

Title: The Cross**[Slide 1]****Text: Mark 15:21-41****“You are my Son”****The beginning of the Good News:**

A story is a kind of journey. You cannot understand the “happily ever after” unless you know what happened “once upon a time.” The story of Jesus is no different: you cannot understand the final journey to the Place of the Skull where Jesus was crucified unless you know the “once upon a time” where the story begins.

The very first story about Jesus begins with a mysterious prediction. John the Baptist is out in the wilderness – the place where God was expected to create a New Israel to be His people. He is baptizing people in the Jordan River for the forgiveness of their sins. And he promises that in response, God will come and dwell with them:

[Slide 2]*Mark 1:7 NIV*

And this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Hadn't God come to dwell with his people at Mount Sinai? Hadn't He traveled with them through the wilderness to the Promised Land? Well, out here in the wilderness by the Jordan River, He was going to come again. The mystery Person who was coming would pour out God's own Holy Spirit upon them.

Jesus' Baptism:

Jesus, of course, is that mystery Person. He comes to John to be baptized. In so doing, He identifies Himself with broken, lost and sinful Israel – a people in exile needing forgiveness. Mark focuses on what happens next:

[Slide 3]

Mark 1:10-11 NIV

Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

Mark had begun his gospel by saying:

[Slide 4]

Mark 1:1 NIV

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God,

Now we know that *this Jesus*, Jesus from Nazareth, is the one who brings the Holy Spirit. This Jesus is the Son of God.

Cosmic Temple:

The Jewish people of Mark's time saw the world as a "cosmic temple" that God had created as a place in which to dwell. It was divided into "the heavens and the earth." God dwelled in "the heavens" on the other side of the visible sky. Humans dwelled on the earth. In between, God had created a sacred space where heaven and earth overlapped. It was there that He would dwell with human beings created in His image.

The people who came to John to be baptized knew that they had lost the vital connection with God that He had promised. He was in heaven; they were on earth. By being baptized and repenting of their sins, they hoped that God would once again create that sacred space where they could encounter and know Him.

And that is precisely what happened when Jesus was baptized. Mark tells us that as Jesus came up out of the water he saw heaven being torn open." The veil or canopy of the sky parted to open a window between heaven and earth, between God and humans. God's own Spirit came down out of heaven to rest on Jesus.

Jesus became that place where heaven and earth overlapped. Jesus became the place where God dwelled with humans.

And then God Himself spoke from heaven:

"You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

God was in the house in the presence of His only Son.

Golgotha

The Temple:

For the Jewish people the city of Jerusalem was the center of the earth. It was the city where God had chosen to dwell. And it was there that, at His command, they had built His Temple.

[Slide 5]

If the heavens and the earth formed a cosmic temple, then the Temple in Jerusalem was a kind of miniature Cosmos – a three-dimensional representation of heaven and earth laid on its side:

- The courtyard in front of it represented the earth. A large basin of water represented the Sea. A large altar provided the place for the sacrifices which made a person set apart or "holy" so that they could approach God.
- Enter through the immense, east-facing doors and you came to a large room called "The Holy Place." This room served as a kind of Garden of Eden. It was decorated with carved palm trees on the walls. A seven-branched lampstand represented the Tree of Life. A table with bread offered table fellowship with God. And each day a priest burnt incense on a golden altar. Its smoke went up like a cloud in front of a beautiful and ornate curtain at the far end of the room. This was the place where heaven and earth overlapped. It was here that God met with the priest on behalf of everyone else.
- This curtain, or veil, represented the sky – the barrier between heaven and earth, God and humankind. Behind the veil was a room called "The Holy of Holies." It represented heaven itself – God's dwelling place. Once a year the high priest would go into this space on behalf of all the people.

Golgotha:

Just a few hundred yards from the Temple stood a rocky outcropping that was rounded in the shape of a skull. It was outside the city walls, near a garden. The Temple was the most holy and sacred place on earth; this bare, blood-spattered hilltop was the exact opposite. It was here that criminals and

blasphemers were nailed to crosses to die. Didn't the Holy Scripture say: "Cursed is anyone who is hanged on a tree?" This was Golgotha, the Place of the Skull.

But on Friday, April 3, A.D. 33 Golgotha would be forever changed. On that day, the mystery Person who walked into the waters of the Jordan River to identify with sin-enslaved humanity would turn The Place of the Skull and a Roman cross into the cosmic altar on which He would give Himself as sacrifice for the sins of the world.

Jesus' death:

Mark tells us that Jesus was crucified at 9:00 a.m. For the next 6 hours He endured every kind of abuse and rejection that human beings could throw at Him. The sign over His head mocked Him as a fake king. The mob that had howled for His death now taunted Him to come down from the cross. The religious elite who had condemned Him to death, offered to convert to His cause if He would come down from the cross. Even the two rebels crucified with Him heaped insults on Him.

Then, at 3:00 p.m. as death drew near, He cried out those desolate words:

[Slide 6]

Mark 15:34b NIV

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

A moment later He was gone. As His last cry echoed off the city walls the ground began to shake from a massive earthquake. It collapsed buildings in Jerusalem. It shook the very foundations of the great Temple. Mark tells us:

[Slide 7]

Mark 15:38 NIV

The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.

At the cross

The Son of God!

In the ancient world there was nothing more obscene or revolting than crucifixion. Cicero wrote:

[Slide 8]

"Even the mere word, cross, must remain far not only from the lips of the citizens of Rome, but also from their thoughts, their eyes, their ears."

He described crucifixion as "the grossest, cruelest, or most hideous manner of execution. (quoted from Cicero, *Pro Rabirio V. 16* as cited in Lane, The Gospel of Mark, p. 561)

But on that dark, evil day, the God of heaven tore open the veil between heaven and earth to make The Place of the Skull the door to eternal life, and to make the dreaded Cross the final altar for the sacrifice that would forgive the sins of the world.

At Jesus' baptism, the curtain of the cosmic temple had parted so that God could speak and send His Spirit upon Jesus. Now, at the moment of Jesus' death, an earthquake ripped in two the curtain in the Temple – from top to bottom.

Once again a voice called out the true identity of this Jesus. But this time the voice came not from God, but from the very soldier who had put Jesus on the cross!

[Slide 9]

Mark 15:39 NIV

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!"

At Jesus' baptism God had spoken to earth. At Jesus' death, earth spoke back to the entire cosmos: Surely this man was the Son of God!

Simon of Cyrene:

So how do we come to this place where heaven meets earth and where God is forever present in the person of His Son? Like the people of Jesus' day, we live in a busy and faithless world. Heaven is as far away from us as it was from them.

Perhaps Mark gives us a hint of the path we must choose. It comes in the form of a brief comment in the middle of Jesus' journey to Golgotha:

[Slide 10]

Mark 15:21 NIV

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 his cross.

The crossbeam that had been put on Jesus' back was too much for Him to bear, so the soldiers conscripted a stranger to carry it for Him. In a strange way, he fulfilled Jesus' command:

[Slide 11]

Mark 8:34 NIV

"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

The cross Simon carried was not meant for him. It was not *his cross*. Or was it? After all, it would be on *that* cross that Jesus would die for Simon of Cyrene and us all.

At the cross:

It is only at the cross that we can truly see how much God loves us. It is only at the cross that we can find forgiveness. It is only at the cross that there is room for every person in God's wide world.

It is only at the cross that heaven truly meets earth.

At the cross.

LIFE Group Lesson for "Golgotha"

Ice Breaker

- When you were a child, what did you think God was like? Did you have a mental picture of Him? Was He friendly or scary?

"We have seen His glory!"

- In the beginning of his gospel, John tells us that he and the other followers of Jesus had actually *seen* God in all His glory through Jesus:
 - *John 1:14 NIV*
 - *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*
 - *John 1:18 NIV*
 - *No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.*
- So what does God's glory look like when it is displayed in human form?
- Jesus gives us the answer as He prepares His followers for his coming death on the cross:
 - *John 12:23-24 NIV*
 - *Jesus replied, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed."*
 - *John 12:27-28 NIV*
 - *"Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!"*
 - *Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again."*
- Finally, He explains what this all means to the uncomprehending crowd around Him:
 - *John 12:30-32 NIV*
 - *Jesus said, "This voice was for your benefit, not mine. Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.*

- Did you get that? Glory = death on a cross.
 - Jesus plays the words “lifted up” to mean both a way of being exalted in glory *and* the lifting up of Himself on the cross.
- This is what the glory of God looks like:
 - It is only on the cross that we see the true heart and character of the God who created us, loves us and redeems us.

Prayer time:

- Where do you need to see the glory of God in your life or your circumstances?
- Pray for God’s love and power to be displayed in this situation.