

Is This the End?
Luke 23:33-43

November 23, 2025 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
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Is this the end? Kind of. It's the last Sunday on our liturgical calendar. We've mostly been reading through the book of Luke since the last Sunday of June. The Lukan reading from that day began, "When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem." He knew what awaited him there. He had already been driven out of a village for his choice. But he did not try to avoid the consequences of his righteous actions or run from them. He stayed his course and continued teaching, healing, and arguing everywhere he went. The Rev. Dr. Cheryl A. Lindsay suggests that his ministry didn't actually garner much attention from the empire until that little incident at the temple. She writes, "Perhaps the most damning action was chasing the moneychangers out. He reclaimed the temple as the Holy One's territory. That threat to the human designed economy could not stand."

And when empire is threatened, it exerts power the only way it knows how: through violence and fear. And that's how we ended up where we are in today's gospel reading, with Jesus on the cross. Now, when the "penitent thief" at Jesus's side says that he has been condemned justly and is getting the punishment he deserves, I know that's meant to be a foil to Jesus' innocence. But my heart breaks every time I read that line. No one deserves that kind of inhumane humiliation and torture. His unjust punishment is not simply the manner of his death, but his internalization of the unjust ways of the empire. Not only that, but the manner of his death is meant not just to punish him, but to punish and strike fear in all the people who witness this public scene of brutality, to retain oppressive control over all the people, even making them believe they deserve it. This is the way of the empire, the kind of power that Caesar and all his client rulers worship and use indiscriminately. And now Jesus, the one who was meant to fight the unjust empire, has become its next victim. So, is this end? Not really.

We know the story. Yes, Jesus will die, but in three days he will rise and defeat death forever. But there's also a pearl in this gospel reading that we sometimes forget. The thief says, "Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom," not knowing when that will be. Imagine his surprise, his ecstatic relief, right there dying on the cross, when Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise." *Today. Today, you will be with me. Today, you will be in paradise.* Of course, this is not the end. Perhaps the end, also known as hopelessness and apathy, is only a story that the empire and its earthly principalities tell. Perhaps even in times when we feel immense pain and grief, Jesus acknowledges and can sympathize with our human experience, but we are still not meant to accept the end. It is our choice to be with Jesus in paradise today, or not.

I'm sure everyone can imagine a time when they have internalized empire's story of hopelessness, of the end. Perhaps when the disease came back, when our nation

abandoned its quest for the cure. Perhaps when our lifestyle of austerity still leaves us in the red, when the measure meant to help people doesn't pass. I know I've felt that. I read a piece of news a few weeks ago that left me feeling devastated. Things had been so hard, at times even bleak, and it looked like maybe there was some potential good in the works. It felt like a roller coaster car's excruciating struggle up the hill, one click on the track at a time. Then the news landed and it was as if those fragile mechanisms that our car depended on gave way, and we slid backward in a free fall right back to where we started. So much hard work, all for nothing. And I thought, "Well, that's that. We tried. I don't know what we'll do now." Have you felt that? You dare to hope that it – whatever "it" is for you – is getting better. You do everything you're supposed to, everything you can. And it fails. You're right back where you started, or maybe things are even worse. Too often, injustice, death, or suffering seem to reign supreme.

If this message doesn't resonate with you right now, I don't mean to bring you down, just tuck it away for another time. Or share it with someone who does need it right now, because you probably know someone who does. It doesn't sound like good news yet, but it will. Because when I felt hopeless and bogged down, somehow, out of nowhere, the thought came to me, "This isn't the end." I think that can happen when we practice paradise. When we tell ourselves Jesus's story again and again till we've internalized it, till there's no space in our hearts or our minds for the story that earthly principalities try to make us believe. Friends, when I remembered Jesus' story, I still felt fear and grief. But at the same time, I felt hopeful. I still didn't know what we'd do...but since I said out loud, "This isn't the end," that future has looked like mysterious possibilities rather than a dead end. Have you felt that? I hope so.

I hope – no, I believe – that you can stand strong against earthly kings' story of fear by reminding yourself of Jesus' story of love. Because look how it has stood the test of time. Steve Garnaas-Holmes writes, "Caesar's power is to extract people's loyalty to the Empire. Jesus' power is the power to promise paradise. Caesar's power is to kill. God's power is to raise. Though we're pretty taken by worldly power, here we have the sum of it: Jesus' love changes the world, and Caesar... well, he gets a salad named after him." The soldiers mocked Jesus, saying, "Save yourself." That is what the Caesars of the world would have us do: isolate ourselves, abandon our neighbors. But instead of saving himself, Jesus saved everyone. And in doing so, he became more powerful than anyone could imagine. That is the kind of king we celebrate on Christ the King Sunday. A king whose power is in lifting up others. A king who lampoons earthly principalities by showing that violence and fear are no match for love. A king who promises that the injustices we may experience are not the end. "Truly I tell you, *today* you will be with me in paradise." Alleluia and Amen!