April 3, 2015
Good Friday, Luke 23:34
"Truly Forgiven – Why Believe?"
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"And Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.'"

He had known it was going to happen. He had seen it all coming. He had prepared in advance. He was committed to the outcome; but, still, it had taken tremendous resolve for Jesus to actually go through with it.

It was awful. It was wretched, hideous, all of it.
The trusted friend betraying him.
The false, repulsive, identifying kiss.
The quick scattering of the disciples.
The feeling of abandonment.
The steely hands of the soldiers.
The blatant lies of his accusers.
The utter disregard of the Council for justice.
Their cynical claim that he was a blasphemer.
Their slaps and punches and insults.
The long night of no sleep.
The appearances the next morning before preening Herod
        and pompous Pilate.
The sadistic physical torture.
The abusive mockery.
The blood-thirsty screams of the crowd.
The whip on his back, the thorns in his scalp.
The march through town.
The howling, laughing strangers.
The weight of the cross.
The nails, the hammer, the impaling.
The pain, the awful pain, which filled his body and flooded
        his brain.

He had known it was coming. Jesus had known full well that this is what it would take. This was his mission. He knew it so well that centuries before he had even inspired the prophet Isaiah to foretell it. Isaiah 50, verse 6 says, of Jesus, *"I gave my back to those who strike me, and my cheeks to those who pluck out the beard; I did not cover my face from humiliation and spitting."*

Just days earlier, Jesus had told his disciples, , *"Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death, and will deliver him to the Gentiles to mock and scourge and crucify him."*

Yes, Jesus had known it was coming. But now that it was happening, now that death was close at hand, it was horrid. It was shocking.

The Son of God, treated so violently! How could it be?

And how could it be that, looking down from his cross, Jesus said what he did? The first words out of his mouth were not a curse, nor a vengeful shout; not a despairing moan, nor a cry for relief … but something truly shocking.

"Father, forgive them," he said, "for they know not what they do."

I have read and pondered those words, heard and preached those words so many times; and yet I am shocked by them every single time.

Forgiving enemies? Forgiving abusers? Forgiving hypocrites and posers? Forgiving the awful people whose sinful words and godless actions had brought such immense pain into his holy life? Forgive them?

Why not, "Father, destroy them!" Why not, "Father, incinerate and pulverize them, for they don't know what they're doing to me"?

I am afraid that that's what I would have prayed; and, maybe, you, too. But not Jesus. He said, "Forgive!"

To me, that's shocking! But not to Jesus. Because forgiveness is what this was all about. Jesus' whole life on earth – Jesus' incarnation, taking on human flesh; Jesus' entire mission and purpose -- was about forgiveness. This whole business of suffering and crucifixion – it all had to do with forgiveness.

When we confess in the Apostles' Creed our belief in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, we're reminding ourselves of the central truths of what we know about God – how he made a plan to save a world fallen into sin, how he sent his Son to be the sacrifice for our sin, how he gives us his Spirit to help us believe and trust in Christ's forgiveness.

In the Bible, we read – and in the Creed, we confess – that Jesus was born, he lived, and then he died all for one great, monumental reason. So that sins could be forgiven. So that sinners, whom he loves so deeply and passionately and purely, can be forgiven.

Jesus knew what it would take to make that happen. He had foretold it, and he didn't shy away from it. Jesus let it happen. The nails went in. The cross went up. He looked down at the crowd, and he said it – the only thing he could say, the only thing that would make sense, the only thing that could possibly fit with him being there on that cross: "Father," he said, "forgive them."

Shocking words, yes! But beautiful words, grace-filled words, divine words, words which on this Good Friday remind us what the whole plan was about.

God's plan is to forgive. God's plan is to forgive your sins. God's plan is to call you to be part of his holy Christian Church. God's plan is for you and me to live and to die and to live again in the communion of his forgiven saints. And God's plan is for you and me to sit at the foot of the cross on this Good Friday and to know, beyond all shadow of a doubt, that we are truly forgiven.

"Father, forgive them," Jesus prayed that day.

I don't know what impact those words from the cross had upon the soldiers and bystanders. I can't know for sure what impact these words of forgiveness have upon you tonight. I only know how they speak to my heart, and fill me with joy, when I think that my Savior suffered and died to forgive me! I only know how Jesus' forgiveness flows into my heart over and over again, and how patient he is with me. I only know how important it is that I learn how to love as he loves me, to learn how to forgive as he forgives me, to learn how to have grace toward others like the grace he's shown me.

I thank God that we are here again today, and that we can reflect upon Jesus' suffering – and the reason behind it. He did it all to forgive you. Amen.