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Everyone Has Their Part to Play
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John 19:1-16a

Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. ² And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe. ³ They kept coming up to him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and striking him on the face. ⁴ Pilate went out again and said to them, "Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against him." ⁵ So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, "Here is the man!" ⁶ When the chief priests and the police saw him, they shouted, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and crucify him; I find no case against him." ⁷ The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God."

⁸ Now when Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever. ⁹ He entered his headquarters again and asked Jesus, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. ¹⁰ Pilate therefore said to him, "Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?" ¹¹ Jesus answered him, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin." ¹² From then on Pilate tried to release him, but the Jews cried out, "If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor."

¹³ When Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus outside and sat on the judge's bench at a place called The Stone Pavement, or in Hebrew Gabbatha. ¹⁴ Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon. He said to the Jews, "Here is your King!" ¹⁵ They cried out, "Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!" Pilate asked them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but the emperor." ¹⁶ Then he handed him over to them to be crucified.

When preserving one's personal power and privilege is presumed necessary, and when trying NOT to do the worst wrong thing is one's moral boundary, one is likely to find oneself in the same, impossible predicament where Pontius Pilate found himself in John, chapter 19: *The most powerful man in Israel, more afraid than ever*, John says in verse 8. Afraid to flex that power to do what **he knew** was the right, **the just!** thing to do.

Pilate knows Jesus is innocent, doesn't he? Three times he goes back to the crowd waiting outside his headquarters, saying, *I can find no case against him*. And every time, these opponents of Jesus – these **biblical people**, along with the mob that has assembled

– shout him down, screaming for Jesus' execution. The last time, the biblical people up the charge, claiming Jesus called himself *Son of God* – a title reserved for Caesar. They dare Pilate to choose Jesus over Caesar, exposing for all the world to see whom they themselves had already chosen.

I really want you to get this, friends; I really want you to see what is happening here. Biblical people, lovers of God and God's word, are begging the oppressors of their own country; they are putting their hope and trust in the war-mongering, slave-keeping leadership of this world, while God's own self – beaten, bloody and bruised – stands to the side, the breathing embodiment of truth; of life; of grace; of peace; of hope.

Pilate, of course, is not free to act. He is stuck. Terribly stuck. Jesus tells him so in verses 9-11. *Where are you from?* Pilate wants to know. We already know. John told us with his opening sentences. Jesus is from God.

At first Jesus doesn't answer Pilate. Pilate pontificates about his personal power, "I can release you or crucify you." Maybe he can, but he doesn't. He's paralyzed to do either the right or the wrong thing. Jesus does answer then, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the ones who handed me over to you are guilty of a greater sin."

There's a tinge of grace there, almost as if Jesus acknowledges the impossible position Pilate's in. To do the right thing – that is, release Jesus – may well ignite the very chaos he's trying to prevent. So he starts out by doing lesser wrong things than crucify him. But sadly, the flogging (remember, that's 39 lashes with bone- or metal-tipped whips) and public humiliation don't satisfy this crowd's bloodlust. And so the great handing off of Jesus, begun so many hours ago, is now completed. Judas handed Jesus off to the biblical people who handed him off to Pilate who now hands him off to the executioners – not one of them having the slightest inkling that Jesus goes only when and where HE chooses, that they are each and every one agents of their own choices, but also players in a drama set in motion by the will of God for their own eternal benefit. And ours.

How many Bible studies have I attended in which we whipped ol' Pilate good? Or these Pharisees and Sadducees? Which, by the way, is why I'm not calling them Jews today – but rather, *biblical people*. Because if we are anyone in the text, we are them: people more confident than most that we know what God thinks and wants in this world.

But there were lots of players. There is Judas. Maybe he was just a thief. Or maybe he was a disciple who thought he could help the movement by rescuing it from a leader who insisted on working against the system when they might have worked better with it. Who was too trusting of powerful people when they offered to help him and who got burned for it.

There were the soldiers who did the dirty work of executioners. So easy to say we'd never do that, except that we expect soldiers to do terrible things on our behalf ALL the time – until we find out after the fact how terrible they were, and claim they should somehow have been more honorable or moral or braver than any of us has ever been required to be. Read The Things They Carried, by Tim O'Brien.

Then there is the mob, the ones yelling for Jesus' death. My mom used to say that my dad could go to a ball game between two teams he'd never heard of, and five minutes in he'd be a diehard fan of one of them. People will literally get into a line without knowing what the line is for. This happened to us when our family went to Paris a few years ago. We were going to a museum on the subway when the train began to fill up with more and more African people all dressed up. We got so curious that when they all got off at the same stop, we did too. We forgot about the museum and spent the whole afternoon at the West African Bastille Day Street Festival.

In the best and worst sense of the word, we are tribal creatures; we hunger to be part of a group, sometimes ANY group. We care more about belonging than we care about the mission of the group. Sometimes we belong to one group simply to stake our opposition to another.

This crowd screaming for Jesus' crucifixion is all the scarier for being made up of people who have no idea who Jesus is, who have no opinion about his guilt or innocence, and who will not remember this afternoon a year later. We're most obviously like these biblical people than all the others, of course – not for being so mad at Jesus, but for thinking ourselves the religious ones; claiming the high ground of biblical faith and the call to love others as God loves us; burdened by the injustice of the world; dedicated to its correction; and wishing it were just as easy as all that.

Because, brokenhearted as we are about all the sadness and injustice everywhere, knowing the truth and being able to do anything about it is (and this is as theological as I know how to put it) A Big, Fat Mess, so long as Jesus hasn't risen from the dead. OR, so long as those who claim to be his own don't believe he has. Because honestly, what is the functional difference?

If Jesus didn't rise, which he hadn't when Pilate was turning himself inside out and this mob was screaming its head off, the gospel wasn't yet in play. So they couldn't think or act outside the confines of their privilege. Because outside that privilege, they had no hope! The truth can't set you free, if the only truth you know is what this world dishes up! Jesus risen from the dead is the truth that sets us free – free from everything besides that Truth itself.

How, how, HOW is it possible, friends, that a worldly man like Pilate got talked out of the truth by biblical people? Biblical people are supposed to be sensitizing this world to the

ways of God – by our words and our deeds, PREACHING to this world the justice and goodness and grace and hope of God.

In my experimental psychology lab job in college, I put rats in mazes and timed how long it took them to learn certain patterns. But before I could do that my professor, Dr. Haggbloom, had to take me through desensitization therapy so I could handle the rats – because rats are gross and creepy. Desensitization happens through repeated exposure to the object of one's revulsion. In the case of lab rats, the exposure was measured and progressively more intense in a very short time. I was handling rats within two hours of being terrified of them.

Pilate got over crucifying an innocent man in the course of a morning. The more the crowd screamed at him, the more guilty Jesus sounded. The more beaten, bloody and bruised Jesus got, the more guilty Jesus looked – never mind that the crowd and Pilate were causing the very degradation convincing them of his guilt.

Pilate, the biblical people, and this unthinking mob commit themselves to continuous injustice to justify the injustice required to maintain the power and privilege they believe they need in order to be safe and well in the world. The dog believes his tail is chasing him – and he doesn't know how to make it stop.

Nothing ever means just one thing in John. All we can see and hear is never all that's going on. Our text ends with Jesus beaten, bloody and bruised, handed over one more time from the politician to the military death squad. And the power in the scene lies in the least obvious location.

But everyone has their part to play, including us. And our part is not to say what we would have done had we been there then. But rather: here and now, how shall we live these days by faith in the whole gospel, fearless and alive, sure of nothing more than that we are sure we have nothing left to lose that we cannot do without – crazy as that sounds out loud.

Because he rose, we will too. Will you pray with me?