

Torn in Two from Top to Bottom

A message by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
April 10, 2020 Good Friday

• Mark 15:22-47 (New Revised Standard Version) ²² Then [the Roman soldiers] brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull). ²³ And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it. ²⁴ And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take.

²⁵ It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him. ²⁶ The inscription of the charge against him read, "The King of the Jews." ²⁷ And with him they crucified two bandits, one on his right and one on his left. ²⁹ Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, ³⁰ save yourself, and come down from the cross!" ³¹ In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. ³² Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe." Those who were crucified with him also taunted him.

³³ When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. ³⁴ At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" ³⁵ When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "Listen, he is calling for Elijah." ³⁶ And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down." ³⁷ Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. ³⁸ And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. ³⁹ Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

⁴⁰ There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. ⁴¹ These [women] used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem.

⁴² When evening had come, and since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the sabbath, ⁴³ Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. ⁴⁴ Then Pilate wondered if he were already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he had been dead for some time. ⁴⁵ When he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the body to Joseph. ⁴⁶ Then Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. He then rolled

a stone against the door of the tomb. ⁴⁷ Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where the body was laid.

~ ~ ~

The ancient Jewish Temple in Jerusalem had several sections, one inside the other. The outermost section, called the House of Prayer for All People, was open to the public. Next there was a court – sort of like a balcony – where women were welcomed. Inside that was the large court or hall where men prayed and studied. And within that spacious area reserved for the men, perhaps at one end of the courtyard, was a sealed chamber known as the Holy of Holies. The famous Ark of the Covenant was kept in the Holy of Holies. It contained relics of Israel’s history with God – items like the tablets of the Ten Commandments, Aaron’s walking stick, some remnants of the manna – the food – God provided to feed the Israelites in the desert.

The Jews were very clear – the Ark itself was not God; worshiping that *thing* would be idolatry. But the Ark did symbolize God’s abiding presence with the Chosen People of Israel. Enconced in the Holy of Holies, it became so revered that the belief arose that anyone who even looked at it would die.

Only the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies, and he only on the annual Day of Atonement, to present offerings of incense and animal blood. For his safety, the Ark was behind a large curtain keeping him from seeing this symbol of God’s presence among them.

Remember how Mark’s gospel stated that when Jesus breathed his last, “the curtain in the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom.” The gospel doesn’t say *how* it happened; but the fact that it happened “from top to bottom” signals that God was at work there. When hearing that verse from Mark’s gospel, the Jewish people of his day would have understood immediately the significance of the curtain in the Holy of Holies having been “torn in two from top to bottom”: in the death of Jesus, God’s immense love for all humankind has been revealed for all to see.