

# Face to Face with Jesus

Let's have fun as we end lectionary Year C. Can we do that? Is it possible to have fun with scripture? Some would say not, it's true. The argument would be to have fun is to diminish the seriousness of the text, of the gospel. To have fun is to trivialize what shouldn't be trivialized.

But let's be clear, we're not making fun; we're having fun. There is a difference. We are looking at the humor in these encounters that Jesus has with a variety of folk in the gospel of Luke. Semantics? No, there is something more going on here, and we need to pay attention. We are entering the story, placing ourselves in dialogue with Jesus. What a thrill it is to be face to face with Jesus. What a joy to be in his presence, hearing his word, receiving his instruction.

Yet, what we discover is that like those in these stories, we are often off track, often misunderstanding, often too much letting our own desires get in the way of hearing the word he has for us. It is . . . funny. Let's admit it, our humanness is funny. In the end, we are laughing at ourselves. We are embracing with humility and with joy the overwhelming grace of God that continues to surprise us with hospitality and opportunity.

Every encounter with Jesus brings transformation. At the very least, we see ourselves in a new light, in all our humanness. And we can either weep or laugh. When we weep, we might pull into ourselves and run away from the source of pain and shame. But if we can laugh, then we might be able to stay and find healing and a new way of being alive in the world.

Through these encounters, these face-to-face moments that individuals and groups had with Jesus here in the gospel of Luke, we can find a way to new life and new hope if we're willing to be honest with ourselves and with him. We too here at the end of our liturgical year want to be face to face with Jesus.

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost – Man Out on a Limb

October 30, 2022 – [Luke 19:1-10](#)

Color: Green

## **PLANNING NOTES**

What would it be like to encounter Jesus face to face? That's the question this series sets out to help us answer. We can't know, of course, but we can get a glimpse of what happened to those who did meet Jesus in the Gospel texts we examine here. It requires a holy imagination to put ourselves in the place of these characters. And we submit, it requires a sense of humor to see the beauty of these encounters and to hear how Jesus can take a simple question and turn it upside down or open it up to reveal something more significant than we realized.

The Zacchaeus story reads more like a parable than real life. Yet, that is the power of being face to face with Jesus. If, indeed, every encounter with Jesus brings transformation, then we can sit back and be amazed at how it unfolds in this story. Are there any similar stories in your community? Is there one who can bear witness to the power of acceptance and recognition to bring about a new life and new way of living in the world? Is there one who could tell a story about how he or she met Jesus, maybe in the hospitality of your congregation or the outreach of a neighbor, and decided to turn his or her life around? Is there one who could testify to that power and presence? It would be a moving experience to hear – even if it was familiar. Tell it again, if necessary. Make it an interview instead of a presentation. Ask about the why, the deeper inner responses; ask about how difficult or easy it was to maintain the change. Let the whole congregation listen in as your own Zacchaeus comes down from the tree to start a new life with Jesus.

Or maybe act out the story; invite the children or youth to lift the encounter from the page to the chancel. They're in the mood for costumes and for tricks and treats, so let them loose in worship as they act out the tale of a little, bad guy who meets Jesus. Watch as the faces change, as the crowd is amazed, and maybe a little resentful. How would we react if our favorite "bad guy" in the neighborhood becomes a good guy, the favored of Christ? Watch it happen. And by all means, sing the song. You know the song, about the "wee little man" and the sycamore tree. Let the children take you through the motions and then all shout together,

“ZACCHAEUS, YOU COME DOWN!” It is a witness to the power of hospitality, sharing a meal, abiding together. Make it fun, childish, and childlike. Because then it becomes possible again. In our grown-up cynicism, we don’t believe in the power of an encounter with Christ as we used to. Maybe here we can recapture our childlike faith enough to believe that redemption is really possible. We might believe it enough to go out on a limb ourselves.

## **PREACHING NOTES**

Two kittens shut down the B and Q lines of the New York Subway system for about two hours one day a few years back. The B and Q are two of the main lines that run from Brooklyn into the heart of Manhattan. A two-hour disruption is going to cause a problem, no matter what time it is.

One morning, a Thursday at 11 a.m., two scared kittens were spotted running down the tracks right next to the third rail. That’s the one that carries the power, 600 volts – not transformer power, but enough to use up all nine lives. So, they decided to cut the power to the whole line. And for almost two hours, the commuters and subway officials waited while a few went on a subway safari to rescue the flustered felines. Alas, the kittens managed to stay out of reach long enough that the disruption was no longer tenable. So, since the kittens weren’t in visible danger, they returned power to the rail and then started the local trains and eventually the express trains but issued an alert inviting the drivers to keep a lookout for the strays.

Naturally, in a day of instant commentary on anything and everything, the opinions were many and various. From the animal lover who praised the compassion of the administrators – or questioned why they gave up so soon just to keep the trains running on time (with the inevitable Mussolini quote tossed in), to the commuters who were patient or not, and the conspiracy theorists who speculated that terrorists in cat suits were behind it all, not to mention the anti-government voices who blamed the president at the time for letting the cat out of the bag. Bah-dum-bum.

The argument centered around one point, really. Were they worth it? And before you get all heated up, let's make a shift here. We're not really talking about kittens on a subway track. We are talking about a little guy out on a limb.

Everybody sing, "a wee little man . . ." . . . "Climbed up in a sycamore tree . . ." . . . "YOU COME DOWN" . . . "I'm coming to your house today." Why did we shout that bit? Jesus doesn't seem to be shouting here. Maybe it is simply enthusiasm, and we got carried away when we were kids.

Who knows? It doesn't matter. What matters is getting the point here. And the point here is that even Luke had to learn to bite his tongue when Jesus comes to town.

If you read through the Gospel of Luke, you discover that there is a certain attitude to people with means, with resources—ah heck, just say it—the rich. Luke didn't like them. Or he thought Jesus didn't like them. In story after story in the gospel of Luke, the rich come out badly. So, when Luke begins chapter nineteen with this introduction, you are forgiven if you expect it to end badly. "There was a man named Zacchaeus; he was chief tax collector and was rich. As if being chief tax collector isn't bad enough. A chief tax collector isn't like the guy sitting in the booth collecting your sales tax, or your business tax, or your inventory tax or whatever. This is the guy who shows up at your door and takes everything you've got left. And he usually shows up with muscle, Roman muscle. He's the guy, some historians think, that recruited all the other guys who are also now as hated as he is. He's the regional director of tax collectors. But, for Luke, as bad as all that is, here's what's worse: he's rich.

So, you know this can't end well. You just know it. Except that a strange thing happens. When Jesus comes to town, Zacchaeus decides he wants to see him. And here's what's weird: he doesn't send a memo and ask Jesus to stop by his office. He doesn't have his people call Jesus' people. He runs (runs!) down the street and climbs a flipping tree! This pillar of society, okay, a despised pillar of society to be sure, but a man of status and standing and whatever else makes you the top of the heap, runs down a street and climbs a tree. He acts like a little kid! What is up with that?

Jesus seems to accept it all, and then invites himself to the house of a guy who would climb a tree just to see him. A curious thing is that we don't know why.

Jesus says he “must stay” at Zacchaeus’s house today. Must stay? But what is even more curious is that we don’t know Zacchaeus’s motivation. All Luke says is that he wanted to see Jesus. “Trying to see who Jesus was” (verse 3). Why? Was it a change of heart? Was he worried about competition? Was it hope or fear? Or a little of both? We don’t know. And apparently, that doesn’t matter.

That is what is really curious about this story. The transformation, the change in behavior, the giving away half of what he owns and paying back four times the amount if (notice the if there, Zac isn’t admitting anything) he has defrauded anyone, all happens after Jesus puts himself on the guest list. He came down from a tree and changed his life.

Or, at least, it appears so. Actually, where our translation has, “I will give” and “I will pay back,” the original text says, “I give” and “I pay back.” So, is he already generous? Is Jesus coming to dine with him because he is already a good guy? Well, the crowd doesn’t think so. They start to grumble when Jesus makes his announcement. “Why are you going to his house?” they wonder, “don’t you know he is a sinner?”

He’s not worth it. That’s what they are saying. Don’t waste your time on him, keep the trains running, Jesus. Stay on target. Keep out of the gutters, off the side streets, out of the trees. Stick to your own kind. His kind, the sinner kind, isn’t worth bothering with.

Jesus says his kind is your kind. He is one of you. A son of Abraham, like you. A child of God, like you. If I ignore him, I ignore you. But I didn’t come to ignore the ones who will go out on a limb just to see me. The ones who will risk reputation, such as it might have been. The ones who will put aside “proper behavior” and become like a little child just to see me.

We don’t know what was in Zacchaeus’s mind when he ran and climbed a tree. Which I guess means, in part, that since our motives are at best mixed, we’ve got a chance too. Jesus just might invite himself into our houses with a surprising urgency. No matter what anyone else seems to think, we are worth the effort, worth the disruption, worth the inconvenience of loving.

Now ask yourself this question of this passage: “Where are you in the story?” Are you standing with the crowd, shaking your head at those people who aren’t worth

it? Or are you standing next to Jesus, inviting yourself into the homes of those others think are sinners? Or perhaps, are you too out on a limb, hoping for a glimpse of Jesus and a whole new way of living?

By the way, seven hours later, they found those kittens, named them Arthur and August, and decided they were worth it.

Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost – Band of Puzzlers

November 6, 2022 – [Luke 20:27-38](#)

Color: Green

## **PLANNING NOTES**

The gospel writers love these stories—stories where Jesus gets the better of those who seek to outsmart him appear in all the gospels. But a key to the stories is that Jesus always engages. He could have simply dismissed the questioners, the scoffers, and sarcastic accusers, but he doesn't. He takes on all comers. And he hopes to crowbar open their closed minds. He has high standards for the leaders of his people and shows his disappointment in how they are leading on more than one occasion. But he never gives up, never refuses to engage.

So, emboldened by this truth, worship could be a time of bringing our questions to Jesus. Whether out loud, or more properly silently or written in a moment of reflection, all could be encouraged to ask the questions that have been tugging away in the back of the mind. Unlike those in the story, these aren't questions to trip up Jesus, but rather the things we've been afraid to ask. It is a way of drawing closer to the one we worship.

It could also be a time to celebrate those who teach us, who share wisdom or new ways of looking at the world and ourselves. We could say thank you to teachers and leaders during worship this week. Those who, like Jesus, open us up to new possibilities. It could be a celebration of small-group leaders and Sunday school teachers. And of course, it could be accompanied by an invitation to join a group, learning together with clear instructions on how to do so.

As discussed in the Preaching Notes, we aren't out to find adversaries; we aren't here to point fingers at those who don't get it. Instead, we are always looking to invite and to include and to understand what it means to live a life of faith in the world as it is today. So let us pray for openness to others, for an awareness of the needs of our community so that we can more effectively witness and serve. Let us pray for a willingness to respond to the questions and doubts that some might have about our faith. We're all on a journey and we're all learning. Letting folks know that a perfectly acceptable answer to a puzzling question from a friend or neighbor is, "I don't know but let me find out." We need to be willing to engage.

Maybe there could be some time for conversation or question and answer, if not during worship, then following. How do we express our willingness to be challenged, to be questioned, to be approached about our faith? Let worship be open to all, which means paying attention to the things we take for granted. How do we make sure that those unfamiliar with our practices can feel at home and welcomed in our midst? Maybe someone is coming with a puzzle to trick us, or maybe they just want to know what it is we know. That is always our hope.

## **PREACHING NOTES**

Tread carefully, preacher. Especially in a lighthearted or playful mode. Our task here is not to humiliate the Sadducees, even though they wanted to humiliate Jesus. Whenever we look at another faith system and the internal variations and conflicts, we can run the risk of demeaning that which we do not understand or with which we do not participate. We are not here to belittle; we are not here to claim moral or religious superiority over another. Our task here, as it is whenever we dare to preach, is to experience Jesus again and to see ourselves more clearly as we are on the way to being made into disciples of Jesus Christ.

We do, however, need some understanding of the beliefs of the Sadducees to understand what is going on here. Luke tells us that the Sadducees do not believe in the Resurrection. But he does not tell us that the Sadducees were the well-to-do folk in the community. It makes sense if you think about it. When you have all that this world has to offer, why bother with something beyond it? When you can claim that being rich is a sign of God's favor and blessing on your life, then why not go all-in on that. Oh, they had a sense of eternity, but it was in their legacy and in their children. Your name survives you—that's what you were working for.

It's not hard to find this sort of thinking around us today. There are those who consider their wealth to be a sign of God's blessing and who live to ensure their legacy in this world. But perhaps what is most recognizable to us is the approach used to challenge different ways of thinking. They don't show up to discuss Jesus' stance on the Resurrection from the dead or what shape the kingdom of heaven will take – in this world and the next. No, they come to make fun, ridicule, or satirize the very idea that anyone would hold an opposing view to theirs.

Jesus had just gone a round or two with the lawyers and priests who wanted to talk to him about tax policy in the empire. Now he is faced with a contingent of Sadducees, who just parked their fancy cars and strolled up in their tailored suits and proceeded to concoct a wild scenario designed to make belief in eternity look ridiculous. They weren't looking for an answer: they were convinced there was no answer. Their only goal was to humiliate their opponent. "So, Jesus, one bride, seven brothers, who owns her in eternity?"

Then Jesus did that thing he always seems to do in the Gospels. He takes them seriously. No, really. He approaches the conversation as if it were a real question looking for a real solution to a complicated, if not impossible problem. He addressed them as if they were open to learning something.

The first thing he wants them to learn is that people aren't property in eternity. He'd like them to learn that people aren't property anywhere, but a step at a time, it seems. Wait, you're thinking, who said anything about property? Well, that was what was behind the question, property and legacy. Who gets to live on? Who has a name in this imaginary heaven, they are wondering? But Jesus says there is no giving away, there is no marriage, because they are children of God, children of the Resurrection, and therefore they don't exist to produce children. Something changes in the Resurrection, says Jesus, something you just barely understand.

Having responded to their sarcasm, Jesus then does something else that he often does in these conversations – he answers the question they should have asked. Had they decided to enter into this conversation by asking what basis was there for believing in the Resurrection from the dead, it would have been a very different moment. Had they set aside their snark and their disdain long enough to ask and to listen, we might have had a very different model for how differences of theological opinion could be handled.

And what was the question Jesus wanted them to ask? He wanted to meet them on their own ground. The other thing about the Sadducees is that they saw only the books of Moses, the Torah, as scripture. Only Moses is authoritative for the Sadducees. So, Jesus turns to Moses. "And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed" (v.37). Uh oh. Now what? Where do you go from there?

When he takes your hero and shows him to be on the opposite side of the argument, it's hard to come up with a witty and withering reply.

We don't have a response at this point. Oh, read another verse, and you'll see that someone replies. The scribes, teachers of the law, who wet their fingers and drew a line in the air. "Score one for Jesus," they say. The enemy of my enemy, you know. But the Sadducees don't respond. At least Luke doesn't give them space to respond. There probably was a response. A loud and negative one. Sure, they had read that verse before, but it doesn't mean what Jesus says it means. No way. Could it? Surely not. But what if . . . ? Jesus saw his mission as planting seeds. That's why he used those images so often to describe the kingdom. A seed takes a while to grow. An idea takes a while to set up residence in the consciousness of a believer. Did he change their minds with that little altercation? It's hard to know for sure, but maybe a seed was planted. Maybe a mind was opened to a new way of seeing the world and the creator of all that is.

Or maybe it was puzzles within puzzles. This group came to Jesus with a riddle, a test to check his orthodoxy as they defined it anyway. And Jesus riddled them right back. Maybe there is a lesson there for us. Meet folks where they are, speak in their language, and then let the Spirit work. After all, we've got an eternity to work with.

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost – Open-Mouthed Tourists

November 13, 2022 – [Luke 21:5-19](#)

Color: Green

## **PLANNING NOTES**

What are you distracted by? That's a question underlying our text this week.

What is it that draws your attention away from your call to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world? Not that followers of Jesus aren't allowed to enjoy the beauty and wonder that this world has to offer. The Christian life is marked by joy and surrounded by wonder. Yet, like the disciples in our text, we can be distracted by what we see around us and lose sight of our reason for being, to live a life of proclamation and invitation.

While the distraction in our text is about something beautiful, even something of God—the temple itself—Jesus's discourse tells us that sometimes it is terrible things that distract us. Wars and rebellions can distract us; false prophets or those who claim to represent Jesus but who really don't, can distract us; natural disasters can distract us. All sorts of things can distract us from lifting up the name of Jesus and living in hope and confidence that indeed God has the whole world in the divine hands.

Each week, worship is an opportunity to reorient ourselves toward God. Yes, the object of worship is giving praise to God and lifting up the name of Jesus. At the same time, we redeclare our commitment to walk the path of discipleship and live as though we were a part of the kin-dom of God, because we are. It is a moment of perspective, or of realignment. Not that we come and realize that nothing else matters, that the wars and conflicts and deprivations and divisions don't matter, because all that matters is giving praise to God. To the contrary, we discover that what is happening in the world matters all that much more because of our commitment to Christ and to loving the world that he gave his life for. But we hold on to hope.

We hold on to hope by declaring that God cares about the brokenness of the world and the people who are harmed by that brokenness. And we declare it by caring too, by serving, by giving, by advocating for change and for peace and for reconciliation. Not out of a sense of despair, but out of that very hope that says

God is still God and there is good in the world. There is grace and there is a way that leads to salvation.

So, let our prayers reach out into the whole world. Let our songs praise the God of creation and instill in us a sense of mission and purpose to bring transformation. Let those who work in various missions be given space to inform and invite. And let there be a call to commitment. Not out of a sense of duty but let us reignite our commitment to love and hospitality. What needs attending in our neighborhood? Who needs to be acknowledged and invited into fellowship in our community? In other words, let us stop being tourists wandering around just taking in the sights of this world, for good or for ill, and let us be engaged with the Spirit in working transformation right where we are.

## **PREACHING NOTES**

You've seen them or passed by them on the crowded streets. They wear their loud colorful shirts and baggy cargo shorts, and they have cameras dangling around their necks. They look out of place, dropped in from a more bucolic landscape, now jostled by commuters and joggers making their way through the city streets, flowing around them, like a stream diverted by a big rock in the way. They lean back, trying to see all the way to the upper floors of the massive buildings or the peaks of the carved monuments. Their eyes are wide, trying to see everything at once, to take it all in with an opened-mouthed stare. They forget their cameras for a moment, amazed at the sights they may have heard about but now see in stone and glass and steel. It's as if their minds freeze at the wonder of it all.

Residents of the city have learned to ignore them or go around them with a slow shake of the head. But Jesus sees them. Jesus sees the wonder in their eyes, as if star-struck by the architecture. And the truth is that the temple they were goggling at was a wonder to behold. A lot of artistry and craftwork had gone into this edifice. It was designed to bring about this reaction; that was the hope of the architects and designers. And there is no reason to doubt that they did it all to the glory of God and subscribed to the credo that said, "Only the best is worthy of the one we worship above all." The temple was worth admiring; it was worth

celebrating; it was worth giving God glory for the accomplishments represented in this amazing structure.

Yet Jesus doesn't have time for tourism, it seems. He brings them back to earth with a sharp word and a threatening scenario, like a slap across the face of the ones lost in wonder. A bit harsh, Jesus, don't you think? Maybe. Maybe it was harsh, and maybe it was necessary. We're in the final countdown, remember. This teaching in the temple is the straw that breaks the temple leader camels' backs. The clock is ticking on this mission to earth, and Jesus knows it. He needs the disciples to stay on track. He needs to prepare them for what is about to come. He wants to shore them up for the maelstrom that is about to descend on them.

We can debate whether these words are predicting future events or whether these words are describing the immediate future. What seems clear is that Jesus wanted to prepare his followers to stand firm when the world is falling apart. The final verse of our text says, "by your endurance, you will gain souls." That version (NRSV) reads as though keeping a cool head when everyone else is panicking will win adherents to the faith. The NIV says a similar thing by declaring that you should "stand firm and you will win life." But is it similar? Or is there a new element, one of self-preservation being revealed? The CEB seems to make it even clearer on that score: "by holding fast, you will gain your lives."

So, is Jesus telling his followers how to take care of themselves or how to witness to the world? Of course, we could say both; that one doesn't negate the possibility of the other. But on the brink of his own suffering and death, does it seem likely that Jesus would be telling his followers how to preserve their own lives? Maybe he is; maybe that's what this faith is about, saving your own life. But it seems much more likely that the followers are called to live a sacrificial witness of faith, that even in the face of devastation and destruction, followers are able to hold on to faith, not for self-preservation or the promise of a life free from suffering but for the hope that life is always bigger than what people can see, and love is always worth living for and dying for.

That is the edifice that is awe-inspiring in this story. That is what we stand before in open-mouthed wonder: Not the created beauty of our hands, but the willingness to live a life of love and transformation, even in the face of opposition

and conflict. Structures and systems and empires will rise and fall; of that, we can be sure.

*What troubles we have seen,  
what mighty conflicts passed,  
fightings without and fears within,  
since we assembled last.*

*“And Are We Yet Alive,” vs. 3, Words by Charles Wesley, United Methodist  
Hymnal, 533*

Reign of Christ (Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost) – Scoffers on a Hill  
November 20, 2022 – [Luke 23:33-43](#)

Color: White

## **PLANNING NOTES**

This text may seem out of sequence. Here we are on the last Sunday of the Christian year, and we are reading Holy Week texts? And where does “Reign of Christ” Sunday come from? Has someone done away with the traditional designation of Christ the King Sunday?

To start with the last question, no one has done away with any way of naming this end of the liturgical year marker. There are some who believe the term “king” speaks of a patriarchal era that doesn’t speak to all. Also in a representational democratic system that many countries around the world have today, the idea of kingship seems foreign or outdated. The alternative phrase “reign of Christ” seeks to be more inclusive and recognizable as we often speak of reigning in a variety of fields. And sometimes the way to draw attention to something is to give it a new name. But there is no requirement that one term be used over another. If the more traditional nomenclature still speaks in your context, feel free to use it.

The larger question then is, “What does it mean to speak of the Christ who reigns, or Christ the king?” What is clear from the gospel accounts is that Jesus came to redefine what it means to be king. The one who reigns over us is the one who was tried as a criminal, who was punished by oppressive authorities and crucified – killed in the most heinous act of execution devised by the powers of this world. That is the one to whom we pledge our allegiance. That is the one whom we gather to worship and follow. The one who reigns over us, Christ our king.

So how do we worship this king? With our words and praises, of course. Let our worship be full of songs of praise to Christ the king. Let our prayers abound with our commitment to the one who reigns over us, and our pledge to be Christ followers into eternity.

But what are the pointers to allegiance to Christ once you leave the sanctuary after worshiping this day? What are the marks of those who are citizens of the kingdom of heaven and not just the nations of this world? How will we live differently? How will we live out our citizenship? Some descriptions of kin-dom living would be helpful here. A call to love God and neighbor in tangible ways each

and every day, and then to put some “meat on those bones” by giving direction and suggestions and possibilities. And the reminder that we can live as followers of Christ only when we do it together. What opportunities for fellowship and learning are available? What covenant groups might help people on the discipleship pathway? To whom do I go, with whom shall I grow as I seek to be one who doesn’t scoff at the criminal dying on a cross but sees the king who will reign over my life always?

## **PREACHING NOTES**

Perhaps our lighthearted approach to this series won’t work so well on this day, with this text. Certainly, the foibles of the human condition are on display here, and we will attempt to point them out clearly and pointedly. But at the foot of the cross is not the place for humor.

Yet, on this Christ the King or Reign of Christ Sunday, there is dark humor in presenting as our king the one who is crucified. This is the foolishness with which Paul wrote so eloquently in First Corinthians (1:18-31). And even here, the worst of us rises up. Even in the face of such suffering, in such redemption, such sacrifice, our humanness is exposed in the characters who stood near the cross, face to face with Jesus.

But let’s start not with us or them; let’s start with Jesus and these amazing words that come from the king on the cross. One of the first observations to make about these words is that there has been considerable debate as to whether Jesus prayed this prayer from the cross at all. Some of the oldest manuscripts do not have these words recorded, which led many to believe that it was a later addition. Some even go so far as to argue that the purpose of addition was to ease the blame from Rome so that the Christians wouldn't seem to be a threat to the empire. Others argue that the addition was an attempt to avoid the centuries of anti-Semitism that grew up in the church.

The effectiveness of the former could be debated, I suppose, but the perhaps laudable goal of the latter was in no way even approached. It could even be argued that in the early days of Christendom, it was the depiction of the Passion

story as a whole that brought forth the shameful excesses of anti-Semitism that still persist even today.

This brings us back to these words – this first word from the cross. It is interesting to me that this first word is not a word to us; it is a word to God. Jesus still has much to tell us, much to pass on to us even with his dying breaths. But he uses this first word to intercede for us yet again. "Father, Forgive them, they don't know what they are doing."

It is not an easy word to hear – or to overhear, in this case. It is not easy because knowledge is so important to us. "Know thyself," said one of humanity's greatest philosophers. We strive after knowledge. We live in an information age. We grow to the age of understanding. We confer degrees of knowledge upon one another. We pride ourselves on our intelligence quotient.

Yet when push comes to shove, when life bumps up against death, when meaning stands before us, salvation is offered to us, love reaches to embrace us, we need to be forgiven because we don't know what we are doing.

In the story of the prodigal son, Jesus tells us that the wanton behavior of the prodigal, the loose living, the slap against parental authority, the self-centered, self-seeking sinfulness is not really who we are. It is a madness of sorts, an unknowing. The turnabout phrase in the midst of the story is, "When he came to himself." If he had only known from the beginning who he really was; if he knew his own soul and his own mind, then his life would have been different. If only he knew.

"Father forgive them, they don't know." Jesus came, some argue, to show us God. And in showing us God, he showed us ourselves. In other words, Jesus came so that we would know what we were doing. And yet as he died, he prayed to God to forgive us because we didn't get it. We didn't know.

He could have washed his hands of us at that moment. In an odd way, that is what the scoffers were asking for. Walk away from us, Jesus; show us your power by taking care of your own skin. That selfishness we know; we understand that. Because we live it every day. It is this sacrifice that we don't know. It is this dying that we don't understand. Give up on us and then we would know that you were

right, that you did have the power, that you were who you said you were. But then it would have been too late. And we would have been lost.

Jesus didn't give up on us. He began his dying by trying to help us live. "Father, forgive them." From the cross, Jesus was trying to get us back or keep us in right relationship with God. Forgive them. Heal them. Hold them. Gather them up. Stitch them back together.

That was the function of this word from the cross, to stitch us back into relationship with God. Even though our actions seemed to say that we didn't want to be there. Even though our words implied that we wanted nothing to do with God or with salvation or with hope for living. The thing is, we didn't know what we were doing.

No one can argue for the historical accuracy of these words from the cross. What I can argue for is the theological veracity of them. I have no doubt in my mind that Jesus died as he lived, trying to stitch us back together. Even as he was unraveling, even as the world was unraveling on that dark day on Calvary, his intent, his desire was to put us back together with God. To heal the breach, by stretching his own broken body across the gap. To stop the hemorrhage by pouring his own blood into wounds we inflict on ourselves. Cross stitching. Father, forgive them, they don't know what they are doing.

But before we go, there were those others who were face to face with Jesus that day. Not the scoffers on the ground, but the ones a little higher up, the ones on either side. The criminals, says the NRSV, one on the right and one on the left. And one of them joins the scoffers on the ground. "Show us your power by saving your skin, and ours!" In this moment of desperation, he like so many of us, defaults to self-preservation. Typical, we might say, expected. But the other had a different word from his cross.

One commentator wrote that this just might be the first Christian sermon. Not the Word from Jesus, but the confession of the criminal. "Do you not fear God since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And, we, indeed justly; for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." It was not a long sermon, but a sermon, nonetheless. The argument is that here is the first one who realized that Jesus, the man dying on a cross, was the Messiah

because he was dying in innocence. His death was sacrificial; whereas, the thief's death was selfish - he died for his own deeds. And then having realized this, and having made the proclamation to his fellow criminal if to no one else, he then asked for something from the one he identified as his Lord.

What is amazing is what he didn't ask for. He didn't ask for rescue. "Get me down, get us down!" That is what was expected, and what the other asked. But this one asked to be remembered. "Remember me. When you get where you are going, remember me." That's all. Maybe what he meant was, "Come and get me, "but that isn't what he said. So, maybe all he really meant was, "Remember me. Don't let my life be summed up by this death. Remember me as the one who recognized you. Remember me as someone who was more than the sum of his sins. Remember me." That's what he asked for.

What he got was a whole lot more. "Today you shall be with me in paradise." Most folks hang their attention on the word "paradise" — the promise of joy unending, of completion, of wholeness. The green fields of heaven stretching out into forever, waiting for the final breath of the one who claimed faith in a man he met while dying. It is a wonderful vision and certainly one worth clinging to.

Yet there seems like there should be more. There's that word "today." I know that given the fact that death was mere breaths away, at least for Jesus, he could have been referring to the fact that shortly Jesus and his new friend would be gamboling through those green fields. It was a sort of "hang on until we get through the messy bit right now and then we'll find our way to the garden" -- which is the literal translation of "paradise."

Even so, I think we are missing something if that is the interpretation we glean. The word "today" seems even more immediate. It carries the sense of right now, this very moment, not just within a twenty-four-hour time span. But how can that be? How can Jesus be inviting the thief, the criminal (and actually the word "thief" is never used). Mark calls them "bandits," which is a term used for those who stir up trouble, often attacking foreigners. So maybe "thief" isn't accurate, and "criminal" is too vague. Perhaps "terrorist" would fit better in this context. So, how can Jesus be inviting this terrorist into paradise even while they hang, dying on a cross?

Maybe the answer is in the other phrase of our second word: "with me." Christian artist Sara Groves has a song titled "What Do I Know" on her *Conversations* CD. In the song, she reveals that she has a friend who has just turned eighty-eight and is afraid of dying. Her faith is still strong; she "grew up singing about the glory land, and she would testify how Jesus changed her life. It was easy to have faith when she was thirty-four, but now her friends are dying, and death is at her door." A not uncommon experience, we might say. And the singer, Sara, wonders how to comfort her, how to strengthen her for what is to come. And what strikes her first is what she doesn't know. Here is the refrain of "what do I know":

*I don't know that there are harps in heaven, / Or the process for  
earning your wings. / I don't know of bright lights at the ends of  
tunnels, / Or any of those things. --* Written by: SARA GROVES. Lyrics © MUSIC  
SERVICES, INC.

What we don't know about eternity is profound. And when we look at what Jesus told us, there isn't that much that we can add to our knowledge. Jesus didn't seem that interested in resolving our need to know exactly what was going to happen to us when we die.

In fact, we might argue that he wasn't that interested in resolving our need to know what was going to happen to us while we live, except in the most general ways. We aren't told what works and what doesn't. Jesus doesn't give us the twelve steps to a better life or anything like that. What he offered us is a relationship. "Follow me," he said. "Today you shall be with me in paradise," he said. "Where two or three are gathered, I will be there." "And lo, I will be with you until the end of the age." "Come unto me, all you who labor and are heavy laden."

Sara Groves resolves her dilemma this way:

*"But I know to be absent from this body / is to be present with the  
Lord, / and from what I know of him, / that must be pretty good." --*  
Written by: SARA GROVES. Lyrics © MUSIC SERVICES, INC.

"Today. you shall be with me in paradise." Eternity is not about a place; it is about a person. It is about a relationship. And when Jesus spoke those words to that terrorist dying on a cross, he meant right now, right then. Paradise for that man

was nothing like a green field or garden of delights; it was a cross that was robbing him of life. And yet in that moment, he found life, abundant and full life. Paradise begins when we enter into a relationship with Jesus. Eternity starts now, not just when we die, but right now when we reach out for the nail-scarred hand and realize that we are not alone. We have declared obedience to the king, the one dying on a cross and risen from the grave. That one is the one with whom we want to be face-to-face.