

He was a very old man.

Not many lived so long in Galilee.

There was no medicine, to speak of, and periodic famine and war.

Many died young and others in middle age.

Only a few became venerable, the elders who had places of honor in the synagogue and market places.

He was one, the oldest rabbi in the region.

He had trained many others and still spoke with authority.

His writings and sermons were still being collected, though clearly his body was betraying him now.

His disciples helped him more than they did, grabbed his elbows, tried to save him steps when they could.

Sometimes, he missed the Sabbath prayers, or only made them on Friday night.

He was so old that he could not tell you how old he was.

More common then than now; his birth was not recorded on a certificate in a government office or in a family Bible.

Some said he was born in Judea, in Bethlehem, which seemed strange, for he had long, long been a Nazorean.

Memories of his young adulthood had faded.

He no longer spoke about those things.

A few of the middle-aged people remembered their parents' attitudes toward him.

Whispers about his earlier teaching, about some days in Jerusalem when he seemed to take the nation to the brink of some kind of rebellion.

But on the night that everything seemed to be coming to a head, he was deep in prayer, and when he emerged, they made a quiet return to Galilee.

And here he has been, the village rabbi, not the typical one.

Too many of his own ideas, some said.

But many loved him.

He would die, sometime later, old, respected, surrounded by his family.

His body was lowered into the Galilean soil that very evening.

Father, if it could be, let this cup pass from me.

But let your will, not mine be done.

What if that prayer had been answered?

What if Jesus had not died as he died,
remembered as John has today or as Mark did last Sunday for us?

What if he had lived to great age and given up the ghost in the way most of us hope to?

I ask, hoping to help you see, that this death is the foundation of the church's life,

of our faith, and our hope.

Without his death, the Gospel would be something different,
if it would still be called a Gospel.

Without his death, the church would be an unimaginably different reality, if a reality at all.

For the most basic thing we know about Jesus is that he died.

Could I say it is the most important thing we know about him?

It is incontrovertible, established in the New Testament and in near contemporary sources, that Jesus of Nazareth was executed,

like a common criminal, as an example to others, in shame and exposure and pain.

He was the willing victim of a conspiracy, between religious and political leaders,
who feared one another and who found it convenient

to destroy the troublesome rabbi from Galilee,

with his big ideas, potential for revolution, and personal delusions.

They had done so many times before, with other visionaries and rebels.

One more didn't matter to them.

That was life in a colonized society, under imperial rule.

People were often sacrificed to the petty gods called *status quo*,

law and order,

the way we do things around here.

Think of your own examples from our age.

All the Gospels remember it, with some differences, but largely the same.

The other books of the New Testament dwell on it, as the fundamental datum of the faith they teach.

Isaiah and others point toward a savior who would give his life in suffering love.

Little, frankly, is made of his birth, in most of the Gospels.

Luke gives us a winsome story, Matthew takes note that it happened.

In John and Mark, however, the gospel story opens with a full-grown Jesus.

He must have been born, they say in effect, but his birth did not attract their attention.

And they all build, in his teaching, in dramatic tension, toward that moment in the garden,
when Jesus asked in wondering prayer, if he had to die in this horrible way.

And he did.

For without this death, what would we have of him?

Some striking parables, that would be as helpful to us as the tales of Uncle Remus or the instructive fables of Aesop.

Some vivid sermons, that would remind us of the speeches of Job, Amos, and many others.

A bunch of words, that might be studied by professors, in departments of Middle Eastern studies.

We would have no sacraments; the bread and cup that show forth his death till he comes would not do that.

Eating and drinking in his living memory wouldn't make any sense, if he died old in his bed.

And into what would we be baptized, if he had not died on the Cross?

Not into his death, if it were peaceful and private.

And if we do not know a death like his by baptism, then we do not know a Resurrection like his.

His death is the basis of the most basic things we do as the church.

Without it, we would be a philosophical society, perhaps a civic club.

More like the Masonic movement or Rotary, not the organic reality we are.

I think there would be a few thousand of us, across the globe, that we would wear strange garb, that we would enjoy our conversations about our intriguing founder.

But instead his death has made us a people, an interdependent, living reality,
Something that only a death and its testamentary power could make.

As he gave his mother and his friend John to each other,

he has made us heirs to his death and his resurrection

The shedding of his blood has made us a people, a people forgiven and restored.

Something world-changing and life-altering happened when he died.

Sins were forgiven, divine love was revealed,

The limitless extent of God's identification with human suffering and sorrow was known.

By this death, death was defeated.

By this blood, the earth was seeded with divine life.

And by his dying, his parables, his sermons, his vision of the kingdom were given their ultimate power,

Giving his words the clearer signature of the divine, making them words of ultimate love and of God's will.

In the Book of Hebrews, it says "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him."

If Jesus had not followed this way of obedience,

If his prayers of release had been answered,

If he had not drunk of that cup of his death,

The fate of the world and our souls is something I cannot imagine.

So let us never imagine it,

let us never live as though this death is anything other than the fundamental fact of our lives.

As we say many Sundays: Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again.

His death is the foundation of all his saving work, of all our lives.

His death is the hope of the world.