It is Finished

Today’s message is on John 19:16-45. This passage records Jesus’s final day and culminates with his famous "It is finished." statement. These three simple yet transformative words signify the culmination of Christ's earthly mission and His ultimate sacrifice for our sins. Through His suffering and death, Jesus fulfilled the divine plan, reconciled humanity with our Creator, and opened the gates of heaven for all who believe. In today's sermon, we will delve deeper into the significance of this pivotal moment in human history, unpacking the layers of meaning behind Christ's final declaration and exploring the impact it has on our lives as believers. Let us open our hearts and minds to receive the truth of His message, that we may be inspired and renewed by the boundless love and grace He offers.

Before delving further into our exploration of John 19:16-45, let us take a moment to understand the historical background of the Gospel of John and its author. The Gospel of John, the fourth and final canonical Gospel in the New Testament, is distinct from the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, presenting a unique perspective on Jesus Christ's life, ministry, and divinity. Traditionally, the authorship of this Gospel is attributed to John the Apostle, also known as John the Evangelist or John the Beloved, one of Jesus' twelve apostles and the brother of James. It is believed that John wrote this Gospel in Ephesus, a prominent city in Asia Minor, around the end of the first century AD, between 90 and 100 AD. The Gospel of John differs from the Synoptic Gospels in its structure, style, and content, focusing more on Jesus' identity as the divine Word, the Son of God, and the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. This Gospel is characterized by its use of poetic and symbolic language, highlighting the spiritual and theological dimensions of Jesus' teachings and miracles. As we embark on our exploration of "It is finished" from John 19:16-45, we are reminded of the unique perspective that the author brings to bear on the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

In John 19:17, the Gospel describes Jesus carrying His cross to the place called Golgotha, which is also known as the Place of the Skull. This verse highlights the final journey Jesus makes before His crucifixion, emphasizing His willingness to bear the burden of the cross, both literally and symbolically. The name Golgotha, derived from the Aramaic word "gulgulta," means "skull." The Latin term for this location is "Calvaria," from which the English word "Calvary" originates. The exact location of Golgotha remains a subject of debate among scholars and historians, but it is generally believed to be a hill outside the walls of Jerusalem, near one of the city gates. The site was likely chosen for its visibility, as crucifixions served as public displays of the Roman Empire's power and a deterrent to potential criminals or rebels. Carrying the cross was part of the Roman crucifixion process, where the condemned person was typically forced to bear the crossbeam, or "patibulum," on their shoulders to the site of their execution. This act was both physically exhausting and humiliating, as the person would be paraded through the streets, often while being mocked and beaten by the crowd and soldiers. In the context of Jesus' crucifixion, His carrying of the cross holds deep symbolic meaning. Jesus not only endures the physical weight of the wooden beam but also the spiritual weight of the sins of humanity. He willingly takes upon Himself the punishment for our transgressions and the pain of our iniquities. The image of Jesus carrying His cross serves as a powerful reminder of His selfless love and the depth of His sacrifice for our salvation. Furthermore, it challenges us to follow in His footsteps, embracing our own crosses and sharing in the redemptive suffering of Christ. Jesus directly instructs this in Matthew 16:24: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." After carrying the cross Jesus is now crucified between two prisoners. Verse 18 portrays the scene of Jesus' crucifixion, where He is nailed to the cross between two other men, one on each side, and Jesus in the middle. This arrangement is significant on multiple levels, providing insight into the historical context, Jesus' role as the Savior, and the fulfillment of Scripture. From a historical perspective, crucifixions were typically carried out in groups as a demonstration of the Roman Empire's authority and power. By placing Jesus between two criminals, the Romans aimed to emphasize His supposed guilt and diminish His status in the eyes of the public. He is to be displayed as “chief among criminals”. The irony here being that Jesus is sinless. He is the last person who ever ought to be in such a position. The Romans here seek to humiliate Jesus and discredit His claims of being the Messiah. Despite this intention, the positioning of Jesus between the two criminals holds deep significance. This arrangement symbolically underscores Jesus' role as the mediator between God and humanity, bridging the gap caused by sin. Through His crucifixion, Jesus becomes the central figure in the process of reconciliation and redemption, offering salvation to all who believe in Him. Hebrews 9:15 explains “For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.” Moreover, the scene of Jesus crucified between two criminals fulfills the Old Testament prophecy found in Isaiah 53:12, which states, "Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many and makes intercession for the transgressors." This prophecy foreshadows the Messiah's suffering and His association with sinners, further emphasizing Jesus' willingness to take on the burden of humanity's sins.

I want to discuss a bit more about crucifixion so it’s clear how insane the crucifixion process was. We are taught and teach that the crucifixion of Jesus Christ serves as the ultimate act of self-sacrifice, redemption, and reconciliation between humanity and God. Historically, crucifixion was a brutal and humiliating form of execution, reserved for slaves, criminals, and enemies of the Roman state. Cicero, the Roman philosopher, and orator, famously described the horror of crucifixion, stating, "It is a crime to bind a Roman citizen; to scourge him is a wickedness; to put him to death is almost parricide. What shall I say of crucifying him? So guilty an action cannot by any possibility be adequately expressed by any name bad enough for it…that you exposed to that torture and nailed on that cross." Crucifixion was a widespread practice in the ancient world, used by various empires, including the Persians, Carthaginians, and Romans. The Romans perfected this method of execution to inflict maximum pain and suffering, serving as a deterrent to anyone who might challenge their authority. The victim was typically scourged before being nailed or tied to a wooden cross, where they would suffer for hours or even days before succumbing to asphyxiation, blood loss, or shock. In the context of Jesus' crucifixion, it is essential to recognize that the Son of God, the Savior of humanity, willingly endured this excruciating and shameful punishment to atone for our sins. By doing so, He broke the power of sin and death, paving the way for our salvation and eternal life. In John 19:19-22, the narrative describes a sign placed above Jesus' head on the cross by Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor. The sign reads, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews," and is written in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek. This inscription is significant for several reasons, as it provides insight into the political and religious dynamics of the time, emphasizes Jesus' kingship, and underscores Pilate's role in the crucifixion. The sign, referred to as a "titulus," was a common element of Roman crucifixions. It served to inform the public of the crimes committed by the person being executed, acting as a warning against engaging in similar behavior. In this case, the inscription "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews" refers to the charge brought against Jesus by the Jewish religious authorities: that He claimed to be the Messiah, a king in direct opposition to Roman rule. The fact that the sign is written in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek signifies its importance and highlights the multi-lingual nature of the region. Hebrew was the language of the Jewish people, Latin was the official language of the Roman Empire, and Greek was the common language of the eastern Mediterranean. By including all three languages, Pilate ensured that the message could be understood by the widest possible audience. The chief priests objected to the wording of the sign, as they perceive it as an acknowledgement of Jesus' claim to be the Messiah. They request that Pilate change the inscription to read, "He said, I am King of the Jews." However, Pilate refuses, asserting, "What I have written, I have written." Pilate's response demonstrates his authority and his unwillingness to bend to the demands of the Jewish religious leaders. At the same time, it is a subtle indication of his own doubts about Jesus' guilt. Earlier in the narrative, John 18 to be exact, we read that Pilate objected to Jesus crucifixion, but for the sake of his political ambition compromised with the Jesus leaders to avoid revolt. Beyond the political implications, the inscription carries deeper meaning. For Christians, Jesus' kingship is not an earthly or political position, but rather a spiritual one. By identifying Jesus as the "King of the Jews," the sign underscores His divine authority and affirms His role as the long-awaited Messiah. The inscription on the sign serves as a powerful symbol of Jesus' divine authority and mission, transcending the immediate circumstances of His crucifixion. In the next verse the focus shifts to the women who remain near the cross during Jesus' crucifixion: His mother Mary, her sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. Their presence is a testament to their unwavering love and devotion, even in the face of immense sorrow and suffering. Losing any loved one is difficult, but losing a child and in such a violent and evil manner must have been painful beyond words. Since Jesus was guarded by Roman centurions she could not even comfort him as he suffered. Nevertheless, in Jesus’ final moments, He shows His deep compassion and concern for His mother's well-being. He entrusts her care to the apostle John, effectively establishing a new familial relationship between them. This act highlights Jesus' selflessness and love, as He ensures His mother's care even while enduring the agony of the cross. Even in the most inconceivable pain Jesus thinks yet of his mother. The we might all have sons who would show such love.

So we come to the last moments of Jesus in verse 30. In this climactic verse, Jesus utters the powerful words, "It is finished," signifying the completion of His earthly mission. With this statement, Jesus declares that His sacrificial work of atonement and redemption has been accomplished. He has paid the price for humanity's sins and has fulfilled the prophecies and promises of the Old Testament. By bowing His head and giving up His spirit, Jesus willingly surrenders His life, exemplifying the ultimate act of love and self-sacrifice. This moment marks the turning point in human history, as Jesus' death paves the way for humanity's salvation and the possibility of eternal life through faith in Him. GK Chesterton, an English writer and philosopher who wrote extensively on Christianity, noted the extreme paradox involved in this moment. He saw the crucifixion as a moment where the divine and human aspects of Jesus converged. He writes, "In this story of Good Friday, it is the best things in the world that are at their worst. That is what really shows us the world at its worst… Rome, the legend, founded upon fallen Troy and triumphant over fallen Carthage, had stood for a heroism which was the nearest that any pagan ever came to chivalry.” This legendary empire upon which much of our current age even today is founded was complicit in the death of God himself. Chesterton notes that Jesus displays courage, and that is something that no other religion does. “Alone of all creeds, Christianity has added courage to the virtues of the Creator. For the only courage worth calling courage must necessarily mean that the soul passes a breaking point and does not break." Scripture teaches us that as Christ was man so is he able to empathize with our condition (Hebrews 4:15).

The rest of the passage covers the aftermath of Jesus death. The Jewish leaders, concerned with maintaining ritual purity before the Sabbath, request the legs of the crucified individuals be broken to hasten their deaths. This practice, known as "crurifragium," would cause suffocation, as the crucified could no longer support their weight to breathe. The soldiers break the legs of the two men crucified with Jesus, but upon reaching Jesus, they find He is already dead, making it unnecessary to break His legs. During crucifixions Roman guards were required to stay there until the prisoner died. If the victim lived the Roman guards would themselves be crucified. The guards often hasted their watch by killing them early. This explains why a soldier pierces His side with a spear, they needed to be extra sure he had died. From Jesus Blood and water flow out, which has been interpreted as evidence of Jesus' humanity and an indication of His true death, countering claims that He had only appeared to die on the cross. The passage concludes by connecting these events to the fulfillment of Scripture. By not breaking Jesus' legs, the soldiers unknowingly fulfilled Exodus 12:46 and Psalm 34:20. These verses foreshadow that none of the Messiah's bones will be broken and that people will look upon the One they have pierced. This connection highlights the divine plan at work, even in the most tragic and seemingly chaotic moments of Jesus' crucifixion.

When we read todays passage, I can’t help but think about my life, and my walk with God. I am often struck by how many difficult things have happened and how they have led me into preparation for many good things. When I was a child, I thought it was normal for people to be evicted and move every month. Every time we moved, I lost everything I owned. I quickly understood from school that I was the only one in the whole school whose family did not own a car. And when I looked at other families, I wondered why it was that they had everything they needed and we had nothing. But then I became an adult and things changed. I was able to go to college for free on a scholarship. I bought a car. I got married. Me and Hershey became home owners. In the last year we had a baby and I was given a government grant to go back to school. All these things are things that I could have barely have imagined. So when I think about my childhood, which was characterized by poverty and loss and think about my adulthood which has been characterized by gain and love, I understand that this is how God worked in the life of Jesus too. Jesus was poor, he suffered and he died. Yet this was preparation for something that was so much more. It was preparation for eternity. It was preparation for transformation. It was preparation for ascension. I do not mean to compare my earthly gains to the resurrection of Christ and I cannot say that this template will play out exactly in everyone’s earthly life. But I am reminded that we often suffer in preparation for greater things. This plays out across the bible in the lives of Joseph, Mary, Moses, Abraham, and most explicitly in Jesus Christ. We are not promised that just because we suffer for an earthly season, we will experience material blessings. But we are told promised something more- that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us. And so today let us reflect on the power of the cross and understand that whatever has come before is all preparation for whatever will come tomorrow.

In this message, we learned about the transformative power of Jesus' crucifixion, examining its historical backdrop, theological importance, and rich symbolism. At this Easter time we invite you to join us as we contemplate Christ’s sacrifice. May Jesus bless you abundantly this Easter season and may his Holy Spirit work within you.