

Two common criminals carry their own crosses. They hang alongside Jesus on mount Calvary. Each has taken a different path to this barren, ominous hilltop. They hear Jesus' words from the cross differently that Friday afternoon. They see Jesus differently. They talk to Jesus differently. Jesus listens to them both. One of them has a shred of hope in the Christ. He asks, "***Remember me.***" Jesus tells him, "***...today, you will be with me in paradise.***"

How did these three men get to this place of crucifixion? Two thieves, stealing from others, taking what is not rightfully theirs, absconding with someone else's hard-earned goods or money. I see these two as robbers like the ones who stripped the Samaritan of his clothes, beat him and left him for dead.

They are not good characters. The Greek word to describe them means, "**Those who do evil works.**" They are more like hardened criminals who use violence to get what doesn't belong to them. We do not know their full stories but surely, they deserve what they are getting. We do not know how they eventually came to hang on crosses next to Jesus. Finally, they were caught.

**Jesus did nothing wrong, other than tell the truth,
but He is here hanging on a cross too.**

We are confident that these two criminals **are** really criminals. We should not trust either one of them. Yet, they act so differently towards Jesus. One joins in

the taunts and derision aimed at Jesus by the soldiers and crowds. He hurls insults at Jesus, “*Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!*”

Does this criminal really want to be saved? His heart is hardened. His words are insincere, thrown out at Jesus to mock him even more. Hmmm. I wonder where in our own faith journeys we have mocked Jesus. Maybe we overlook those times, when, in the smallest defiance towards God, we do not pray. Instead, we try to do something without asking God for direction, or for help or for God to *remember me*. Maybe, that is when we, too, have mocked Jesus.

The other criminal responds differently to Jesus. His heart is different: open, softened. We can visualize him, staring at Jesus, believing that maybe, there is hope for him. He rebukes his partner in crime, “Don’t you fear God? We deserve what we’re getting, but this man has done nothing wrong.” **How does he know this?** Whom was he listening to when he gathered that knowledge? Who told you Jesus was innocent and died for you?

I believe that Jesus, hanging from the cross, listened and looked at both of these criminals. Jesus listened to one of them and he was confused, saddened, and bewildered by the loud taunts and mocking voice.

He turned to the other, looked at him with compassion in his eyes after he had told his partner to stop mocking him. Was this look of compassion stirring the soul of the criminal? When Jesus’ gaze of compassion falls upon us, we are not

made to feel small or feel like a nobody. **Jesus accepts us!** This criminal saw Jesus differently. He did not play the victim. He believed Jesus had done no wrong.

Jesus' loving gaze into the criminal's eyes told him all he needed to know.

He asked, **“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”**

This criminal had some knowledge that Jesus was the King, that he represented God's kingdom.

Nobody wants to be forgotten. Nobody wants to be left alone. Everyone wants to be remembered. One criminal tries to bargain with Jesus while taunting him. The other feels the weight of his own sin and seeks forgiveness. When I am feeling low, I ask Jesus, do you remember me? When I think that Jesus hung on the cross for me and for you, it is then, that **I know Jesus remembers me!**

He remembers you!

He remembered this criminal!

How easily it could have been for Jesus, hanging on the cross to think about himself. Jesus could have been doing his own life review; how he was born to Mary and Joseph; how he grew up learning the Hebrew Scriptures; how his father taught him to be a carpenter; how he met John the Baptist and was baptized in the Jordan; how he wandered for 40 days in the wilderness tempted by the devil; how he called his disciples to follow him and how he healed so many people.

I imagine Jesus was filled with a thousand thoughts and feelings that Friday afternoon. He was hanging in pain, wounded, bleeding, life draining out of him, all the while looking down at the soldiers, at the crowds. His ears hear the jeering and jarring noise of their insults. His eyes see the anger on their faces. He knows that they do not know what they were doing. He knows that he is able to save himself and yet, he is willing to die, die slowly, second by second for you, for me, for those who carry their own crosses.

He hung on that cross for all sinners, for all people who get lost, for those who do bad things. Jesus was not afraid to associate with classes of people (criminals, prostitutes, unclean sinners) that you and I would sooner cross over to the other side of the street then associate with them.

The second criminal did not ask for forgiveness, but he was *looking for hope*. He did not ask to be saved. He did not ask for eternal life. ***Hope would do!*** We look for hope in our world too. We get to a point in our life where we cannot go on without hope. There is no use going further if God will not *forgive* us, if God will not *remember* us, if God will not *love* us, if God will not *give us hope*.

Through which criminal's eyes do you see Jesus? Do you see Jesus as a discredited, disillusioned man? Or, do you see him as one who can give hope; as one who embodies love and compassion for people; one who is willing to give his life up for our sake, for the sake of the world?

In Jesus, I see our Savior and our Lord, one who remembers us, who has forgiven us, who loves us and continually covers us in his mercy, one who will come and take us to be with him in Paradise.

In the Bible, when God remembers people, God delivers them! God remembered Noah and saved him from the flood. God remembered Abraham, and spared his nephew, Lot, from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. God remembered Rachel and opened her womb so she could have a child. God remembered his covenant with Abraham and therefore delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt.

When the criminal asks Jesus, “...*remember me* when you come into your kingdom,” Jesus responds, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

When I hear that, I think, ‘that’s more than remembering. **That is eternal life! That is hope!** This one criminal is given the hope he never had in life.’”

I believe this is comforting news. Jesus, who knows this criminal has only a shred of faith, shows compassion upon him and offers him salvation. I believe that as long as we maintain our faith, God will look beyond our failures and sins, and remembers us too.

Finally, what is the *paradise* Jesus quotes? The Greek word in the Bible comes from a Persian word referring to “*a king’s garden.*” In ancient times, a

king's garden was a walled garden of beautiful plants, flowing water, even exotic animals. Perhaps you have visited a renowned Botanical Garden. You were surprised with its beauty and deep serenity. The place may have provided you with a sense of sheer wonder and joy!

Is that what paradise, with Jesus, will look like for believers?

The other day, in a small group here at church, we talked about our impressions of heaven. What do we think it will be like? The words we shared last week in attempting to describe heaven were *peaceful, hopeful, joyful, filled with music, being in the presence of Jesus, and being in a garden* was mentioned too. This is similar to what the author and preacher, Adam Hamilton writes in his book that we are studying during Lent.

The metaphor of the garden should not be too far-fetched for us. God started life in the Garden of Eden. Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, was crucified and buried near a garden at Calvary. However, after Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden of Eden, God's people were never allowed back into the King's Garden. No one ever allowed back, until Jesus was crucified and ascended into heaven, into paradise. Then, the first person Jesus invites into paradise, into the King's garden with him is a dying, hardened criminal.

Jesus has re-opened the gates into the King's Garden. He has forgiven you and he invites you to this paradise, to live forever with him there. Amen.