crucified with him so they could be buried before the Sabbath began at six o'clock that evening. Jesus' legs were not broken as was the case with the other two because he had already died, but a spear was thrust in his side, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water.

Joseph of Arimathea asked permission from Pilate to take Jesus' body off the cross and prepare it for burial. Permission was granted, and he was assisted by Nicodemus, the man who had earlier visited Jesus at night.

With Jesus in the tomb, the religious leaders were now able to bury their fears. Finally, they could enjoy a peaceful Sabbath, or so they thought.

**What comes to mind when you hear this tragic story?** What feelings well up inside of you?

I am overcome with a sense of grief and gratitude. My heart breaks and rejoices, which may sound rather odd.

**I grieve over what Jesus endured that day.** He died the most painful and horrible death a human could experience.

The Roman officials were so repulsed by the idea of crucifixion that they declared no Roman citizen could ever be punished this way. It was reserved for slaves and criminals who were not Romans.

**At the same time, I read this story with a grateful heart.** I have no words that adequately express my appreciation for what Jesus did on my behalf.

I truly stand amazed in his presence. I am overwhelmed with Jesus' courage, strength, resilience, goodness, patience, love, faithfulness and focus.

He was sent by God to reveal the true nature of God, to confront injustice, to expose corruption, to model the Golden Rule, to share an alternative vision for settling disputes, to offer forgiveness to all who would repent and to encourage people to seek the will of God when making decisions. If this mission put him in harm's way and cost him his life, he was willing to pay the price. He would rather be crucified at the hands of his enemies than to be unfaithful.

How grateful I am Jesus was faithful and fully committed to this mission. What a difference his transforming love has made in my life.

**I hope you feel the same way.** It is my prayer you often express your profound appreciation to Jesus for the difference he has made in your life.

I believe all of us are better people when we recognize the sacrifices Jesus and others have made on our behalf and express our heartfelt gratitude. The recognition of their contributions to our lives is the first step to becoming more like them.

**Whose story would you tell today if you were remembering those who have shaped and formed you into the person you are?** Whose hands taught you a skill? Whose voice gave you directions? Whose advice kept you from making mistakes, and whose heart forgave you when you made mistakes?

Whose feet raced to you when you were in trouble? Whose fingers caressed your brow when you were sick? Whose ears listened to you when you were upset? Whose eyes looked into your soul and saw good when others saw only bad? Whose arms held you when your world came crashing down, and whose arms lifted you on their shoulders so you could reach your dreams?

Whose garden fed you when you were hungry? Whose word vouched for you when others were skeptical? Whose cheers encouraged you when you were ready to give up? Whose business provided you with your first job? Whose pocketbook opened up when you needed money? Whose scholarship made it possible for you to get an education, and whose recommendations opened doors of opportunity for you to enter?

I think gratitude brings the best out in us. It promotes humility, kindness, compassion and generosity. This is because gratitude enables us to see those who have helped us on our journey, along with those who need our help.

Ingratitude, on the other hand, turns us inward. It makes us cynical, arrogant, angry, envious, jealous, fearful, suspicious and vindictive.

Don't let this happen to you, and to make sure it doesn't, focus your attention upon this sacred table and the one whose ultimate sacrifice is symbolized by the bread and the juice. Thank Jesus for his immeasurable love and his willingness to give his all to make our world and

your life better. Ask the Lord to help you to be as faithful as he was and to put others' interest and wellbeing above your own.

I can think of no better way to honor Jesus. I can think of nothing he would rather do.