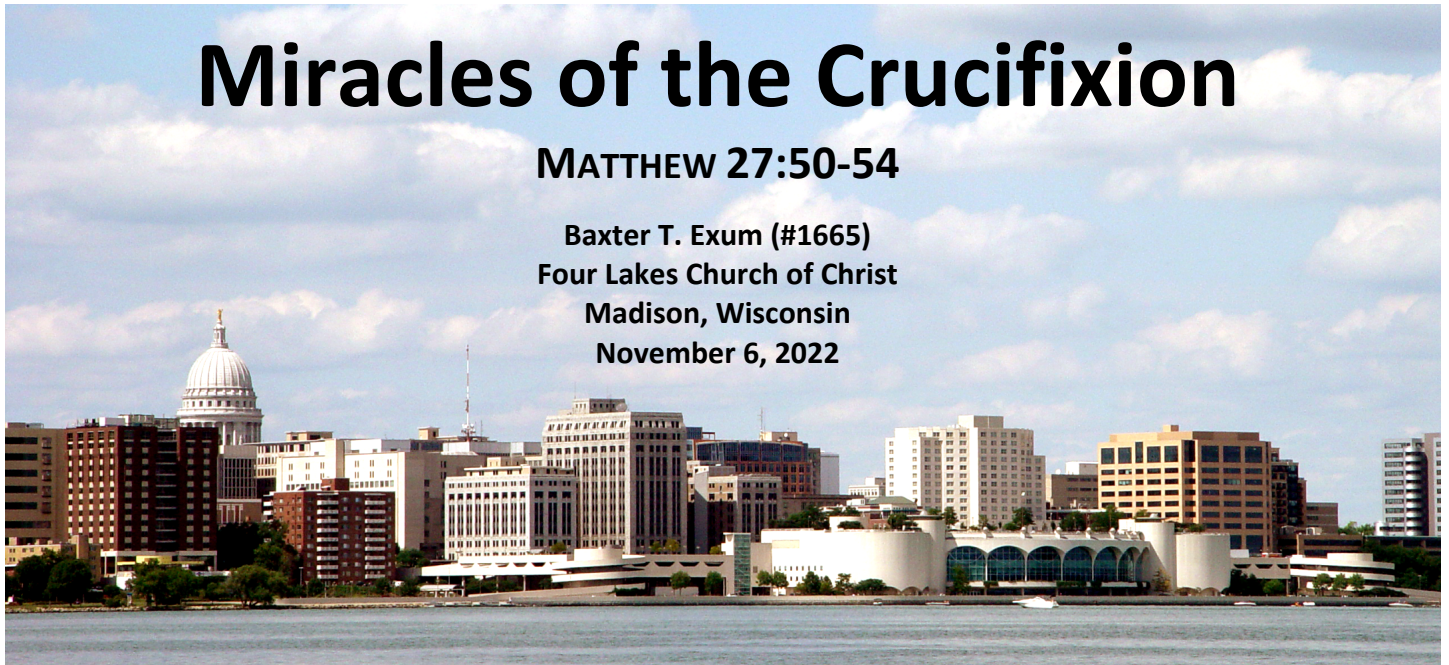


Miracles of the Crucifixion

MATTHEW 27:50-54

**Baxter T. Exum (#1665)
Four Lakes Church of Christ
Madison, Wisconsin
November 6, 2022**



It is good to be together with God's people this morning! We'd like to welcome you to the Four Lakes Church of Christ! If you are visiting with us today, we are especially glad that you are here, and we hope that you will take a moment to fill out a visitor card online. The QR code is on the bulletin (on the wall, right inside the front door), and the web address for that is very simple: www.fourlakescoc.org/visitor. And while we are on this slide up here, let's remember our efforts to collect CANNED PINEAPPLE for Shults-Lewis Child and Family Services. We have four more weeks to collect pineapple, and old cell phones, and used inkjet and toner cartridges, as well as funds for other groceries down there. Thank you so much for helping with this! And let's also not forget today's Soup, Slurp, and Sing at Patsy's place after worship this morning – right up the road in Sun Prairie – talk to Patsy or Gary Mueller if you need directions or an address.

As we get started today, I'd like to share a couple of pieces of mail, the first from LaVerne Becker, a former member of the church here in Madison who lived down in Mount Horeb at the time. Laverne thanks us for sending her our monthly Activity Report. At one time, we mailed these out to 139 people every month, but thanks to email, we have now cut that mailing list down to only three, and LaVerne is one of those three! She wrote back a week or so ago, and she says, "Can you believe that I am 90 years old and still living in my home here in Prattville, Alabama. I will soon need to have help since I have a bad right knee (from falling so many times in the past)! May God bless you and your family. Love, LaVerne Becker." I thought you might appreciate the update from LaVerne this morning.

And then we also have a note from a student in our Bible Correspondence Course program. We have the monthly figures in our bulletin each week, and I hope you noticed the update this week, that we graded and returned 1072 lessons in October. These lessons went out to 372 students, 121 of them are new students, and 5 of them have now finished every lesson we have to offer, which is awesome. A few weeks ago, we heard back from Helen. I'm not sure where she lives, but she says,

Thank you again for these wonderful lessons. I love these lessons. The last lesson I made a lot of errors because I was doing it while sleepy. I laughed when I saw that I had chosen that Jesus preached in New York and Chicago. I was too sleepy to reread the lesson before enclosing it in the envelope. Thank you and God bless. These lessons enable me to go deeper into the Bible.

I enjoy studying and learning what I didn't know. Thank you. Thank you for the beautiful certificate.

She also enclosed a small donation (which we do not ask for) – it is our honor to provide these lessons.

And then we have another note from an inmate in Belfair, Washington, maybe an hour or so southwest of Seattle. She addresses this to the Four Lakes Church of Christ and Ms. Patsy,

Thank you for the studies! I have long been without one and Ms. Cindy told me she submitted it for me, I am still grateful and in awe that she insisted with her heart and in awe that you would send studies to an inmate. Again, thank you. I hope to have further contact with you all. If I'm ever in Wisconsin, I'd love to visit! I have some Amish friends in Richland. I'm a believer and follower of Christ. I don't have a "religion." I was raised 7th Day Adventist, now I have a relationship with our Father! Because He lives! Rachel

She has the acronym "H.O.P.E." at the bottom, which stands for "Hold on, Pain Ends." And then, there is a note that says, "PS – Thanks so much for the envelope or I'd not be able to return this for months!" I think we budget over \$100 a week for this, which is a significant part of our weekly contribution, and this is why! But I thought you might appreciate seeing one of the notes we receive on a regular basis.

As we get started today, I'd like to get back to something that I have done on a very regular basis, almost since I first started preaching in Wisconsin more than 30 years ago, and that is: I need your help in deciding what we study in sermon form over the next year! One of the toughest parts of preaching is deciding what to preach on. Some of you who do some fill-in preaching know how hard it is to come up with a topic or text, but on a full-time basis, it is truly relentless. One preacher tried to describe it by saying that the "tyranny of preaching is that Sunday comes once every seven days." It never stops! And I always worry that we are missing something. I'm the only preacher that some of you have ever had, and it worries me: What if I fail to cover something critical? The Bible has more than 32,000 verses spread out over 1,189 chapters. It is literally impossible to study all of it in sermon form, so I need your help! Hopefully all of you in this room today have one of these Sermon Request Cards, and I've learned by experience that I need to get these back today, or I may never see these again. I will be harassing you on the way out today. Don't think that you need to edit this to come up with the perfect question: Just write something down! If you think of something later, let me know then. Most of what we study here in some way goes back to a request or a question. But I've also put my contact information on the cards and on the wall up here. Feel free to respond in that way as well. And this goes especially for those of you joining us online or on the phone. The question on the card is, "Do you have a Bible question or a favorite scripture, passage, character, or topic we need to study in sermon form?" I need your help with this, especially as I start planning our lessons for 2023. We have 52 Sundays a year, I'm out of town for several of those, so our time together is critically important, and I need your help to narrow down the entire Bible to maybe 47 or 48 lessons. Thank you so much for helping with this!

We are here this morning, to hear and to share the good news that Jesus the Son of God came to this earth to save us. He died in our place on the cross, he was buried, and he was raised up on the third day. We obey this good news by turning to God in obedient faith, confessing our faith in Jesus as the Christ, and by allowing ourselves to be buried with Christ in baptism, an immersion in water for the forgiveness of sins.

We do have two pretty interesting examples this week, starting with a post not from a church, but from The Palace Health Care and Rehab in Red Boiling Springs, Tennessee, which looks to be about an hour northeast of Nashville. They posted this week and they say that “Spirituality is so important. One of our residents needed [to be] baptized and the Willette Church Christ was able to provide the service. Thank you to Beverly Stewart, HR and James England, [and] maintenance for taking her in our Van to the Church!” If you run a nursing home in Tennessee and have somebody who wants to be baptized, you call the nearest congregation of the Lord’s people, and that’s what they did, and God’s people got it done. So, good news from Tennessee this week.

And then we have an interesting update, also from Tennessee, from Don Blackwell. Some of you know that Don Blackwell is a gospel preacher who was injured in an ATV accident while away from home preaching a gospel meeting several years ago. He’s paralyzed and in a wheelchair now, but here is Don’s report about a week ago. He says,

This is Deven Grove. Deven was shot 3 times this summer, leaving him a paraplegic. He is from McMinnville, Tennessee. I met him while he was in Bethesda Care in Cookeville. After studying with him and his girlfriend, Jessica, we baptized Deven on October 30th. Because of his condition, we had to bring in an inflatable pool and lift him with a Hoyer lift to baptize him. Deven's condition is similar to mine, except that he also does not have the use of his arms. Deven is an amazing young man with a good and positive attitude. Jessica is a sweet and kind young lady and a blessing to him.

So, good continues to come from tragedy, and we share this as a reminder: This is what it means to obey the gospel, and if you would like to do what these two people have done, we invite you to get in touch, and we would love to study with you. Our contact information is on the front of the bulletin each week. Or you can simply either call or text me at 608-224-0274.

This morning, I’d like for us to study a question that came in from one of our senior saints earlier this week, and I will admit, the question has come pretty close to breaking my brain this week! She was reading through Matthew’s gospel account and came to a passage that has stumped her through the years; so, she picked up the phone and decided to share the confusion! Thank you so much for that! But it is a weird passage! Like many of you, I have read the passage a number of times through the years, but I always passed over it rather quickly, “Oh, that’s strange; someday I should probably figure that out,” and then I keep on reading. Well, that time has finally come! We know that the four gospel accounts are inspired and were written by four different men, all giving their own perspective, and each describing the crucifixion in their own way. There are similarities, but we also find differences – not contradictory, but each one picking up on certain details that the others might not mention. Well, in Matthew 27, one of the Lord’s disciples, a former tax collector, gives us a few details that are not shared anywhere else in scripture. And these details are often overlooked. One author has compared it to some of the mountains surrounding Mount Everest. Have we ever heard of Mount Changtse, Mount Khumbutse, Mount Nuptse, and Mount Lhotse? I haven’t. Those mountains are all among some of the tallest in the world, but they are overshadowed by Everest. We are more familiar with Denali and Kilimanjaro, even though both of these are shorter than those mountains surrounding Mount Everest. In the same way, we have some huge miraculous events in Matthew 27:50-54, but they are overshadowed by Jesus’ death and his resurrection.

And yet, although somewhat confusing, some of the rather strange details we find in Matthew 27 do give us some new insight concerning power of the Lord’s death on the cross. Jesus, of course, performed many miraculous signs during his ministry – healing the sick, raising the dead, casting out demons, restoring both

speech and hearing, calming the storms, walking on water, and so on. Well, in Matthew 27:50-54, we have several miraculous signs that take place both at and immediately following Jesus' death. So, this itself is a bit strange, but we also seem to have some inconsistencies in the timeline of this new information.

Some, then, have tried to dismiss this passage as perhaps just being added after the fact, suggesting that perhaps Matthew didn't really write these words, that this information was added later. And yet, as we examine the manuscripts, we have no indication of this whatsoever. These verses appear in the earliest of manuscripts. So, we can't just dismiss it that way. Others have suggested that Matthew is speaking metaphorically here, that he's exaggerating for effect, that he's using some kind of apocalyptic language. And yet, where do we stop? These things come right between Jesus' death and resurrection. Are those also apocalyptic or allegorical? So, we have no indication from the context that what happens here is anything other than actual history. And all of this forces us to go back and to ask, "If this is actually from Matthew (as it seems to be), and if this is literal history (as it seems to be), then what in the world do we make of this? What happened, and what does it mean?"

As we study, I'd like for us to start by looking at the text itself, I'd like to summarize some of the questions we might have about this passage, I'd like for us to try to move through the events here in chronological order, and then I'd like for us to close today by answering the "So what?" question: What does this passage really mean for us today?

So, let's start with the text itself. This is Matthew 27:50-54,

⁵⁰ And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit. ⁵¹ And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth shook and the rocks were split. ⁵² The tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; ⁵³ and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection they entered the holy city and appeared to many. ⁵⁴ Now the centurion, and those who were with him keeping guard over Jesus, when they saw the earthquake and the things that were happening, became very frightened and said, "Truly this was the Son of God!"

I have some questions, don't you? I look at this passage, and I want to know:

- Who were these people who were raised from the dead?
- How did God choose who got to (or had to) go back? Was there a "sign-up sheet" in Paradise?
- Were these people like Abraham, and Moses, and Elijah?
- Or were these people who had died more recently, people who would have been recognized?
- Did John the Baptist come back to say "hi" and "told you so" to King Herod?
- What about Joseph, Jesus' earthly father? Did he return?
- Were there some awesome family reunions during this time, and what would that have been like?
- What if you came back and your wife had remarried shortly after your death? We have some potential for awkward right there!
- Did these people live normal lives and eventually die again (as we assume happened with Lazarus and Tabitha)?
- Or, did these people ascend into heaven (as happened with Enoch, and Elijah, and Jesus)?
- Or, are they still living somewhere on the earth, even today?

- When the tombs were opened, were they alive at that point, stuck in their open graves before heading into Jerusalem on Sunday morning?
- Or did they use their time on Saturday trying to find something to eat and something to wear?
- Did they even have the ability to eat food?
- What did they look like? Like Jesus, could you see the scars from the cause of death? Were they gross? Were they scary?
- Were they totally normal, or did they walk around like zombies?
- Why is this not mentioned elsewhere in scripture, like in the book of Acts or in any of Paul's letters?
- Were these people still around for the Day of Pentecost? And if so, why didn't Peter say anything about it?
- If they had retired, and if they had left their savings to others in a will, did they have to go back to work to earn a living?

I have so many questions, and you probably do as well! So, we go back to the parallel accounts, and they don't help us at all! Often if we have a question in Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John, we look at the other accounts. But here, nothing! John is off in a category all its own. But even when we look at Mark and Luke, nothing! In fact, it's almost like a gaping hole. Mark and Luke have the veil and the incident with the Roman centurion, but there is a gap in their coverage of this. Why is that? I don't know! I will add that to my list of questions. My feeling is that since Matthew is writing to Jews (probably in Jerusalem), his first readers would have most likely heard about this, so he covers it. Mark and Luke, on the other hand, were writing to Romans and Greeks, so they leave it out so as not to cause a distraction. Think about Paul mentioning the resurrection on the Areopagus in Acts 17 – that was the moment he got laughed out of town. But ultimately, we don't know.

However, instead of focusing on what we do NOT know, let's just briefly run through the timeline. And I know we have some small print down here at the bottom, but I've just listed the six big events down there, I want us to run through these in order, making some observations along the way. Obviously, we have the Lord's death in verse 50, but right as he cries out with a loud voice and gives up his spirit...

I. ...we start (in verse 51) with THE VEIL OF THE TEMPLE BEING TORN IN TWO FROM TOP TO BOTTOM.

And, in fact, we just studied this in our Sunday morning class from Hebrews 10 two weeks ago (when I was filling in for Caleb). As we learned then, the **"veil"** was a heavy curtain in the temple, dividing the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place. The Most Holy Place was that inner room containing the Ark of the Covenant, the back room where the high priest was allowed to enter only once every year, on the Day of Atonement. This was their access to God. And here we find that at the moment Jesus dies, that curtain was torn in two, not from bottom to top as if a man had done it, but it was ripped in two from top to bottom, indicating that God had done it. And as we learned two weeks ago, this curtain was not thin and somewhat transparent like the curtains we have here in this room, but secular accounts from the time tell us that it was thick as the palm of a man's hand. This was like those room dividing partitions we might have in a school gymnasium or a conference center. This curtain was 30-feet wide and 60-feet tall; it was roughly 4-inches thick, and it was ripped in two at the exact moment Jesus dies on the cross. He cries out with a loud voice, ***"It is finished!"*** (according to the other accounts), and at that moment, less than a mile away, there is a giant RIP, exposing the Ark of the Covenant in the temple.

Well, the author of Hebrews refers to this in Hebrews 10, explaining that we now have ***"confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which he inaugurated for us through the veil, that***

is, His flesh.” He goes on to explain that Jesus is our great high priest, and that we now have access to God directly through him, and then we had those *“let us”* references.

We won’t spend much time on this, other than to note that this is where it happens. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all mention this, but they don’t explain. They leave that to others who would write later. For now, the veil is torn. At this moment, the temple itself becomes pretty much irrelevant (along with the whole system of the priesthood, and the sacrifices, and all of that), although this wouldn’t be explained in greater detail until later.

By the way, I believe the tearing of the veil probably had a significant impact on the priests, which is why Luke will tell us (not long after this, in Acts 6:7) that *“...a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.”* Without that curtain, your job as a priest was pretty much irrelevant. This, also, by the way, is why it was so important that the earthquake didn’t destroy the temple (which God obviously could have done). If the temple had been leveled here, everybody would have said, “Yeah, that’s terrible; let’s rebuild.” But instead, God rips that heavy curtain from top to bottom, sending a much clearer message.

Some of you know that I’ll be serving as an election official this week. There are times when we need to have a voter rip a ballot – not to destroy it (that ballot is evidence and needs to be preserved), but simply to VOID the ballot. If somebody makes a mistake, we have them rip it partially to indicate “this is not the way I intended to vote,” but then we preserve that ballot as evidence. And I would suggest that God does something similar here. He doesn’t destroy the temple at this point, but he makes it irrelevant. So, the veil is torn.

II. The second miraculous event in this passage is the EARTHQUAKE.

Obviously, earthquakes are pretty common. We have several references to earthquakes in the Bible. We still have earthquakes today. When I go out to see my sister, we travel to some places where the earthquakes have split the roads out there. We think snowplows and salt are rough on our roads here. Out there, the earth is actually moving. Sometimes, earthquakes can be quite destructive – we have some fairly recent examples from Japan and Haiti. Sometimes, thousands are killed. In Matthew 27, though, we have the only earthquake that results in the population INCREASING! And we find in this passage that the destruction is very limited and specific. We will get to that in just a moment. But if this had been a naturally occurring event, the destruction would have been widespread. As I said earlier, the temple would have been damaged. Those clay homes in Jerusalem would have been damaged. The damage here, though, is very specific. And this earthquake happens for a reason. To me, we seem to have a comparison to Mount Sinai. Back when the Law was first given, Exodus 19:18 says, *“Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the LORD descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked violently.”* The writer of Hebrews refers back to this in Hebrews 12:26-27, but also looking to the future. He says (referring to God), *“And His voice shook the earth then, but now He has promised, saying, ‘YET ONCE MORE I WILL SHAKE NOT ONLY THE EARTH, BUT ALSO THE HEAVEN.’ This expression, ‘Yet once more,’ denotes the removing of those things which can be shaken, as of created things, so that those things which cannot be shaken may remain.”* There is a time coming when both the earth and the heavens will shake. But for now, we have the tearing of the veil, followed by the shaking of the earth...

III. ...which brings us to ROCKS BEING SPLIT.

And just think about the grammar in all of this for a moment, ***“and the earth shook and the rocks were split.”*** Rocks don’t split themselves, do they? No, the rocks are passive in this. God split the rocks! God shook the earth! And these things happen at the moment Jesus dies. He cries out with a loud voice, setting off this chain of events.

In terms of the rocks being split, the word we have translated here as ***“split”*** is the same word that was just used to refer to the veil of the temple being ***“split,”*** and it’s the basis of our English words “schism” and “schizophrenia,” a splitting of the mind. The rocks were split; and more specifically, God did the splitting; which leads us the next event, indicating some thought or design behind what’s happening here...

IV. ...as we notice (at the beginning of verse 52) that THE TOMBS WERE OPENED.

So, the splitting isn’t random, is it? Tombs around Jerusalem were often carved or chiseled out of rock. And so, instead of just digging a hole and going down, tombs were often horizontal into the side of a cliff of some kind. And like the tomb that Jesus was about to borrow for a few days, tombs were often then sealed with a rock rolled or placed over the opening. Well, we have an earthquake, but no real damage other than a veil being torn in two from top to bottom and rocks splitting, resulting in tombs being opened. We are heading somewhere here! There is a plan underway. This action is leading to something. The splitting of rocks indicates force, while the opening of tombs indicates design or thought.

And if this happens right after Jesus’ death, we need to remember that it was against the Law of Moses to do any work on the Sabbath, and it was also against the Law to have any contact with a dead body. This means that these graves would have been open for at least a day or so. That’s a bit concerning, isn’t it? If I hear that graves are popping open around town, I might go check on my loved ones. And if that grave is open, I might keep watch through the night. That’s a bit concerning. Two thoughts come to mind here: First, I remember visiting the grave of a great-aunt (Clara Exum) up near Soldotna, Alaska, back in 2018. With the permafrost, it was one of the weirdest cemeteries I’ve ever seen – the ground was very uneven, even squishy – I felt like I was in danger of sinking down into those graves as we walked around. And then I also think about having a job mowing cemeteries when I was a student down in Tennessee. These were old country cemeteries out in the middle of nowhere. This old guy at church was always looking for young men to help him go out and mow. And I can tell you, it’s a bit creepy to be mowing a cemetery and to have your foot slip down into a hole over a grave. There’s a whole lot of weed-whacking in old cemeteries, by the way. But I’m just picturing tombs split open, and they stay open for a day or so. This is clearly a preview of something that is about to happen.

V. And this brings us to the second half of verse 52, where Matthew tells us that MANY BODIES OF THE SAINTS WHO HAD FALLEN ASLEEP WERE RAISED.

At this point, it is slightly unclear whether these people are raised immediately at Jesus’ death or at his resurrection. But either way, we need to realize that Jesus’ death brings us life. Sometimes we might only think about Jesus’ resurrection bringing us life, but in Hebrews 2:14 (while speaking of Jesus), the author makes the point ***“that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil.”*** We have a similar thought in 1 Thessalonians 5:10, where Paul refers to Jesus ***“who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we will live together with Him.”*** He died for us, so that we can live together with him. His death brings us life. And I think that’s what we have here, at least a tiny little preview of it.

Were you guys ever able to talk your parents into opening a Christmas gift early? It happened a time or two in our family. But instead of the main gift, they let us open something small. And that's almost what I see happening here. We have a preview of a much larger resurrection still to come. And I say this because of who we see being raised: The saints! All of those raised were *"holy,"* they were *"saints."* These people were selected for their holiness. And isn't that a picture of what is still to come? What we see here is something of a preview, the opening act for something much greater.

And can we even imagine how this must have affected people back then? Rocks are split, tombs are opened, and only certain people are missing. Only certain people come out of those tombs. I'm imagining the Pharisees heading out to check on their relatives, and they are all still in their tombs. Uh-oh! That's not good! Only the truly righteous have been raised. Again, a picture of the resurrection to come, *"For an hour is coming,"* Jesus says, *"in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment."* The resurrection will be selective. Here, though, the bodies of many saints are raised.

VI. This leads us to the last item up here – regardless of whether the saints were raised at Jesus death or at his resurrection, we definitely know that they ENTERED THE HOLY CITY AFTER HIS RESURRECTION AND APPEARED TO MANY.

What did they do in Jerusalem? I don't know. They *"appeared."* That's all we know. And really, this almost just proves that this is an inspired account. If I had been making this up, I would have elaborated quite a bit here. I would have answered all of those questions I was asking earlier. Matthew, though, leaves it at this. He explains what happens, and then he tells us the result of what happens...

CONCLUSION:

...and this is the main point in this passage (in verse 54), *"Now the centurion, and those who were with him keeping guard over Jesus, when they saw the earthquake and the things that were happening, became very frightened and said, 'Truly this was the Son of God!'"* So, unlike what we learn in Mark and Luke, it's not just the centurion, but it's the other soldiers as well. These men see what happens, they watch how Jesus dies, they experience the darkness, and the shaking of the earth (and all of these things), and they are terrified. But notice, they aren't terrified in a way that causes them to run for cover. No, they are terrified in a way that causes them to say, *"Truly this was the Son of God!"* They knew this was the charge against Jesus, they had heard the insults indicating that this was the accusation, and now, after seeing everything, they conclude: We have crucified the Son of God! Luke tells us that the centurion *"began praising God, saying, 'Certainly this man was innocent.'"* They can't un-kill Jesus at this point, they can't un-do what they have done, so in fear they confess. They have killed an innocent man, the Son of God. And they confess it, even before the resurrection. They confess it, based only on seeing his death. And this is why we are here this morning, to remember the Lord's death. This is what we'll be singing about today. I realized we haven't answered every question we might have about this passage, but I do hope we have a deeper appreciation for the Lord's death. He was the Son of God, an innocent man.

Before we partake of the Lord's Supper, let's go to God in prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

Thank you for loving us so much that you sent your only Son to this earth to die in our place. Today, we haven't answered all of our questions about what happened on that day, but we've seen enough to know that he was truly your Son. Be with us as we think about his death this morning. We pray for clear and honest hearts. As we sing, we pray that we would be touched and overwhelmed with the enormity of his sacrifice.

We come to you through Jesus our Savior, entering through the veil in His name. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com