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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Easter 4, Series B (Good Shepherd)
Saturday, April 24th, 2021
Sunday, April 25th, 2021

Sermon: Not a Victim
Texts: John 10:11-18

Focus: Jesus gladly and willingly laid down his life on the cross and took it up again on Easter.

Function: That they would rejoice in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Structure: Problem-Solution

Locus: "I believe that Jesus Christ... has redeemed me..." (SC, 2nd Article of Apostles' Creed).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ! Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed. Alleluia!* Have you ever wondered if Jesus was a *victim* on Good Friday? Was he at the mercy of events and interests that conspired against him? Was his death inevitable because of his many enemies? Was Jesus Christ, our paschal Lamb, a victim?

Before I became a pastor, I used to hear many sermons that strongly suggested the supposed victimization of Jesus. And the implicated offenders were always *us*—the hearers. "You put Jesus on the cross! Even if you didn't drive the nails into his hands, you might as well have because *your* sins put him there. It is *your* fault that Jesus died!" It always seemed the strategy of this homiletical move was to guilt trip people into feeling sorry for the crucifixion and to repent—not so much of our many sins—but solely of that particular sin of murdering the Son of God.

It is true that in many of Peter's early sermons in the Book of Acts, he bluntly blames his audience for Jesus' death. In last week's reading from Acts 3, we heard him say, "[T]he God of our fathers, glorified in his servant Jesus, whom *you* delivered over and denied in the presence of Pilate... and *you killed* the author of life, whom God raised from the dead..." (Acts 3:13, 15,

ESV).¹ And in today's reading from Acts 4, he directs his accusation against the Jewish high priest and religious council: "Let it be known to all of you... that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, *whom you crucified*, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well" (Acts 4:10). Now to be fair, the Jewish priests *are* the ones who condemned Jesus at a kangaroo trial and handed him over to Pilate to be killed, demanding his crucifixion. And some of the regular people in the temple courts were likely also part of the mob that day. They were there. They demanded his death. They were guilty of it.

But what about us? Are we also implicated by extension? Is Jesus truly a murder victim, a religious martyr, a victim of the mob?

According to Jesus, the answer is a big, resounding NO! In our Gospel for this Good Shepherd Sunday, Jesus declares:

"I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.... For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father" (John 10:14, 17-18).

Nobody takes Jesus' life from him. He laid it down of his "own accord," by his own "authority." Speaking of the cross and empty tomb, Jesus says that he has authority to lay down his life and authority to take it up again.

Jesus is not a victim. Rather, he is the agent of his own destruction, the orchestrator of his own death, for one very important reason: because he loves us. Jesus died to rescue us from sin and death. He died to save you from your sins. He died to give you forgiveness and eternal life. And all this he did lovingly and willingly, as the author of Hebrews writes: "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the

¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:2, NIV). Jesus endured the cross for “the *joy* set before him.” The cross was for Jesus a source of joy and delight! How?! Why?! Because the cross meant his death, but our life and salvation.

Throughout the narrative of the Passion account, Jesus asserted again and again that he was in control of things. *He* was the director of his own destiny—not history or Pilate or the Jewish priests. Jesus was running the show.

For example, on at least three separate occasions leading up to Holy Week, Jesus predicted his betrayal, death, and resurrection in stunning detail. He was not surprised by Judas’s betrayal in the garden of Gethsemane. At the Last Supper, he actually told Judas when to leave: “What you are going to do, do quickly” (John 13:27).

And when the soldiers came to arrest Jesus in the garden, they didn’t have to take him by force. He willingly went with them peaceably. In fact, when Peter tried to fight back, Jesus told him to put his sword away. “Do you think I cannot appeal to the Father [for]... more than twelve legions of angels? But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled that it must be so?” (Matt. 26:53-54).

At his trial in the high priest’s house, Jesus said not a word in his own defense. The same thing happened when he stood before Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor.

“You will not speak to me?” asked Pilate in exasperation. “Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?”

To which Jesus replied, “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above...” (John 19:11).

Jesus didn’t try to get off and go free. With determination he marched toward the cross.

And even as he hanged from the cross, bleeding out and breathing his last, Jesus did not give into the temptation to save himself, even when the crowd taunted him: “Save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross” (Matt. 27:40). What the crowd failed to see—and what we must remember—is that the nails aren’t what kept Jesus on the cross. Love kept him there. Love for you, love for me, love for this whole bloody world. Jesus didn’t attempt to save his own skin. Instead he came to save us from our sin. And that is why he went joyfully to the cross, enduring the pain, scorning its shame. Nobody took Jesus’ life from him. He gave it freely as a gift.

Having accomplished what he came to do, Jesus said, “It is finished” and died (John 19:30).

I sometimes wonder what Satan thought on that Good Friday. Did he know, then and there, that Christ’s death was his defeat? Or was he just as surprised by Easter as everybody else. When did the devil realize that the cross was his undoing? “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8).

No, Jesus was not a victim. He was the victor. He had the authority to lay down his life for the sheep, and he had authority to take it up again. And so on the third day he rose again from the grave. That was his Father’s charge. That was his mission. Mission accomplished.

Alleluia! Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed. Alleluia!* Amen.