

**Today You Will Be With Me in Paradise**  
**Good Friday, 2010**  
**Luke 23:39-43**  
Rev. John Burns  
University Baptist Church ~ College Park, MD 20740  
Website: [www.weareubc.org](http://www.weareubc.org)

I've been to paradise. It is located in the Shenandoah Valley halfway between Sperryville and Madison, Virginia. There is a cabin there that has a porch swing on the second floor deck and a person can sit there and look out at Old Rag mountain as well as peer down upon a beautiful apple orchard. No one every comes up the road to the cabin. Deer come by, geese fly over, a bear or two wonders through at night, but no one every drops by to disrupt one's serenity. The air is crisp and clean and because the cabin faces west, the sunsets are miraculous. If heaven looks at all like the view from that cabin, I will be ecstatic.

A friend of mine recently told me that he had visited paradise. He likes to walk on the wild side of life and recently attended a Mardi Gras party at the Mardi Gras World warehouse in New Orleans. The place was filled with drunken people as well as folks flying on other chemical magic carpets. According to my wayward buddy, the guests at the party stumbled around in various stages of undress while the D.J. blasted music and soap bubbles filled the air. "There were absolutely no rules" my friend exclaimed, "You could see anything and everything in that place. It was a small slice of paradise."

What's your version of paradise? Somebody here might say, "If I were completely healed of my cancer, that would be paradise." Another might say, "A new job with benefits, now that would be paradise." I'm sure there is someone in this room who would answer, "Paradise, for me, would be having my wife, husband, daughter or son, back, free of pain and happy again." Maybe your vision includes a healthy marriage, successful children, a boxcar of cash, a boat out on a lake or bathtub full of fragrant bath salts and no interruptions for a whole hour. We all have a vision of paradise.

So did the two thieves on the cross. Luke tells us that two criminals hung on either side of Jesus as he died on Good Friday. One was self-centered and sarcastic. "Are you not the Messiah?" he hissed to Jesus, "Save yourself and us!" He was the "bad thief." The "good thief" then spoke up. "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Both thieves wanted salvation: "Save yourself and us!" "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." Yet one thief has been forever labeled as "bad," while the other is universally referred to as "good." No lesser mind than St. Augustine said, "Do not despair; one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume; one of the thieves was damned." What has made the church conclude that one man was saved and one man was damned?

The labels come from Jesus' response. Luke reports that Jesus turned to the second thief and promised, "Today, you will be with me in paradise." We conclude that Jesus must have had kinder feelings toward the second thief and therefore cast him as the good one.

So what made him better than the first robber? They were both thugs after all. Both men committed crimes that, at least in the eyes of the Roman government, warranted death. The second thief even admitted they were guilty. He said, "We have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve." Although they used slightly different wording, both men wanted to find paradise. So why was one good and the other bad?

We have a whole generation that is turning away from the church. One of the reasons relates to the concept of paradise. I don't think my generation and my parent's generation meant it to come out this way, but in effect what we communicated to our children and grandchildren was that faith in Christ will give you a good life. You'll have a happy marriage and you'll raise healthy children. Your vocation will be blessed, you'll be able to buy a nice home, purchase a car or two, go on vacations in the summer and surround yourself with a loving community who will support you in all your endeavors. With Christ, you'll find paradise on earth and heaven when you die.

Our kids believe too much in authenticity to buy into that message. If you've been raising folks from that generation, you might be tempted to say, "Preacher, you couldn't be more wrong. Why I can't get my kids to be honest about anything. They don't tell me the truth about where they go, who they're with, what their doing, what kind of trouble their causing, what kind of grades they're making, how much they are drinking, what dangers they are exposing themselves to or what they truly believe." That may be true, but that simply means they aren't honest, it doesn't mean they aren't authentic.

In London, I am told, there is a space between the subway cars and many of the platforms in their metro system. The sides of the cars are straight and many of the platforms are rounded. In some places, a person could actually fall into the void between the cars and the standing areas so the system has invested a great deal of money to tell riders to "mind the gap." It is said vocally every time a subway car opens. "Mind the gap" is printed on t-shirts, signs all over the subway station and painted onto the ground at each stop.

There is a sizable gap between what we say Jesus will do for us and what Christ actually does. Almost half of Christian marriages fail. Kids raised in a church-going home are only slightly more likely to attend worship regularly after they grow up than those with no religious upbringing. True believers lose their job at the same rate as pagans. Cancer strikes the good and the bad. The wicked have nice homes, multiple cars and fantastic vacations. If material well being, good health, happy families and successful vocations determine the nature of paradise, then Jesus doesn't deliver and sometimes, the world does. Old folks like me, may have better manners than to point this out, but our kids value authenticity too highly to pretend they don't see what they see. They mind the gap and report their observations.

Since they've been told, intentionally or not, that they should follow Jesus in order to have the American version of paradise and have observed that one can find that paradise without the church, they've left it behind. Our kids are not bad people. They are not nearly as materially obsessed as we are. They volunteer to help others, they are non-judgmental, they care about the environment, they eat healthier than we do and they've found a certain degree of happiness attending their parties, going to their concerts, hanging out with their friends, club and bar hopping, rooting for their favorite teams, making their plans and living their lives, with only a cursory glance at the church. If both believers and non-believers seek only to secure their own version of paradise, then our kids have decided they'll spend their Sundays doing something they like better than sitting in a pew.

And that is why the message of the second word from the cross is so important. The difference between the two thieves of the cross is wrapped up in their understandings of paradise. For the first man, paradise is getting Jesus' help to do what the thief wants to do. He wants to be returned to his old life so he tells Jesus, "Intervene and set me free so I can go about my business. Help me return to the life I was pursuing when I got arrested." The second thief, in contrast, is asking to join Jesus in Christ's work. "Remember me when you come into your kingdom. Put me to work as you establish your reign." Therein lies all the difference.

When our prayers are focused solely on getting God's help to accomplish our dreams and goals, Jesus is unmoved. "Jesus, find a job for me." "Jesus, take away my sickness." "Jesus, patch up my marriage." "Jesus, make my business prosper." "Jesus, make our offer on that house go through." Those prayers are like the one offered by the first thief. "Jesus, act on my behalf and help me achieve the life I want."

The second thief, however, said "Jesus, help me find my place in your work." We pray the prayer of the second thief when we say, "Jesus, when you have a mission to accomplish, remember me." "Jesus, as you institute your reign, show me what my contribution is to be." That is a prayer Christ can honor, for that prayer leads to the kind of paradise Jesus can deliver. If the first thief would have been asked to describe paradise, what would he have said? "All the money I can get my hands on." "A palace in Caesarea by the sea filled with wine, women and song." "My own fiefdom where everyone has to do what I say." Jesus doesn't grant that kind of paradise.

The second thief, in contrast, had already expressed his heart's desire to be with Jesus as the Lord established his eternal reign. For him, paradise was a new way of living in communion with his loving Lord. Christ could provide that kind of paradise.

A couple of years ago, I worked on a Habitat for Humanity project in the ninth ward of New Orleans. About fifty of us, doctors, lawyers, students, preachers, retirees all hammered and sawed and glued and hauled concrete all day long in the hot sun. About two in the afternoon, our work was interrupted by the calliope sound of the ice cream man. When the carnival like notes hit our ears, hammers and saws dropped all over the site as we ran out to the popsicle truck like children and waved our money in the air to secure a slurpy treat.

After we retrieved our icy treasures, we'd all sit down on the ground and take a break. I sat up on an unfinished porch one afternoon, looked out on the whole gathering and asked myself, "why are we all so happy here?" It was hot as blazes with humidity to match. We were tired and wounded from hammering our thumbs and dropping wheel barrows on our feet and working blisters on our hands. Not a one of us was getting paid a dime and yet we experienced something very near bliss. Then it came to me. We'd found a kind of paradise there. The kind of paradise that God gives when we are willing to do our Redeemer's work, when we set aside our agendas, to do the work of God's kingdom.

Jesus never promised to give us a paradise of health, wealth and success. Our Savior hasn't failed us because he never said that kind of paradise would be ours. Instead, he promised us, what he promised the thief on the cross. If our most sincere prayer is "Jesus, use us in your grand and glorious work!" then today, we will experience the longings of our hearts. For to be with Jesus, helping to create the new heaven and earth Christ has promised, well, that's paradise."