

If there is one group of people I cannot stand, it is the Romans. What right to they have to come into our land and take over what we have fought so hard to preserve? They pay off the high-priests in the temple you know. It was probably one of them who gave away my location. The more I think about it the madder I get. They say I am a criminal. They say I stole, they say I killed, they say I incited people to rebel against the authority of "their" state. I say that even if those charges are true, I am a patriot. I shouldn't be here rotting in this cell waiting for the day of my death. I should be out there making them sweat.

I should be out there, not in here. What is going to happen to me? Is this a dream? Am I really going to be killed for acting on my good conscience? Those Romans have more than enough they need to live; I only made things fair by taking a few things. I killed a couple of them; so what? They had it coming. In fact, they deserved it because this city belongs to us not them. They should be the ones who die, not me. My God, what have I done? This is really happening; I am going to die.

What was that? Who's coming? Is it time? Are they coming to take me away to the hill where they crucify the criminals? They can't do this. I don't deserve this. There are so many people so much worse than me. I don't want to suffer. I am afraid to die!

Excuse me? What did you just say? Say it again. I am a free? How could this be. I am a condemned man. Why today, why now? Oh, I guess I forgot about that. The custom your people started of releasing a prisoner during the Passover. How decent of Pilate to listen to the people and release me.

Why is this happening? I mean, the thought never crossed my mind that I would be the one released but I am actually walking away from death. Man it's bright. Wait a

minute. “Guard, what’s going on here?” Who is the man in the courtyard, and why all the shouting? Is that right? They chose me, Barabbas over him. Well, he must have done something really bad. I’m out of here.

Of course we have no way of knowing what really happened the day Barabbas was released from death row. What little we know about him is recorded in the Gospels of Mark, Luke, John, and our reading today from Matthew. Each Gospel contributes a piece of his life that when put together forms the picture of a man who had committed multiple crimes. And each Gospel records a version of the crowd requesting that he be released instead of Jesus. But that’s about as far as God’s Word takes us.

Today, as we continue our sermon series on those witnesses to Christ’s passion, our witness is Barabbas.

This man gets kind of a bad wrap if you ask me. We hear his name once a year or so and immediately think how unfair it was that a convicted criminal was released at the request of rowdy crowd who turned their back on our Lord. But this wasn't the fault of Barabbas. We may imagine how he gloated at the Roman authorities as he emerged from the darkness of his cell. We paint this picture in our minds of a man who deserved so much more pain than he suffered but the truth is we don’t know what he was feeling or how he acted.

We can be certain of his guilt in the crimes he was accused of committing; this is the Word of God after all. But his story is different from those we read about today when someone is released from death row. In the stories we read about today, death row prisoners aren’t released and traded for someone else at the request of an angry crowd. That's not the way it works. They are released because of new evidence that proves their innocence.

One of the more recent of those is a man named Glen Ford. After nearly 30 years of being locked up at the Louisiana State Penitentiary for a murder he did not commit,

this death row inmate was released from prison a couple of weeks ago, a free man. The day of his release, Mr. Glen Ford told reporters, “my mind’s going all different kinds of directions.”

Barabbas was not released because of his innocence but he probably felt a lot like Mr. Ford described.

I imagine Barabbas’ mind was also “going all different kinds of directions.” He was probably more confused than ever. After all, he had been awaiting the day of his own death. I doubt he spent his final hours reflecting on all the good times he enjoyed as a revolutionary on the run. The truth is he was probably more scared than he had been in his entire life. Maybe for the first time, he realized that he had absolutely no ability to control the world in which he lived.

On top of that he was probably suffering the physical effects of being shackled to the floor. He was most likely hungry and maybe a little nauseous from the smell of his cell. And to add to that misery, he was probably suffering mentally as well—consumed by the haunting thoughts of being nailed to a cross. For all we know, he repented of his sins and asked God to deliver him from his suffering or maybe he didn’t. Whatever his experience, his life quickly changed. There was no warning—no planning—no deals; he was a free.

And as long as we’re speculating, what do you think happened to Barabbas after his release? Did he just walk away from Jerusalem and start a new life? Did he dye his hair and shave his beard or change his name? Did he live his life with faith in God or did he continue the same behavior that landed him in prison in the first place?

A Scandinavian author named Par Lagerkvist wrote a novel titled “Barabbas” in the 1950’s that tells the story of what he thinks happened after his release. In the opening chapter, the reader finds Barabbas not celebrating his unexpected gift of freedom, but actually on the slope of Golgotha’s hill watching the one who took his

place be crucified. He witnessed the darkness that overtook the day and felt the earth shake as the condemned “King of the Jews” gasped for his last breath and then died. The thoughts of the man on the cross that day would never leave the mind of Barabbas and the book tells the story of his coming to terms with just who this man really was and what it meant to the life of a freed criminal who was guilty of so many sins.

Maybe this is what Barabbas experienced after his release. And maybe what he witnessed that day on the hill gave him the faith to believe that Jesus was the Messiah—the Savior of the world. Maybe what he witnessed that day drove him to repent of his sins and to make some changes in his life. Maybe that day was a turning point for him to start living for others instead of himself because maybe that day he believed that God saved him. Maybe it gave him hope but we will never know. What about you and me? We may not have been there that day when Jesus was crucified but we know it happened don't we?

Paul writing to the Romans says that we, those who have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only that Paul writes, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance. We have all experienced both physical and emotional sufferings and unfortunately they will continue but our lives have been changed. We can't forget that; we shouldn't ignore that. We have a new hope that surpasses all of the good or bad that this world could offer because just like Barabbas, we were released from the prison of darkness even though we are all guilty. And an innocent man who loves us more than we could ever know took our place. I don't know what that meant for Barabbas but I do know what it means for me and I hope you know what it means for you.

Because it matters. Even in our contemporary world filled with contemporary problems the most ancient of problems—sin—can still keep us in a prison of darkness. But

through our faith, even though we don't deserve it, we have been set free because the one true God in the form of humble man took our place on the cross.

Christ died for us. Those are the last four words of our epistle reading and they sum up this story of Barrabas and these words sum up the story of God's love for all of us. Because wherever we are in life and whatever we're experiencing, Christ died for us. That matters more than anything. Now lets go out there and act like it. **Amen.**