

That Can't Be!
Luke 23:27-43

It is no surprise that the religious leaders would scoff at Jesus while He hung dying on the cross. Time and time again He had revealed their hypocrisy and sin. None of the tricks they tried or traps they set worked. The truth that Jesus spoke always prevailed.

It's no surprise that the soldiers would mock Jesus. They were serving far from home in a land they didn't like among a people they didn't like. This Jesus had thought He was some kind of a big shot. They were glad to put Him in His place – nailed to a cross.

It's really no surprise that even one of the criminals crucified with Jesus would rail at Him. Our twisted human nature delights in the suffering of others. The old Adam in us shows itself when we verbally attack people at home, work, or school. As long as Jesus is the one being harassed, this criminal isn't, so he joins in on the fun.

These things don't surprise us. But what about some other things in our reading from Luke?

The women of the LWML get scolded for weeping for Jesus, but He speaks words of comfort and promise to a convicted criminal? That can't be!

Blessed are the barren? That can't be! How can Jesus say that? Being barren back then was seen as a curse, not a blessing. It is a heavy burden to bear for many couples still today. Blessed are the barren? Really?

And people will want mountains to fall on them? That can't be! Would anyone want to die in such a way? Really?

Well, yes. Things are going to get really ugly in Jerusalem in about 40 years. Jesus says, "*For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?*" Many have taken this to mean, "If the Romans beat and crucify an innocent man like me, how will they treat you when you are guilty of rebellion against Rome?" We know the answer. In 70 A.D. every building in the city is torn down and burned, and horrific things happen to its inhabitants.

Jesus means it when He says, "*Blessed are the barren...*" They will not have to watch their children be slaughtered by the Roman soldiers. The people would long for the quick death of being crushed by a mountain rather than be tortured. The women, as long as they survived, would indeed weep for themselves and for their children.

Now, what about the words of comfort and promise spoken to the other criminal? The first rails, "*Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!*" But the other rebuked him, saying, "*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.*" And he said to him, "*Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.*"

That is faith! When everything is looking good – when the bills are paid, when I'm healthy, when my relationships seems to be going well – it's easy to say, "Yeah, Jesus, He's my guy!"

But what about when a heavy load of debt is hanging over my head, when I, or someone I love has serious health issues, or when an important relationship is in the toilet? Then can you say, “Yeah, Jesus, He’s my guy!?” No, you can’t. If you do say it, it’s not you. It is the Holy Spirit dwelling in you. They are words of God given faith.

There is no other way to explain why the thief would say to Jesus, “[R]emember me when you come into your kingdom.” What kind of kingdom could Jesus possibly have? And how could the criminal think he could be a part of it? It would not be an earthly one. They were both about to die.

It would be the eternal kingdom of the heavenly Father. Jesus would sit enthroned in power and glory in this kingdom as the Son of the Father. The faith of the criminal grasped this, and held on tightly to this vision as nails held him tightly to his own cross.

The faith of the criminal was confirmed by Jesus with words of comfort and promise: *“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”*

Before that could happen, there was this little matter of dying to pay for the sins of the world. Of all the things in our text to which we might say, “That can’t be!” is that Jesus, Himself, would become the worst criminal ever.

“Jesus, the worst criminal ever? That can’t be!” you say. The editors of eight different English translations of the Bible agree with you. The Greek could be translated “Two other criminals were led away to be put to death with him.” “But, no, we can’t call Jesus a criminal. We will translate it,

“Two others, who were criminals... Two others, who were evildoers... Two others, who were malefactors...” We can’t call Jesus a criminal, an evildoer, a malefactor.”

And yet He was... really. Jesus became the worst murderer, vilest sex offender, most nefarious thief, and most vicious slanderer the world has ever seen. How can this be? Jesus took on Himself the sins of all people of all time. Jesus took on Himself your sin.

Carrying that great weight, He suffered the torment of hell as His heavenly Father turned His back on Him. Jesus knew what it was like, for the very first time, to be shut off from the love of His Father. It was agonizing. It was hell... And then He died.

With His death the sin of the world was paid for. With His death your sin was paid for. With His resurrection came the promise of life everlasting in paradise. Through faith, the confessing criminal was received into that kingdom that day.

Your day is coming! In two years? In twenty years? We don’t know. But we do know that when that day comes Jesus will welcome us into His paradise. He has gifted us with faith, and through that faith we will be with Him forever.

Jesus is the Christ, and He has saved us through His life, death, and resurrection. The devil would like us to believe, “That can’t be! A miserable sinner like you?” But faith says, *“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”* And He does. Jesus’ words of comfort and promise are for you: “[Y]ou will be with me in paradise.” Amen.