



## **Christ's Passion**

**John 18:28-38**

Brett Younger  
Senior Minister

April 14, 2019

Passion Sunday

CONNECT  GROW  SERVE

*They took Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate's headquarters. It was early in the morning. They themselves did not enter the headquarters, so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover.*

*So Pilate went out to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this man?"*

*They answered, "If this man weren't a criminal, we wouldn't have handed him over to you."*

*Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law."*

*The religious leaders replied, "We aren't permitted to put anyone to death." (This was to fulfill what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death he was to die.)*

*Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?"*

*Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?"*

*Pilate replied, "I'm not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?"*

*Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the religious leaders. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here."*

*Pilate asked Jesus, "So you are a king?"*

*Jesus answered, “You say that I’m a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”*

*Pilate asked Jesus, “What is truth?”*

- John 18:28-38

Years ago, a preacher came to the seminary where Carol and I were students preparing for ministry. He began his sermon by asking: “In ten years, will you still love Jesus or will you be too sophisticated? Will you find that it’s easier to look intelligent than it is to follow Christ? Will you think you’re too smart for Jesus?”

He asked hard questions. At seminary, the clear black and white absolutes that many of us grow up believing about Jesus melt into a fuzzy gray. Students learn just enough Greek to know that translating Jesus’ words is not an exact science; enough redaction criticism to see that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John do not always seem to be talking about the same Jesus; enough historical criticism to wonder if St. Paul really understood Jesus; enough of Karl Barth’s Christology to know that Karl Barth and Christology are both difficult; enough soteriology to recognize that saying who is in and who is out is not as simple as it was in Sunday school; enough church history to know that the councils that wrote the creeds were often as

confusing as some present-day church meetings—not ours, other churches I have heard about. A good education makes it harder to say “true God from true God, begotten not made, of one being with the Father” without wanting to raise your hand to ask questions.

You and I are sophisticated people. We live in the greatest city in the world, which is not the same as being the smartest city in the world, but it is close. Our hometown newspaper is *The New York Times*. And if we have ever read *The Post* it is only because it is cheaper.

We are bright people. We can order coffee in Spanish. We know what a falafel is. Some of us have been to *Hamilton*. We might watch *Game of Thrones*, but we are not goofy about it. We are cultured.

Let us say we see Adam Driver walking down Columbia Heights, we do not yell “Hey, Kylo Ren.” If he speaks first, we might respond, “Paterson was underrated. I loved the poetry.” Adam Driver would say, “Not many people saw that film. You’re a sophisticated person.” He would be right.

We are smart. We do not have any stained glass window with Jesus in the sanctuary, but we have the founding of Harvard. We are educated people. We want people to know we are intelligent, so we do not talk about Jesus much.

We could. If someone asked, we could talk about Jesus, about who Jesus was or was not, who Jesus thought he was, and who Jesus has become in history. Sometimes at church we talk about Jesus, but even here we tend to discuss Jesus from a safe distance. We think we are deciding what we think about Jesus, but it may be that it is Jesus—the story, the hope, the myth, the person—who is challenging us.

Pontius Pilate does not understand what he did to deserve such a terrible post. He hates Jerusalem. The desert makes him miss Rome and the cool breeze of the Mediterranean.

When he was young Pilate dreamed of bigger things than being in charge of Judea, but he could have done worse. He is a friend of Caesar's. His sons get the best education money can buy. His wife is unstable, but she has a good therapist.

The Jewish people confuse Pilate. They claim to worship a God who runs history and history keeps running over them. Pilate is essentially a law-and-order guy, and he maintains order as best he can.

On this day, there are the usual problems. The tax people have not come up with enough revenue—something about not being able to get blood out of a stone. A man comes in with a scheme for an aqueduct to solve the city's water problem. It would pass through land that the man is prepared to sell at considerable personal sacrifice (Frederick Buechner,

*Telling the Truth*, New York: Harper and Row, 1977, 9-12).

And there has been some kind of demonstration at one of the city gates with an up-state messiah. Every time the religious holidays roll around, there is trouble and this year is no exception.

Pilate is frustrated with the pompous fools who bring Jesus for questioning: “Why are you bringing this guy to me? What does this preacher have to do with Rome?”

“We wouldn’t have brought him here if he wasn’t a threat.”

Pilate wants to get this over with: “Then you take care of him.”

But the authorities want Jesus executed. Pilate tries to get out of it. It has only just started and he is already sick of the whole matter.

Pilate’s wife hears about it and begs him to have nothing to do with Jesus: “I had a dream. He’s innocent.”

Pilate is not sure what to do. He just wants the religious nuts out of his building and Jesus out of his office. Pilate agrees to see the man if that is what they want. Jesus stands in front of the desk with his hands tied behind his back. They have roughed him up. His upper lip is puffed out. One eye is swollen shut. If there were just the two of them, Pilate would give him money for an Uber and send him

back to the sticks where he came from, but the guards are watching.

Pilate goes straight to the point: “Are you the King of the Jews? Have you committed treason against Rome?”

Jesus asks, “Is that your question or is it what they told you to ask?”

The one who should be answering the questions is asking them. The trial still looks like a poor, pitiful rabbi before the power of imperial Rome, but something about Jesus makes Pilate wonder who is really on trial. The judge feels like a defendant.

Pilate tries to distance himself from what is going on: “What do you think I am, a Jew? It’s your people who are angry with you. What did you do to make them so mad?”

Jesus says, “My kingdom is not of this world,” but his accent is so thick that Pilate barely gets it, the accent together with what they have done to his lip. If his kingdom isn’t of this world, then Pilate figures it does not concern him. “Look, buddy, why don’t you say whatever they want you to say and we’ll all go home. Why do you want all this fuss?”

Jesus says, “I’m here to tell the truth. Everyone who cares about truth, who longs for truth, understands what I’m saying.”

Truth is the concern of philosophers and dreamers, not pragmatists and politicians. Jesus lives in a reality that is nothing like Pilate’s world.

The religious leaders will not let Pilate off the hook, but Jesus will not let him go either.

Pilate asks with a cynical sneer, or a despairing sigh, or both: “What is truth?”

He asks “What is truth?” half because he would give his life to hear the answer, and half because he believes there is no answer, and would give a good deal to hear that too, because it would mean one less thing to worry about.

Pilate’s question, “What is truth?” hangs in the air, seemingly unanswered. The man with the split lip does not say a blessed thing. Or else his not saying anything is the blessed thing. The only answer that Pilate gets is Jesus himself—the truth that is Jesus.

Jesus offers himself as a mirror for others to see the truth, to see themselves—and the religious leaders and Pilate are so appalled by what they see that they destroy the mirror. They execute Jesus because they do not want to see who they are. To look closely at Jesus is to see ourselves in Pontius Pilate trying to avoid any responsibility, in Simon Peter hiding outside Pilate’s office waiting to hear a rooster crow, and in Jesus’ mother, crying over a broken heart she does not completely understand.

Jesus is a mirror that shows us who we are. He helps us see ourselves like God does. We may not want to look at Jesus, because Jesus makes it clear

that most of what we strive for is dust, and most of what we should treasure, we ignore.

When we look at Jesus' integrity, our superficiality is obvious. When we look at Jesus' courage, our cowardice is embarrassing. When we look at Jesus' love, our apathy is shameful.

We avoid looking too closely at Jesus, because we might see that we are supposed to love our enemies, share what we have, and give up our inferior understanding of the good life.

When I look closely at Jesus I come face to face with realities I would rather ignore: So much of what I do is self-serving. My heart does not break nearly often enough for the hurting. I worry too much about what people think of me. I do not care about starving children like I should. I am much more likely to be kind to someone who is kind to me. I define morality as whatever I approve. I find it easier to talk about prayer than to pray. Jesus lives in a kingdom different from the one in which I live.

Barbara Brown Taylor tells of being at a retreat where the leader asks everyone to think of someone who represents Jesus in their lives. One woman says, "I had to think hard about that one. I kept thinking, 'Who is it who told me the truth about myself so clearly that I wanted to kill him for it?'" (Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Perfect Mirror," *The Christian Century*, March 18-25, 1998, 283).

It is easier not to look at Jesus, because when we do not look at Jesus, we feel better about who we are. If we come to church and compare ourselves to each other, we are not so bad. I am not that much worse than you are, and you are not much worse than I am, but when we start looking at Jesus, then we are both in trouble.

We find it so hard to look truthfully at Jesus that no one would ever do it—except for this. It is truth that makes us free. Jesus shows the truth that is buried deep in our sometimes broken stories and the amazing reality beyond what we usually see.

When we give ourselves to Jesus' truth, we love life in all its pain and joy. When Jesus' story becomes our story, we live with deeper truth and greater freedom. Jesus has been exalted, sentimentalized, debunked, made and remade to the measure of each generation's desire, dread and indifference (Frederick Buechner, *Faces of Jesus*, New York: Simon and Shuster, 1977, 9) and yet though we may think we have learned to ignore him, there is a sense in which there is no escaping Jesus for any of us.

Jesus, more than any person in history, has pulled on hearts and souls, inviting us to a better life. We have no choice but to follow Jesus or run from Jesus. Jesus is a dream so true that we will never completely stop dreaming it. We are Pilate in our

asking after truth, and like Pilate, we end up looking at Jesus.

We open our hearts to Jesus in order to see what is in our hearts. We think about Jesus, who he is, and who we are compared to Jesus in order to be drawn into the profound truths about ourselves and our world. If we honestly ask who Jesus is we learn who we can be.

What do you suppose it was like for Pilate, years later, when he was a retired administrator? What was it like on quiet nights when he was alone with the memories of the captive people he ruled? Pilate could rationalize that he had done about as well as he could. If he executed some innocent people, that was his job.

Pilate thinks: “Even that Galilean who talked about truth and made such a commotion. You have to keep order.” But then Pilate wonders, “What if I’d decided not to be done with it as quickly as possible? What if I’d said, ‘Jesus, have a seat. Tell me more.’”

What if we said, ‘Jesus, have a seat. Tell us more.’”

We may think we are too sophisticated for Jesus, but there is a courtroom in our heart. It is you and me who are on trial. Jesus will not stop telling us the truth, that our lives could be better, more loving, more joyful, more free, and more true.

*Sermon © Rev. Brett Younger*

75 Hicks Street  
Brooklyn, NY 11201  
718.624.4743  
[www.plymouthchurch.org](http://www.plymouthchurch.org)

