

## **“Christianity: The Meaning of the Cross”**

Mark 15:12-20

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Last Sunday, we explored Jesus’ question, “Who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter’s confession was simple and clear: “Jesus, You are the Messiah and the Son of the living God”. Truly, we believe that Jesus came to restore our relationship with God. That is what Christianity is all about. This is Simon Peter’s faith statement. This morning, I add two more questions for you: What is your simple faith statement about Jesus? What are the compelling reasons that Jesus is your Messiah?

Certainly, Christianity began based on the profession of faith that Jesus is the divine, the Son of the living God. As today’s Scripture reading describes, Jesus was crucified and died on the cross. The Roman soldiers mocked Jesus at the cross, calling out to him, “Hail, King of the Jews!” Outside the Biblical account, non-Christian scholars argue that there are only two hard historical facts about Jesus of Nazareth: “the first is that Jesus was a Jew who led a popular Jewish movement in Palestine at the beginning of the first century: the second is that Rome crucified him for doing so.” Even though Jesus was crucified and died on the cross, early Christians didn’t remain in despair and sorrow. Death is not their final story of Christian faith. Jesus’ followers and early Christian churches started talking about the resurrection of Jesus because they had a firm belief that Jesus rose again.

What is the essence of Christianity? Christianity came out of Judaism. But Christianity is different from Judaism, because Jesus is regarded as a great teacher, called a Rabbi who taught about God’s love and mercy. The Muslim faith respects Jesus as a prophet. But Prophet Mohammed is the most important Prophet of the religion. There is reverend respect for Jesus as a teacher, but Muslims do not accept Jesus as the divine. To Muslims generally, God is so different from human beings that it is impossible to conceive God in human form. But Christianity believes that Jesus is the son of God.

There are many miracles and supernatural things in the New Testament Bible. But those miraculous healings and supernatural powers to control nature feeding five thousand people without food or walking on the water were not essential evidences that Jesus was the divine son of God. Miracles and superpower were God’s signs but there were not the essence of Christianity. The essence of Christianity is to believe in Jesus who helps us to reconnect back

to our relationship with God. When Jesus called his disciples, he didn't explain all the compelling evidence of his divine character. He simply asked them to trust him and follow him. Christians are those who experience God's touch in Jesus.

Last year, a book, "Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth" was one of the bestselling books for three weeks in the New York Times. The aim of this book is to re-create Jesus' life within the social, religious, and political context of the era in which Jesus lived in Galilee. The author, Reza Aslan did extensive research on a historical Jesus based on the Roman and Palestinian writings and documents of the first century. His conclusion is simple. Jesus was a 'revolutionary Jewish nationalist' called a zealot. In Jesus' times, there were many radical Jews who were strict nationalists who preached the sole sovereignty of God. They wanted to throw off the yoke of Roman occupation and cleanse the Promised Land of all foreign elements. Some zealots resorted to extreme acts of violence against the Roman authorities.

Reza Aslan argues in his book that Jesus of Nazareth was himself a violent revolutionary gathering followers for a messianic movement with the goal of establishing the Kingdom of God. But Jesus was arrested and executed by Rome for the crime of sedition. According to Aslan's theory, in the early Church times under the Roman Emperor, Jesus' followers and disciples were zealots, but the Christians felt the need to distance themselves from the revolutionary zeal that had led to the sacking of Jerusalem. Thus began the long process of transforming Jesus from a revolutionary Jewish nationalist into a peaceful spiritual leader with no interests in any earthly matter. That was a Jesus the Romans could accept, and in fact did accept three centuries later when the Roman emperor made the itinerant Jewish preacher's movement the official religion of the state, and what we now recognize as orthodox Christianity was born.

Our Christian faith is not based on Jesus' social and political agenda. The purpose of the Bible, Christian teachings, and Christian spirituality is not to re-create Jesus' human life, but to help us experience the presence of the living God in Jesus. We are more interested in the stories and testimonies of how early Christians and Jesus' disciples were inspired and transformed by Jesus and changed their lives. The key element of what we believe in Jesus is not powers of politics and violence but of love. We must remember to contrast the zealots from the Savior. These are evidences that Jesus is the Savior. Christians could write their own faith statements after they met Jesus.

Some of you read the Bible to seek spiritual guidance and every Sunday, your pastor shares a message based on the Bible. Why do we read the Bible? Because we know that Bible reading is not only for informational insight but also for transforming our lives. The Bible and the four gospels are testimonies of faith written by communities of faith after they experienced Jesus Christ. The Gospels are eyewitness accounts of Jesus' words and deeds. Each gospel is a faith statement about Jesus Christ. The Bible is not a book written for providing historical documentations of Jesus' human life, but written to share an urgent and desperate message for Jesus' followers and early churches. Each of the Gospels has its own emphasis on the ministry of Christ. For example, Matthew, writing to a Jewish audience, emphasizes Jesus' fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, proving that He is the long-awaited Messiah. Mark describes Jesus Christ as Servant of the Lord and Savior of the world in order to strengthen their faith in the face of severe persecution, and also teach them what it meant to be His disciples. Luke's purpose describes Jesus with a special focus on mission for the gentiles. John emphasizes Jesus Christ as "the Son of God, fully God and fully man".

The Bible stories are testimonies of faith handed down by Christians and Christian churches sharing a common faith and assurance that Jesus is the Christ and Messiah and our God. The church doctrines and Creeds are the collections of our "Affirmations of Faith". The Nicene Creed was the very first historical and ecumenical Christian faith statement that all Christian churches agreed upon. What is your personal creed or faith statement or testimony about Jesus? If you love Jesus and are willing to follow him as your Messiah but if you are not sure yet to believe all the supernatural things and miracles, you don't have to be discouraged in your unbelief. It is okay, you are just fine to be part of this Fair Oaks United Methodist Church. Unlike some churches that require affirmation of a strict list of beliefs as a condition of membership, The United Methodist Church is not a creedal church. You don't have to recite the Nicene's creed for your faith statement. To some extent, we all wrestle and struggle in our faith because we all admit our limitations and doubts to understand and believe in God as a human being.

What is your own faith statement about Jesus? Christian musicians, Keith Getty and Stuart Townend composed a song, *In Christ Alone*. It contains their faith statement and testimony about Jesus Christ as their God. Right after the sermon, we are going to sing their song together. Our faith in Jesus is firmly based on his compassion and love for people. Jesus proclaimed that God is love and the love is here for everyone. He proclaimed this message through his life and ministry. It was the reason for his death on the cross. The experience of

Jesus' resurrection affirmed early Christians and churches' faith and trust in Jesus. The doctrines and ecumenical faith statement affirms our beliefs and faith that Jesus wasn't merely a revolutionary zealot for the political liberation of Israel, but reclaiming the wholeness and restoring a right relationship with God. That's what we believe in Jesus as divine son of God. I hope that you can find your own reasons why you choose to follow and to believe Jesus as your Messiah. Amen.