

Everyone, I think, is in a hurry to get to Easter. You might've noticed on the sign, the school billboard just behind the church here, on your way in that one of the things that they have going through their pictures is "Happy Easter." And I've heard people say at the store and other places too, "Happy Easter!" They're looking forward to Sunday. They're looking forward to what is to come. And that's fine. There's nothing wrong with that. Easter is a time of joy. Easter is a wonderful thing. A time when we can worship the Lord, a time when we can be together with family, a time when we can have good food. Those are all wonderful gifts of God. But I wonder if in our rush to get to Sunday, we sometimes forget about today, forget about Good Friday. Because what is the purpose of today at all? Why are we here today? What is it that we have come to celebrate? Is Good Friday just a necessary step to get to Easter? Because Jesus has to die before he can rise, after all, so maybe we just need to focus on this so that we can get to Sunday. Or is Good Friday something that is good in its own right? Something that is important? Something that we should focus on?

Consider this, Christians, as an answer to that question. When God talks about the suffering, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus in the Gospels, he spends two whole chapters talking about Maundy Thursday and especially talking about Good Friday. Two whole chapters and very long chapters at that! God is focusing on the events of today. But when it comes to Easter morning, to the resurrection, it gets not even a full chapter. Like here in Matthew, we just heard most of chapter 26 and all of chapter 27, very long accounts of what is happening on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. But the resurrection, Easter morning in chapter 28, isn't even a third of the whole chapter. It's just a few verses. Now, that doesn't mean that Easter is unimportant. By no means. Easter is important. We should look forward to it. But God himself considers today so important that he spends so much time talking about it, talking about everything that is happening. So yes, Christians, Good Friday is a day we should pay attention to, because this is something that teaches us things that we don't even see on Easter.

And to really learn that, to really focus on that, we want to look at just a little part of our reading for tonight from Matthew chapter 27, just after the death of Jesus Christ. Because when we talk about these things, it will show us what Good Friday has to teach us. And it will show us why it's so important.

So we begin at verse 51: "And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom." So Jesus has just died. We know that. And now Matthew tells us that the curtain of the temple has been split into two. What's the significance of that? Why is this important? Why is he talking about this? Why is that curtain even there? If you were to go into the temple, Christians, you would see this great curtain in the middle of it. Remember, the temple is about a hundred feet tall. It's a huge building. And this curtain goes all the way to the top on the inside, so you're talking about a single piece of fabric eighty to a hundred feet tall. This gigantic curtain which separates the temple into different sections. Its whole purpose is to serve as a kind of wall, as a kind of division between parts of the temple, so that the outer part of the temple where most people could go was separated from the inner part of the temple where very few people could go by this great curtain. And the only people who could go behind that curtain were the high priests, and even then they could only go at certain times of the year. It was a division between God and his people, because God said that he would be behind that curtain, that he would be in the innermost parts of the temple. And because he was separated by this curtain, there were very few

people who could come to him. Now, that division, of course, was actually necessary. It had to be there, because God, after all, is holy, and we are not. If we come before God in our sinfulness, we would be destroyed. And so what God did for his people at that time was to give them a kind of barrier, a kind of covering, something to stand in between himself and his people. And as long as that barrier was there, his people would not be destroyed, and they could have God living among them. But as long as that barrier was there. There was always something in between us and God. Our sins kept us away from God. We could not come to him even if we wanted to.

But when Jesus dies, Christians, the curtain is torn in two. No longer is there a barrier between God and his people. No longer is there this division between us and God. God himself has cleared the way. God himself, by giving his Son to die for us, has forgiven us our sins, and now we can come to God. We can call on him as Father. We have access to God through the flesh of Jesus Christ, as the book of Hebrews tells us. We who were separated have been brought near, because Jesus died so that we would have access to God, so that we would be able to be reconciled with him. So yes, Christians, this is important. It shows us how Good Friday is important. The death of Christ has brought us back to God.

The second thing that we learn here is the other half of verse 51: "And the earth shook and the rocks were split." That's an important detail right there, because it shows us that God himself is present. Whenever God shows up in the Old Testament among his people, we very often see these kinds of earthquakes, these kinds of things that happen along with it. Think of Mount Sinai, for example, when God came down and gave the law to his people. The mountain shook at the presence of God. It was a literal earthquake, because God had come down to earth. And that's what's happening here too. It shows us that this is God doing something, that it is God who is accomplishing all these things. Because this isn't just an ordinary man dying an ordinary death on an ordinary cross. This is God himself coming down among us to work our salvation. So yes, this shows us too why Good Friday is important, because it's not just Jesus as a man dying on the cross. It is God bringing us our salvation.

The next little detail comes in verse 52: "The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection, they went into the holy city and appeared to many." Now this is only recorded here in the Gospel of Matthew. None of the other Gospels talk about this. But it's still important, because it shows us what Jesus's death does for us. When Jesus dies, the debt has been paid. The sins that have kept us away from God are now taken care of. Which means that the judgment that we deserved has also been taken away. And these Old Testament saints with the judgment being taken away from them rise again to new life. We're not told what happens to them, but that's not really the point. The point is that they rise the moment that Jesus dies. And that's an important point to remember here, Christians. Because I think sometimes we connect the resurrection very often with Jesus' resurrection. And while it's true that Jesus' resurrection shows us that we too will rise, his resurrection is not the reason why we will rise. His resurrection is only proof that we will. The reason why we will rise is because he has died. He has died to take our punishment. He has died so that we would live again. God himself has been laid into the grave, so that we would come forth to live with him forever. That's why Good Friday is also important, Christians, because it shows us that God gives us life through the death of his Son.

And the last little detail we see here is in verse 54: "When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, 'Truly this was the son of God!'" Now, this is important too, because it shows us that when these soldiers and this centurion saw the death of Jesus, they believed in him. They knew that he had come to forgive their sins. They knew that he was the one who had come to give them everlasting life. Now, why that's so important is because these guys don't know who Jesus is before this point. They are not Jews. It's not like they went to Sunday school or went to Bible class a whole bunch. They don't know what the Bible says. All they know about Jesus is what they have seen in the past several hours. Yet even knowing that little, they come to believe in him as the Savior, as the one who has come to take away their sins. Because Jesus' death gives us the Holy Spirit to believe in him, to know that he is our Savior, to know that he has come to set us free, no matter who we are, no matter if we have known him all our lives or haven't known him for ten minutes. Jesus will be our Savior, because he is the one who sets us free.

So Christians, we can see through all of these things the importance of Good Friday. We don't want to just skip it over in our rush to get to Easter. Easter is important. We'll get to Easter soon enough. But let's pay attention to what God has to teach us today, that the death of Jesus Christ is the very heart of the Gospel, the very heart of our hope, to know that God himself has given us his Son so that whoever believes in him might not perish but have eternal life. When we focus on these things, Christians, when we focus on Good Friday, it will give us hope. So that no matter if we are worried, no matter if we are afraid, no matter if we are grieving, no matter if we are suffering, Good Friday gives us hope, because this is the Christian hope: that Jesus Christ has died so that we would live.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, we thank you for the gift of your Son Jesus Christ. We thank you that you have sent him to die for us, so that we may live. Help us always to trust in him, knowing that he is the resurrection and the life, and knowing that in him is all our hopes. In his name we pray. Amen.