April 3, 2011 Comm. Matthew 27:50-54 Lent 4

THE CENTURION

In London there is a landmark known as the "Charing Cross" which is the junction of two main streets within Central London England. Since the second half of the 18th century is has been seen as the centre of London and most directions are given from this point. Once a little girl got lost in that city. Amongst the tall buildings and all the people she was overwhelmed with fear. When asked by a police officer if she was lost, she said yes. He asked if she could tell him about a landmark, you know, a building, a park, any place that would let the police officer help her find her way home. At first she said no, and then she began to concentrate as much as her little brain could do when a smile appeared on her face as she yelled out, "the cross, and the cross. Get me to the cross and I can get home from there."

This morning perhaps the cross was also the way home for our newest person who was there at the foot of the cross. He hadn't planned on being there that day. After all, he had his fill of crucifixions throughout his years of being a Roman Centurion. He had traded this night so he could have the following week off. But this day didn't turn out to be just another ordinary day…nor would it be an ordinary crucifixion.

Is his job that night to find a man named Jesus and arrest him? Pretty simple. He had help. One of Jesus' followers had told them he would turn him over for 30 pieces of silver. He would lead them to Jesus for he knew he was in the garden praying with the disciples. The Centurion, with his arrest warrant in hand, made his way to the garden. This should be an easy night, the Centurion thought so he took just a few of his men who were armed. When they arrived he could see this man was harmless. Even his little band of followers was no match for his men. Why, he remembered hearing him preach in the square a few times and liked some of what he said. When the betrayer pointed out the man to be

arrested, his followers began to fuss, but when his guards pulled their swords they all high tailed it out of there as quick as their feet would go. Then the Centurion marched Jesus to stand trial. It was late at night. His watch was not ended as he was assigned to make sure this criminal never escaped or to make sure his followers didn't cause trouble. The funny thing was he, nor they, looked like trouble. When they finally brought Jesus before Pilate there was a large crowd gathered outside. The religious leaders wanted him to die, but Pilate couldn't find anything to charge him with, so he told the Centurion to give him a few lashes upon his back. This should satisfy those who wanted to harm him, and also it would teach this man a lesson.

The Centurion and his men did just that. They poked fun at him. Asked him questions. Called him "king" beat him with sticks. One man then wove a crown out of thorns, pricking his hand, bleeding a little over that crown as he placed it on the head of Jesus and pushed it down to make it stay. Those thorns dug in causing bleeding. The troops laughed. And then more troops gathered around to poke fun, spin Jesus around, told him to do a miracle or two for them. They spat on him asking him if he knew which one did it. In all of this Jesus remained quiet. Then someone put a robe, you know, one like a soldier wore upon him as if he was a king. There he stood, robe on, with his crown of thorns, someone put something to resemble his kingly scepter in his hands, and they poked more fun at this man who had done nothing to deserve what they were doing. It amazed the Centurion that this man said nothing, didn't fight like others had, didn't cry his innocence, and didn't yell for help. When the Centurion thought they had done enough, they stripped and whipped him. What kind of a man was this? Not once did the Centurion hear a complaint. Not once did he cry out to stop. When the Centurion thought he had enough, he stopped them, put his clothing back on, wrapped him in the robe, left his crown on and brought him to Pilate. The crowd was still there. This time, standing near Pilate was another prisoner. On one side was Jesus and on the other Barabbas. Pilate silenced the

screaming crowd and religious leaders with his hand. “Since it is one of your feast days I will release one of these to you. Since I can’t find any fault with this man called Jesus, you decide who you want. Should it be Jesus or Barabbas?” The crowd screamed to let Barabbas, a known killer and thief go. “What shall I do with this other man?” Pilate asked. “Crucify him, crucify him.” came back their cries. After trying to persuade them to release the other man, Pilate washed his hands of the situation and instructed the Centurion to march Jesus through the streets to the hill of the skull where crucifixions were held to make an example of him.

The Centurion did what he was told. All through the streets people yelled. Some tried to reach out to touch Jesus, but they were brushed back by the guards. When he fell, some tried to help but the Centurion pushed them back with his horse. When he fell again, maybe out of pity, maybe because he wanted this over, the Centurion looked in the crowd to find someone strong enough to help carry the cross. When he picked a stranger, the march through the street went on with voices crying, yelling. Finally at the cross the other two were put in their places, and the guards laid Jesus down on the ground, on the cross and drove the nails into his hands and his feet. Then lifted him high for all to see. There he and the other two stayed until they breathed their last.

The Centurion might have been thinking many things that day as he watched someone he thought was innocent die. Keeping the crowd back was his job. His men gambled for his clothing… he won the biggest prize, his robe. The religious leaders continued to yell mocking remarks, while his mother and the other ladies who followed this fellow cried. It was a tough day. Perhaps the toughest this Centurion ever had. And it wasn’t over yet.

Six hours they were hanging there. The Centurion heard lots from the crowd but very little from the man on the center cross. Then, when it seemed he was breathing his last, the

man on the cross mumbled words, words asking why he was being forsaken, then when the darkness came, some of the crowds began to disburse, the Centurion heard words he never thought he would ever hear. He heard him say, “It is finished.” Followed by, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” The crowd became unruly trying to hear his words and looking for a miracle. What was he doing? How could he forgive this mean crowd that put him there? How could he forgive those who drove the nails into his hands and his feet? How could he forgive HIM, the leader of this group who watched and even took part in his beatings, the mockery, and the procession through the streets? Maybe as he asked forgiveness for all, Jesus might have lowered his head while the Centurion stood beneath the cross and looked up. Could their eyes have met? Could he sense in this man’s eyes that yes, even he…even he, the Centurion whose whole life was filled with sin, was forgiven, his slate cleaned, his heart made pure. And maybe as he stood that close, as Jesus took his last breath as one of the guards put a spear in his side and water and blood came pouring from that wound, maybe some of the blood fell on the Centurion, and while trying to wipe it off, he looked again at the man on the cross, his head hanging down now, breathless, for he had died. As he checked to make sure he was dead he looked into his face…he saw something amazing….could it be? Did he detect a slight smile on his face? And the Centurion, feeling differently about this one crucifixion, felt his heart strangely warmed, to use a Wesleyan term, and looked toward Jesus and whispered, “Truly, this was the Son of God.” Then while the thunder could be heard, and lighting cracked across the sky, and the earth quaked, he shouted louder with assurance, “Truly, this man was the Son of God.”

Yes, the Centurion was there at the cross where he first saw the light and the burdens of his heart rolled away.

My friends, when you survey the wondrous cross on which Jesus died, what do you see? Does the blood stained cloth remind you that he shed his blood for your sins? That he died to set you free? That he breathed his last so you could have eternal life? That he suffered and died so that you could be free and full of joy in this life by trusting and walking with him? Has there been a time, maybe a sermon, maybe a song, maybe just something that happened in your life that helped you understand that the man on the cross died to set you free? Has there been a time when you knelt at an altar of grace and maybe prayed a prayer asking God to forgive your sins? I know I've had the privileged to lead some to Jesus, even recently leading a 7 year old boy who wanted to make sure he was going to heaven to receive Jesus into his heart.

That's what the Centurion felt that day. The cross led the Centurion home just like the Charing Cross did for the girl who was lost. And folks the cross always leads the lost home, for Jesus died on that cross to lead the way. And who knows, maybe when Jesus rose again, maybe he appeared to the Centurion as well. And maybe the Centurion who lived a life of sin, tossed away his past, and quit the army he was in, to join Jesus' army and become one of his disciples. And that robe he won? He cherished it for the rest of his life because the one, who wore it, died to set him free.

What a story and testimony he had. The cross led him home. What a wonderful God we have who invites all to come to the cross to find our way home. So shall it be at this communion table today.

"Take me to the cross" the little girl said, "then I can find my way home." Maybe there is one today whose heart is saying "take me to the cross…I want to find my way home." If so, see me after church.