

Isaiah 52-53 & John 19 – April 15, 2022 (Good Friday)

Two days ago, we said goodbye to a dear friend and laid to rest Lois Shaw. It was a bittersweet funeral, as all funerals are. Lois lived a long, faithful life, full of the Spirit's fruits. And we know that our Lord has taken her to be with him. But it's still hurts.

Wednesday morning, after Howard Funeral Home had brought Lois' casket into the sanctuary, I went in to see her. I wanted to pay my last respects. To pray for her friends and family. To ask God that he would give me wisdom and gracious words as I consoled those who came to the visitation and funeral. This is all part of my normal funeral routine.

But I was also curious. Curious about how Lois would look. I won't go into the gruesome details about how Lois looked on her deathbed. She was always very, very concerned about looking prim and proper and put together whenever she was in public. Sufficed to say, on the day she died, she did not look like her herself.

So I was absolutely dumbstruck when I walked up to the casket and saw... Lois. Looking exactly as she did every Sunday morning. Chris and Lindsey had done a phenomenal job of making her look like herself again.

That's important to us. It's important that our loved ones look their best at a funeral. It's important that they look like themselves. Like the person we knew and loved in life. Because death up close is hard enough to look at.

John says at the beginning of his gospel that Jesus was light shining in the darkness. There's a lot of darkness in this world. The darkness of sin. Of greed and lust and hate and selfishness. But the darkest place in our world is most certainly the darkness of the grave. Because its a darkness we can't even see into. A darkness that conceals everything beyond it.

And we're forced to face that darkness. We face it at funerals, of course. But we face it plenty of other times too. Every time we go to the doctor, we face that darkness. Every time we have a close call on the highway or a severe thunderstorm pass over our house, we face that darkness. Every time we turn on the news and hear about some war or tragedy, even if it's on the other side of the planet, we face that darkness.

It's a strange irony, isn't it? To be alive is to always be facing death. And it can come crashing down on us so very quickly. The sky can be blue, the sunshine bright, the air crisp and clean—and then we receive a phone call with bad news, and darkness descends. And we suddenly have to face death up close.

Tonight, we deal with another death up close. Not that of a friend or family member. No, tonight we stand at the foot of the cross. We look upon him and the reality of his death. And we see the enemy that is death up close.

The prophet Isaiah painted a poetic picture of that night. He described a Savior, a Suffering Savior, who would stand in our place and experience death up close. For us who are part of fallen humanity, death is justice. It is a verdict that fits the crime. We have disobeyed God and deserve death. But now the Suffering Savior comes near.

And we see him. And it isn't a pretty death. There was nothing prim, proper, or put together about how Jesus looked. In fact, Isaiah tells us that Jesus definitely did not look like himself.

When Jesus was lifted up, he was so bruised and beaten and bloody that people were astonished by the sight of him. His appearance was so marred that it was beyond human semblance. He didn't even have a form that looked like a child of mankind. By the time the Roman soldiers got done with him, he barely even looked human.

But that wasn't the worst of what he experienced. The physical wounds that marred his appearance were only the beginning of what he suffered. For as Isaiah describes it, "He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows... Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrow... He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities... The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all... He was cut off from the land of the living... He was assigned a grave with the wicked." He didn't deserve death, but he experienced it up close.

The Apostle John watched this death up close. While all the other disciples fled in fear or shame, John stayed by Jesus' side. Throughout his gospel account, John refers to himself as “the disciple Jesus loved.” It's the type of statement we might consider arrogant or boastful if it weren't for the fact that it is so obviously true. John was the disciple that Jesus loved.

Loved enough that Jesus would entrust his own mother to John's care. Jesus loved all of his disciples. Jesus loves the whole world. But there was something special about the friendship between Jesus and John.

And so, as John recounts the death of Jesus, he isn't just giving us the facts of this event. No, he wants us to understand the meaning of what is happens. He wants us to know his Lord and rabbi and best friend had to die.

He wants us to know that this was always part of God's plan. John doesn't spend much of his Gospel focusing on the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. That's something we normally associate with Matthew's Gospel. But when he gets to the Passion narrative, suddenly it's all that John can think about.

The soldiers gambling for Jesus' clothing and refusing to tear his tunic, to fulfill Psalm 22:18. Jesus' thirst on the cross quenched with sour wine, to fulfill Psalm 69:21. The other criminals who have their legs broken, but not Jesus, to fulfill Exodus 12:46. The piercing of Jesus' side with a spear, to fulfill Zechariah 12:10.

John is adamant that we not see just an ordinary man dying on a cross. We see the Christ, the son of the living God. We see the one who gives us life in his name.

John wants us to look through his eyes and see Jesus' death up close. He pleads with us, “*He who saw it has borne witness – his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth – that you also may believe.*”

Most of all, that you also may believe that when Jesus said, “It is finished,” it was finished. All was completed. The debt was paid. The dirt was washed away. The sin was atoned for. There was nothing more that could be done.

The God who made the world in all its perfection gave us perfect, complete, finished salvation. The God who made the trees, died on a tree. The God who made the iron in the earth, died with iron nails through his hands and feet. The God who cursed sinful mankind with thorns and thistles, died with thorns around his head. The God who breathed life into our lungs and filled us with his spirit, breathed his last and gave up his spirit.

Tonight, we stand with John at the foot of the cross to view a crucified Jesus. We experience death up close, the death of our Suffering Savior. And we see a death that should be ours. We look into the darkness that we will all face one day.

But something has changed. In fact, everything is changed. Because when we look into the eyes of death we don't just see darkness. We see light shining in the darkness. We don't see a conquering enemy, but an enemy that is conquered. We don't just see death. We see resurrection on the other side.

We see through John's eyes. Through Jesus' eyes. Through the Holy Spirit's eyes. We see with the eyes of faith. And we know without a doubt that this seeming defeat was really a victory. A victory won on my behalf. A victory so that I may see death up close and find hope in the midst of sorrow.

Jesus looked at my death up close and died so that I may look at his death up close and live. So that I may stand beside the remains of Lois Shaw and Margie Loesing and countless other members of this congregation and proclaim that at this moment, they live because Jesus died. That the last time you saw them, they were not just a pretty corpse in a casket, but a redeemed child of God, welcomed into paradise.

We look at Jesus' death up close and it is bittersweet. For our sin led to his death. But by his wounds we are healed. Amen.