

A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard	Prepared for the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania, VA
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A Hero for the Ages

Have you seen *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice* yet? I haven't. Maybe after Easter. I do love a good super hero movie. Batman is probably my favorite, but honestly I don't know how he can stand up against the man of steel. Should be interesting to see. One of the things I love about a good super hero story is how the hero is usually down, and almost defeated, when he finally comes back at the last minute and saves the day. You've seen that scenario a million times, in books, comic books, movies, epic poetry, so many different ways of telling a story. It's not just for super heroes either. Any kind of literary hero can follow that same arc, whether it is Iron Man, or Rocky Balboa, or Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea*. It's an exciting way to tell a story, tried and true, and it is a favorite among audiences everywhere. But that is not the story that we tell this evening.

This evening we tell the story of the Cross of Jesus Christ. This is a story, not of heroism and a last-minute savior, nor is it a story of an epic battle where good triumphs over evil, it is rather a story of failure, defeat, and death. It is the story of a man, heroic perhaps in his acceptance of his fate, who faces his death with almost super-human courage and resolve. Yet the familiar heroic arc is noticeably missing here. There were opportunities too. Think of the trial scene. How dramatic would it have been to have Jesus, who had verbally sparred repeatedly with the Pharisees, argue circles around the Chief Priests and the Scribes? He could have proven to them how he had fulfilled all the prophecies, and used the ancient Scriptures to show that they should bow down to him as their Lord. It would have been like any number of great court room scenes in stories we know, from Perry Mason to Matlock. How heroic would that have been?

Can you imagine Jesus before Pilate, when Pilate says, “What is truth?” and Jesus answering, “You can’t handle the Truth!” How awesome would that have been? But he didn’t do that. He didn’t respond to Pilate’s question. He didn’t answer the charges against him at all.

Think about the crucifixion scene. They nailed Jesus to the cross and posted some soldiers there to guard him and the two criminals who were crucified with him. Can you imagine some little old woman, hunched over and covered with a shawl, stumbling up to one of the soldiers as if she were confused, then throwing back the shawl we discover that it is really Peter in disguise. He pulls his sword and shouts. Just then, the other disciples, whom we haven’t seen since the arrest scene, emerge from the crowd where they’d been hiding in plain sight, all of them disguised too, and they rescue Jesus in a classic battle with the Roman soldiers. How awesome would that be? It’s the Robin Hood hanging scene all over again. The whole thing could end with Jesus and his disciples in their secret hide out at the end of the day sharing a cup of wine and laughing about how close he had come to dying. But that’s not what happened. Peter denied him, and the rest of the disciples scattered in fear. No one came to help Jesus.

Think about the ultimate opportunity for Jesus to be the hero in this story. There he is... hanging on the cross... the soldiers have divided his clothing among them, and the people are saying, “He saved others. Why can’t he save himself?” Just then, a light from heaven shines down on Jesus, illuminating his face. He looks up, as if he hears a voice speaking to him from above. He begins to struggle. He’s pulling his hand away from the cross. Slowly the nail starts to move. It comes loose and finally his hand is free. Then the other hand, the same way. As he continues to free himself from the cross, Jesus moves faster, looks stronger. Where he was nearly dead, now he seems healthy and whole. He steps down from the cross, stands tall, wipes the sweat and the blood from his brow, glares at the soldiers, and they run off frightened by his

macho coolness. That would have been a great ending. But Jesus did not free himself from the cross. The nails and the wood were too strong for him. He did not come down from the cross. He died on that cross. He died. No one saved him, not his own fast talking, not his followers, not himself; no hand of God reached down and plucked him from the grip of death. He died.

He did die well, though. He was innocent, falsely convicted and condemned. He faced his death with courage and grace. But he didn't even die a hero's death, for his death accomplished nothing. He didn't sacrifice himself to save Peter, or another of his followers. He didn't die in the process of saving Mary Magdalene from Herod who kidnapped her and held her in his castle. He didn't even die for his cause. He died ignominiously, quietly, insignificantly.

Now, I know what you're thinking. Jesus was a hero. His death did accomplish something. He was raised from the dead and never dies again. He opened for us, all of us, the way to eternal life. Yes, that's true. But I'm talking about a hero in the classic sense. In order to be a hero, he would have had to avoid death, or died in some dramatic way that still saved the day somehow. Besides, it wasn't until the third day that any of this became known. After his death, his followers were afraid and they hid. It wasn't until the resurrected Jesus appeared to his followers that they began to understand that his death wasn't the end of this story after all. In the end, Jesus doesn't just defeat the evil villain, like any old hero does. He doesn't just overthrow the Roman occupiers and set his people free. He doesn't just get the girl and ride off into the sunset. His death defeats evil itself. His obedience to God defeats all rebellion. His resurrection defeats death itself. His sacrifice sets the whole world free from Sin and Death. But I'm not talking about that stuff. That's a sermon for Sunday. Tonight we are talking about the cross.

Christians have been tripping over the cross on their way to Easter ever since that horrible Friday afternoon. I think we'd rather just ignore the reality of the cross, and skip straight to Sunday morning. But there it is. The cross. It stands between us and our joyful exclamation on Sunday. It is a reality. Jesus' suffering and death are a reality. It is all part of the story. It wasn't just a temporary setback; it was death, real death. Only the author of life could have possibly written a different ending to this story.

We trip over the cross even today. We like heroes. We love winners. We just need to reconcile ourselves to the fact that our Lord was a loser. He willingly identified himself with the weak, the outcast, the criminal, the sick, the oppressed, the reviled, the homeless, the poor, the powerless. After all, isn't that us? Isn't that who we are? Aren't we, at some time in our life, aren't we all the lowliest and the least? The question for us at this point in the story is: When we look at the poor, when we look at prisoners, when we look at the aged or the infirm, when we look at refugees, when we look at those whom the world hates and rejects, who do we see? Do we see the eyes of Jesus looking back at us? Or do we just see losers? Do we see the ones for whom Jesus was willing to die? Or do we see expendable people?

The cross. A stumbling block from day one. Let's spend some time this evening contemplating the cross of Jesus.

Amen.