

**West Valley Presbyterian Church
Were You There?
Rev. Dr. Kim Engelmann and Readers**

PILATE: MARK 15:15 (MATT)

“Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.” (Mark 15:15)

I am Pontius Pilate. I wanted to release Jesus. I really did. He was fascinating and had a depth of insight that I admired. These religious people and all of their laws and strange ways! I really get frustrated with the whole scene. I wanted to free Jesus and maybe even keep him around for awhile so I could ask him some more philosophical questions about truth and meaning. But I was under a lot of pressure from the crowd, and also from Herod who expected me to keep things in order. I knew in my gut that Jesus was innocent. But I released Barabbas a hardened criminal in his place. He'd murdered and he was dangerous. But, its what *they* wanted and I need to give the people what they want as much as I can— especially the religious people because they are so cantankerous - in order to keep the peace around here. Especially over Passover weekend when this whole area is mobbed! The streets are jammed with people during this festival and I could just imagine a rebellion breaking out. Then I would really be in a difficult position, and there would be even more death of innocent people to deal with. That's how I rationalized it as I washed my hands of the whole situation and handed Jesus over to be crucified. The crowd loved it and

they even shouted, "His blood be on us, and on our children!" I guess they thought they were victorious and I was a hero for the moment for giving in to them. I wasn't able to sleep last night, however. I'm not sure that washing my hands of the whole incident made much of a difference.

HOW DO YOU RESPOND TO THE CROSS? (KIM) *Are you like Pilate? Some commentators say that the crowd's declaration "His blood be on us and on our children" is a hidden prophetic utterance that only Jesus' blood could rescue them from the sin of having him crucified. Despite what you think about that, is pressure from others keeping you from recognizing who Jesus is? Are you giving into peer pressure and conforming to the will of people or to God?*

SIMON OF CYRENE: (Mark 15:21) TIM

“²¹ A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross.” (Mark 15:21)

I am Simon of Cyrene. They forced me to help Jesus carry the cross. I didn't want to be involved. Not one little bit.

I am a Judean and had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. Carrying the cross of a criminal would make me ceremonially unclean and unable to participate in the Passover celebration. Generally, I am one of those guys who likes to stay to himself, do my own thing, on my own terms. Quite frankly, I've seen religion divide people and I don't see a need for it. Besides I just wanted to come and enjoy myself and not be excluded from all of the festivities. I was required by law to be there, so I might as well enjoy myself, right? Life is hard enough as it is. That is why they had to force me to do this unclean thing that did indeed disqualify me from Passover. I think they chose me to do this because I am a large fellow – muscular - and they thought I could handle it. I stand a head taller than most, so they spotted me at once. Anyway, they literally pulled me out of the crowd and ordered me to pick up the cross bar from this guy – he was lying face down in the dirt and couldn't get up with the weight of that beam across his shoulders. The soldiers literally shoved me towards him and as I stooped to lift the cross from him I saw him turn and look up at me. His hair was matted with blood, and his face was disfigured with swelling, but there was gratitude and relief in his eyes. He drew me in, and a longing stirred within me that I didn't know was there. I

wished I had known him before these last hours. As I began trudging up the hill with him staggering behind me, the resentment I had felt for being picked out of the crowd to do this gruesome task, started to melt. I began to feel as if I was doing something *very* important – beyond what I had any idea. A kind of strange gratitude for being involved in this drama came over me. I only wished I had known him before these last moments of his life. Maybe getting involved more with this man and what he stood for would have made me a better person...

HOW DO YOU RESOND TO THE CROSS? (KIM) *Are you like Simon? The way Mark talks about Simon in 15:21 (the father of Alexander and Rufus) indicates that this incident may well have meant Simons conversion – it's as if Mark expects the early Christians to recognize the family...Perhaps you don't want to be too involved either with the things of God - Maybe organized religion has been a negative experience for you. Maybe church politics drags you down, or you just don't know anymore who to trust. But what about a relationship with the person of Jesus? Is he drawing you to himself today?*

The Soldier: (Mark 15:22-24) Bill Pierce

“²² They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means “the place of the skull”). ²³ Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. ²⁴ And they crucified him. Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get.” (Mark 15:22-24)

My name is Alexis. I am a soldier. I work hard at my job. In some ways my job is my life. I am proud to be a soldier for the Roman government, and glad that I can put food on the table in an abundant way for my family. In order to keep my job, I follow orders. I do what I am told. I invest in what my duties are because I believe that it is for a good cause. I follow the rules, and the rules say that when someone is a criminal they must pay for it. Justice must be served. I work for the Romans and Rome is a powerful nation – so clearly the Roman government knows what it is doing when it suppresses rabble rousers and those who would defy the established order of things. If rebellion isn't nipped in the bud, who knows what might transpire? This job requires that I enforce the rules and carry out the punishment for those who break those rules. I do my job and I do it well.

The job of being a soldier also comes with perks. *Don't think that didn't persuade me somewhat to do what I do.* Its quite a lucrative perk actually because every time a criminal is put to death by crucifixion, we all gamble for the criminal's possessions around the base of the cross. It's a good deal because you acquire all kinds of valuables this way – especially if the criminal was a thief. Of course, in the case of Jesus, that Nazarene preacher, he didn't have much to speak of; just a robe and a hooded shawl. I didn't win anything off of

him. Yeah, its always a gamble. I never know if those dice are going to come up in my favor or not. Next time, hopefully they will. I keep trying to win as much as I can cause that all translates into success for me. Ultimately, it's all about doing the job well, staying out of trouble, following orders, and bringing in the bucks. (Pause) *What a storm at that crucifixion for the Nazarene preacher, though!* I've got to tell you...never seen anything like it. Everything got dark, and there was this earthquake that made the whole place shudder. I was actually scared for a few minutes there with the lightening and thunder, but I soon got over it. Soldiers don't generally get scared and I am actually ashamed to share that. Tomorrow is another day, and I will try harder to be brave. I have a lot to do as a soldier and when duty calls, I answer!

HOW DO YOU RESPOND TO THE CROSS? (KIM) *Are you like the soldiers at the cross? They were so wrapped up in their job that they had no idea what was going on. Jesus was right there, but they didn't see, and they didn't understand. Sometimes our duties in life, the pressure for material gain and our day to day jobs get in the way of our spiritual understanding and growth as Christians - of recognizing the presence of Jesus in our midst.*

THE CHIEF PRIEST (MARK 15:31-32) Steve Eldridge

³¹ In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself!

³² Let this Messiah, this king of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe." Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him."

(Mark 15:31-32)

My name is Abishua. I am one of the chief priests in Jerusalem. We have charge over all the functions of the temple. It is our sacred office to offer sacrifices in the temple for the glory of God and the redemption of His people. It is the highest office in the land, and with the scribes, we are the most powerful religious leaders in Israel. Our authority is unquestioned. Everyone knows our lineage. From the time of Aaron, we have been God's chosen vessels, His official ministers. So it has always been. So it shall always be. We view any circumstance which might upset this ancient order and practice with profound concern.

The recent case of the troublemaker Jesus of Nazareth, illustrates my point. You understand, His teachings have disturbed the people and have even called our temple practices into question. A dangerous extremist. He has challenged an authority and practice that transcends our time, one established and approved by longstanding tradition.

Certainly we have encountered similar challenges before; those who would destroy, cloaking themselves in the disguise of reform. But none as dangerous as this Jesus of Nazareth. His followers and sympathizers have numbered in the thousands. Some even dare to claim that He may be the long-awaited Messiah. But surely if that were so, we in the priesthood should have been among the first to acclaim and honor Him. We know what the Messiah will look like and it is not this man! No, I am afraid the people are too easily deluded. You see, we have been aware of Jesus for quite some time. And none of our information substantiates his irresponsible claims. We would have known him of course if he was the Messiah, because we are the chosen ones of God and know the ancient scriptures inside and out. God would have revealed it to us there if Jesus were the Messiah. His tendency to associate with the

unclean – people who are sinners – prostitutes, tax collectors, the lepers and blind who are clearly being punished for their sins – these people are his friends – is just one example of what an imposter he is! We had to put him to death, and make it clear to the common people who don't understand the law the way we do, that this man was not of God and that the power of tradition and the law far outweigh this trouble maker's claims about mercy, justice and compassion. We as the chief priests are the ones to say what is acceptable and unacceptable in the sight of God. No tax collector, prostitute, or anyone who is unclean has any share in relating to a holy God. Thank goodness we put an end to that Jesus movement by nailing him to a Cross!

HOW DO YOU RESPOND TO THE CROSS? (KIM) *Sometimes the most religious among us are the hardest ones to reach with grace and truth. Sometimes tradition (the way we've always done it) gets in the way of a life change that the Holy Spirit may want to accomplish in us. If we say we have no sin in ourselves, if we say that we are good, the truth is not in us. We deceive ourselves. We are all sinners saved by grace, no matter how well we know the Bible, no matter how hard we try to climb a ladder of goodness, we are all in need of rescue. We all need a Savior.*

Mary (Mark 15:40-41) KELLY

“⁴⁰ Some women were watching from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joseph,^[a] and Salome.

⁴¹ In Galilee these women had followed him and cared for his needs. Many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem were also there.”

(Mark 15:40-41)

I am Mary the mother of Jesus. I watched my son die his excruciating death on a cross from a distance. I wept, I cried out to God and I knelt down in the dirt and mud, too weak to stand. I wanted to run up and pull him down off the cross, comfort him, hold him. I couldn't. They wouldn't let me near. As I stood there watching my son be brutalized, I had so many flashbacks of him when he was young. His first smile, learning to speak, to walk. The strongest memory I had though was of the angel Gabriel who came to me in the beginning and told me I was pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit. At that time the angel told me that “a sword would pierce through my soul also.” I didn't understand then. Everything else the angel had said was so positive and reassuring. The angel had told me that I was to name my son Jesus. He would be a Savior, he would lift up people who were sick, oppressed and down-trodden, he would bring God's justice, and he would triumph over evil with good. He was the hope of Israel and the promised anointed one we had all been waiting for. And I had the honor and privilege of raising this child. I looked forward to the day when all of these promises would be fulfilled. And as I watched him heal and help, teach and lead, I thought this was the beginning of a new thing for our nation that God was doing. I was so excited. And then when he rode

into Jerusalem on a donkey for the Passover feast I thought that this must be the moment when he was going to overthrow the Roman government. Instead he ended up being crucified on one of *their* crosses! What a cruel twist of fate!

I don't know what to think anymore – I am so wiped out I can't even think and I don't want to. Despair is closing in. How can I believe the promises the angel gave me after watching my son die? My eyes are swollen with grief. Life has a way of turning on you and dashing your hopes...making light and hope grow dim. My son is gone. Can the dead live again? Can my son be restored? Of course not. There is no way out of my anguish, and I am alone in my darkness.

(KIM) HOW DO YOU RESPOND TO THE CROSS? ARE YOU LIKE MARY? *Has life hit you hard? Dashed your hopes? Is it too hard to pray? It is at these times that God is closer to us than we have any idea. Just when we think the end has come and there is no way out, God makes a way. Know that God is faithful and will be faithful to you. All his promises are true and reliable. Mary will find this out very soon.*

THE CENTURION: Bob Harrison (MARK 15:39)

“And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how

he died, he said, “Surely this man was the Son of God!” (Mark 15:39)

I am Gamaliel, the centurion. I stood in front of Jesus and heard him cry out from the cross that Friday at 3pm. It was the last breath of a dying man. It's not like I haven't been in this situation before. I have overseen many crucifixions, but none like this. What happened that day at Golgotha – (Golgotha is a garbage dump outside the city in the shape of a skull where we often carry out the crucifixions)- what happened that day at Golgotha was horrific and life changing. I was there when the darkness covered the whole area for three hours. I was there when we were all shrouded by a dark curtain of clouds that completely shrouded us from the sun. I was there when the ground trembled beneath us. I saw rocks rolling and splitting, I heard thunder and I observed lightning streaking across the sky. I felt the rain pelting down on me, and then I heard his cry. This cry from the man on the cross. He had just moments before cried out “My God My God Why Have You Forsaken Me?” and it was a cry that sounded like someone who was dying not from nails piercing flesh but rather from a broken heart. And then came his very last heaving cry...and that is when I knew. This was no other than the Son of God. Here I stood before him, and I had overseen his death. I had told them all what to do to murder an innocent holy man. And I was filled with despair that I had been a part of his death and yet with utter conviction, not caring what those around me would think...I shouted out with a conviction that filled me and overwhelmed me so that I could not keep silent...“Surely this was the Son of God!” As soon as the words of true confession were off of my lips I fell to my knees. Before that cross I worshipped. I don't know why I knew; me a Roman Centurion with no religious training, here I was kneeling at the cross of a Jewish rabbi. And yet I knew I was in the presence of holiness. I knew that God was there, and that somehow my recognition of who Jesus was made the difference between life and death.

BOB YOU DO THIS: *Are you like the centurion? Do you recognize Jesus as Savior and Lord? Can you stand at the base of the cross as this centurion did and declare your need for him? It doesn't matter how much religious training you've had, or how well you understand everything. All*

Jesus asks is that you confess him in faith, and recognize him as Lord. It will make the difference between life and death for you.

As we take communion may you come to the cross in the depths of your heart, recognize that his death was so that you could be set free. May you come to him today in a whole new way, even if you've done it before, and declare him Lord of your life.