

It is now nearly dawn on Good Friday. And apparently it was a pretty cold morning, because Peter feels the need to warm himself by the fire. He's standing in the courtyard of the high priest, waiting to see what the outcome of the trial will be. And while he's standing there warming himself, a servant girl says to him, "You also were with the Nazarene, Jesus." Why did she say that? I'm almost certain she has no idea who Peter is. How does she know that he might be connected with Jesus? Actually, it's because of how Peter talks. Peter has an accent, it seems. We learn in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 26, the bystanders say to Peter, "Certainly, you too are one of them, for your accent betrays you." Being from Galilee meant that he talked a little bit differently. Maybe he had a little bit of a twang to the way that he spoke. It was obvious that he was from out of town. And so this servant girl figures, "Well, this guy is from Galilee. Jesus is from Galilee, so they must have come here together. They must be connected in some way." It's an assumption, of course. There's no way she can actually prove it, but she happens to be right.

So Peter has a choice in this moment. He can either accept it, acknowledge that he is with Jesus, speak the truth, or he can deny it and take the easy way out. And Peter, unfortunately, chooses the easy way. He chooses to deny his Lord. He effectively says to her, "You're making assumptions about me! Yes, I'm from Galilee. That much is obvious, but you don't know a thing about me. Just because I'm from there doesn't mean that I belong to Jesus. I have no idea who this man is!" It's an easy way for him to get out of a sticky situation, a plausible deniability, as it were. It seems reasonable to say, "Just because I'm from Galilee doesn't mean that I belong to Jesus." And he denies it two more times. "I do not know this man. Leave me alone!"

But then the rooster crows a second time. And Peter realizes what he has done. He has denied his Lord just like Jesus said that he would. And Peter weeps, realizing that this is what has happened. He has denied Jesus because he wanted to play it safe. He has denied Jesus because he didn't want to risk anything for his Lord.

But the dawn is now breaking, and the council takes Jesus bound to Pilate. We might ask, why are they taking him to Pilate? Why don't they just try him themselves? Why do they need to go to the Romans? Who is Pilate anyway? Christians, Pilate, of course, is the Roman governor of Judea at this time. And Rome has ruled over Judea for going on 100 years by this point. At first, they used kings to rule for them. You remember Herod, after all, King Herod in the Christmas story who tried to kill baby Jesus. He was a king, but he was under the Roman empire. They figured as long as he acknowledged that the emperor was his lord, he could do whatever he wanted. And that was a pretty good deal. It was a good way to rule over these distant nations. But after Herod died, his son, Herod Antipas, became king. And Herod Antipas was a terrible king. In fact, he was so bad, the Romans said, "We've had enough of this. We're going to rule this country ourselves. We're going to do it directly." And so they brought in some military commanders to become the governor of this region. Pilate is the fifth governor who has ruled over this land, and he started his reign in the year 26. And so he is the one in control. He is the one taking care of all the affairs of this land.

And one of the things that the Romans did for themselves to help maintain that control was to keep the right of executing criminals for themselves. The people they ruled over weren't allowed to do it. If they had someone they wanted to put to death, they needed to go to the Romans. So that's what the council is doing. They are bringing Jesus to the only person who is legally

allowed to execute him. They have to make their case before the Roman governor if they want to put this man to death.

But Pilate, for his part, is probably not all that interested. Because we learn from history, Christians, that Pilate was a cruel man. He was a good governor, certainly, but he wasn't all that interested in playing nice. He wanted to rule and make sure things went the way that he wanted them to go. And sometimes that meant that his actions angered the Jews. There was one occasion, for example, where he decided to set up some golden shields in and around the temple in Jerusalem. Which would've been fine, I suppose, except for the fact that these shields had printed on them a picture of the emperor and depicting him as a god. And so the Jews were understandably upset about this. "This is idolatry! This is blasphemy! Why would you put these in the temple?" And so they revolted. And the only way that Pilate regained order was when the emperor told him to take the shields away, to put them in Caesarea by the sea. Then he would be able to regain order within this nation. And it was events like this, and this wasn't the only one by any means, that put Pilate on pretty thin ice with the emperor. The emperor basically told him, "You need to play nice. You cannot anger these people anymore, because if you upset them again, you're going to lose your job." And so Pilate now is stuck. He has to play nice. He has to go along with what they're doing, to a point, because otherwise the emperor is going to remove him.

And so he hears the case, then, that the council brings against Jesus. They come to him and they say, "This man claims to be a king! This man claims that he is going to set up a kingdom, and he is going to rule in place of Caesar." Now, pay attention here. They've changed their story. Because remember a couple hours earlier, as we heard last week, the charge they brought against him was blasphemy. They said he has blasphemed, and for that reason, he should be put to death. But the problem was that the Romans didn't care about blasphemy. That was a local problem. That was not something they were concerned with. So if they want Pilate to listen to them, they need to say something that Pilate's actually going to listen to. And in this case, treason. But it shows you just how badly they want to put him to death. They're even changing their story midstream so that they get anything to condemn him. And they bring accusation after accusation against him to the governor, hoping that something will stick.

Now, normally, we would expect Jesus to say something at this point. Normal Roman legal procedure was that the accusation was made, then the defendant spoke for himself, and then the judge would make the ruling. That's how it was supposed to go. But Jesus doesn't say anything. He doesn't defend himself at all, so that Pilate is amazed, frankly. He's probably never seen anything like it in all of his career: a man who doesn't even want to defend himself against his accusers! "Don't you hear how many things they're saying? Why won't you say something?" But Jesus remains silent. And so Pilate is trying to figure out to do.

Now, Pilate may have been a cruel man, Christians, but he wasn't stupid. He knew that they were just trying to kill him. He knew that they didn't really have a good case against him. He knew that it was out of envy that they had delivered him up. And so Pilate, being the shrewd man that he is, decides to beat them at their own game. He is going to do something that will force them to let him go. And the people have this custom every year of where one prisoner is released to them. The governor pardons them, and they are set free. So Pilate figures, "I can use this to my

advantage. I will appeal to the crowd. The crowd will want him let go, and then they can't do anything about it. I will have won, and I wouldn't even have to lift a finger in this case." And so he appeals to the crowd: "Who do you want? Barabbas or Jesus?" He figures this is an easy question.

But the plan backfires. The priests have stirred up the crowd to ask for Barabbas instead of Jesus. Set him free and condemn Christ. Now, Pilate's stuck. He doesn't know quite what to do. "What am I supposed to do with Jesus in this case? What you want me to do with the king of the Jews?" And they cry out, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" They're not only asking for his death. They're asking for the very worst punishment possible under Roman law to be laid upon him. And Pilate rightly recognizes that this wouldn't be right. Jesus has not deserved such a terrible punishment, whatever he might've done. So he asked them, "Why would you want to do this? What evil has he done?" But the crowd is insistent: "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

And so now Pilate, like Peter before him, has a choice. Pilate can do what is right and set Jesus free, like he should do. Or Pilate can do what is easy and give in to the crowd. But doing what is right in this case is going to be extremely risky for Pilate. Because if he sets Jesus free, it's almost certainly going to cause a riot. And if a riot happens, he will almost certainly lose his job. Pilate is not willing to risk that much for this man. And so Pilate chooses to do what is easy. He gives Jesus over to be crucified. Like Peter, he decides to play it safe.

And Christians, I ask you this evening: what are you willing to risk for Jesus? Because following after Jesus is always going to cost you something. How much are you willing to do? The situation you find yourself in could be like Peter, where following after Jesus means that people are going to treat you differently, that people will look at you differently as a result. Is that a risk you are willing to take? Are you willing to risk your reputation for Christ? It could be a situation like Pilate, where doing the right thing, where following after God will mean that you will be unpopular and that it will cause problems in your life. Is that a risk you are willing to take? Are you willing to risk your comfort and your safety for Christ? Of course, you could take the easy way out like Pilate and Peter did, wanting to play it safe, not wanting to risk anything at all. But playing it safe means turning away from Jesus. Playing it safe means that you won't have anything to go on. Following Christ is never about playing it safe. Following Christ is never going to be easy. The temptation is always there to not risk anything for Jesus. But how much are you willing to risk?

But Jesus also says, Christians, in Matthew 16: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." Yes, there is great risk in following after Jesus. It's quite possible that we may lose much, even our very lives because of him. But no matter what we lose, Christians, no matter how much we risk for him, what we will get in return is so much more. We will find everything in him, because Jesus is worth every risk. As Jesus says again, John, chapter 12: "Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life." Eternal life, Christians! That's what Jesus has promised. That's what Jesus is going to give us when we trust in him. So are you willing to risk everything, knowing that? Because Jesus is worth far more than anything in this world. He is worth more than your

reputation. He is worth more than your comfort. He is worth more than your safety. He's worth everything because he promises you the glory of heaven and far much more in the life to come.

So let us risk everything for Jesus, because Christ is far more than anything in this world. Jesus has saved you. Jesus has forgiven you. Jesus gives you eternal life. And nothing in this life can ever come close to that. So let us risk it all for him, because he is worth it.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have called us to follow you and after your Son. We pray that you would help us always to do what is right in your sight, risking everything for his sake. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.