

FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

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SERMON: *You are free to go (Barabbas)*

SERIES: *Easter*

SCRIPTURES: **Mark 15:6-15**; Matthew 27:15-26; Luke 23:13-25; John 18:39-40

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**Credit to Max Lucado, John Ortberg, Darrel Bock, NT Wright*

Well good morning, it is so great to worship with you.

It's hard to believe this is the last day of March. Tomorrow is April Fool's day. I'm not sure if you're into April Fools or not...but I remember back when I was in high school. There was this story going around about a prank the seniors pulled on the administration. Don't know if it really happened. But they said the seniors got three small pigs, just three and let them loose in the high school. You know the little ones that just run all over the place and are just impossible to catch. Three of them. And so it took a whole host of teachers and administrators a couple of hours to track down and corral the pigs. But that wasn't the best part of the prank. Some genius, had suggested that they spray paint the pigs with numbers...and so they did...1, 2, and 4. And the teachers spent the next several hours looking for number 3, which of course didn't exist.

All that to say, April is here and Easter is only 4 weeks away. And I was thinking that, often, on Easter Sunday, we go right to the story of the resurrection and some of the supporting characters in the Easter story get left out. So this year, to help us prepare for the Easter Season, we're going to look at the story of Easter from the perspectives of some of characters in the story, you may not be as familiar with.

Our series is called, “once and for all” (**SERIES TITLE SLIDE**). Easter Sunday happened only once. But its impact was for all people.

Next week, we’ll be looking at the impact on **Nicodemus** and **Joseph of Arimathea**
On Easter Sunday, we’ll talk about the impact on **Mary, Magdalene**.
Palm Sunday the impact Easter had on the **crowds**

This morning we are going to start with the impact that Easter had on one of the more intriguing characters in the Easter story. A man by the name of Barabbas (**Pic of Barabbas**). The story of Barabbas is really the story of a second chance at life. That’s part of what Easter means...a second chance at life, offered in grace, by the only one who could offer it...Jesus.

And so as we begin preparing for Easter. I’d like to walk through Barabbas’ story...what Easter meant to him. And how his story is related to your story, my story...why second chances are important for you and for me.

It’s kind of interesting, as many of you know there are four different Gospels or retelling’s, in our Bible, of Jesus life/death/resurrection. Each is unique.

Some stories only show up in one Gospel or two or three. Zacchaeus...wee little man...only Luke...also Prodigal Son story. Or the Samaritan woman at the well...only John. There are only a few stories, which show up in all 4 Gospels.

The story of Barabbas, is one of the few that shows up in all 4 Gospels. Don’t know exactly why. But as I was reading this story over again, thinking about the significance of Barabbas, it made me wonder if the story was just so astonishing that each of the Gospel writers felt they “had to tell this one.” It’s one of those, “*You won’t believe this*” kind of stories. It kind of makes you think “is this an April fools joke.”

I'm hoping by the end of today, you'll kind of walk out of this service feeling the same way. *"Wow, what a story. I gotta tell this one."* But this is no April fool's joke.

Now to understand Barabbas we need to understand...

I. What's going on?

Jesus has gotten himself into a little bit of trouble with the Jewish religious leaders.

Remember Jesus, is a Jewish Rabbi (teacher) and he has started to gain a following. Some Jews even believe he is the Messiah, central figure of human history. So Jesus is a pretty popular guy, to some. But he has become a threat to the established religious order...Pharisees and the teachers of the law. **(PIC OF JEWISH LEADERS)**

He eats with tax collectors and sinners. He heals on the Sabbath. He forgives sins, which in the Jewish world is something only God can do.

It doesn't help that he says things like...

Matthew 23: 2-3 - ² "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. ³ So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach.

Or how about this...

Matthew 23:15 - ¹⁵ "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are.

When you say things like that...it doesn't really put you on the good side of the religious leaders. So they want to get rid of Jesus.

But they don't actually have the authority to get rid of Jesus. The Jews are living under Roman control. So the Jewish religious leaders, drag Jesus before the Roman Governor, Pilate (**Pic of Pilate**) looking for permission to "kill him."

But Pilate, doesn't like people telling him what to do, especially Jews. And truth is he's having a hard time understanding exactly what Jesus has done wrong. And so in some ways, when you read the story, Pilate is looking for a way to get Jesus "off the hook."

This is where we pick up the strange and often overlooked story about a man named Barabbas...

Mark 15:6-15 - ⁶ Now it was the custom at the festival to release a prisoner whom the people requested. ⁷ A man called Barabbas was in prison with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the uprising. ⁸ The crowd came up and asked Pilate to do for them what he usually did.

Pilate had this custom, once a year...he would release a prisoner during the Jewish Passover Festival.

So Pilate, gets this idea. *"Maybe I can get Jesus off the hook. If I agree to release a prisoner as is the typical custom. I'll have them pick who to release: I'll make them pick between Jesus (guy don't really like) or Barabbas (an obvious criminal and murderer, a danger to society). They'll surely pick to release Jesus. That gets him off the hook. And Barabbas, who is scheduled to die soon anyway for his crimes...just get rid of him sooner. It's like "killing two birds with one stone."*

⁹ "Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?" asked Pilate,

11 But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead.

12 “What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?” Pilate asked them.

13 “Crucify him!” they shouted.

14 “Why? What crime has he committed?” asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, “Crucify him!”

15 Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

II. Barabbas

There's not a whole that we know about Barabbas.

Just a few minor descriptions: He is an **insurrectionist** (perhaps led revolt/resistance against Roman Empire), a **murderer**, and a **notorius prisoner**. And because of his rebellion, Barabbas is arrested and condemned to death. That's about all we know. And that may be one of the reasons, he gets lost in the Easter story. He just becomes a name, that we pass over, ignore, don't give a second thought to. But I want you to think, a little more deeply with me about this man.

I've always pictured Barabbas (**PIC OF BARABBAS**) as a fairly large, muscular, loud, brash, nasty, arrogant, stubborn person. Defiant, unconstrained. I suspect when he was first arrested, he was hollering insults and threats at the Roman soldiers. It probably took several men to contain this wild beast of a man. Letting everyone know, he was not afraid of the Romans.

But the Romans could be so cruel to people who threatened their stability. **(PIC OF ROMAN BEATINGS)** Beatings, physical pain, have a way of bringing people to their knees. The beating he must have been given.

It makes me wonder, when his arms were chained, his mouth covered, his body mutilated and weakened, the crowds had left...if somewhere, in the midst of that excruciating pain, did it start to humble him just a little?

Chained and dragged into a jail cell with a certain death sentence. Don't you wonder if, once, for just a moment there was a twinge of regret for his rebellion to the Empire?

This once loud, strong, stubborn man...now sits, bruised, beaten, with a tiny little barred window to the outside world.

Can you picture that? **(PIC OF BEATEN PRISON IN JAIL CELL)** He lowers himself to the floor, in the corner of that cell, leaning against the cold, damp wall. He whimpers as he pulls his knees up to his chest.

He peers out that window, his eyes soon fall upon the executioner's hill, lined with Roman crosses and this reality that, that too would now be his fate. For the first time in his life, did he realize this was it?

It even makes me wonder, how old was Barabbas? 21 – 22? Did he have a family? Did his mom, try on many occasions to persuade him to stop his resistance, to give up this foolish effort? But he refused. On this day, did she fall her knees in tears and pleading with the officers to spare his life? Did he have children? Would they understand what was happening?

It's easy for Barabbas to just become a name, but he's a person.

He is now a lost, lonely, deserted, broken, hopeless...and he is guilty. He knew that his actions could lead to this very point. We might say, he is suffering the consequences for his own destructive behavior. His choices, his life, his failures, his wrong...that's what leaves him helpless and abandoned in a jail cell. As good as dead.

I have to be honest, there is part of his story that I just cannot relate to. I am not insurrectionist (at least not to the same degree he was☺). I might pull a prank on someone every once in a while. But I am not likely to end up in a prison cell or on death row. I am no murderer.

And yet, there is a side of me that can very much relate to that Barabbas. I wonder if the same is true in your life? There is this reality about my life that in so many ways ***'I am not the person I know I should be.'***

I am not the father, I know I should be.

I am not the husband I know I should be.

I am not as honest as I know I should be.

I am not as pure as I know I should be.

I don't keep my mouth shut, when it would have been better to.

I have lost my temper. Sometimes I can be so ungracious and unforgiving.

"Whatever else men have believed, they have all believed that there is something the matter with mankind." (GK Chesterton)

"Freud, Plato, Karl Marx and Ralph Nader, Martin Luther King Jr. and Gandhi and Jesus all agree with this – something is terribly wrong with us and cries out to be put right!" (Ortberg 39)

That's Barabbas. Murdering, insurrectionist and crying out to be put right. That's me. I am not the person I know I should be.

The Bible's word for this is, **sin**. I know it's kind of a churchy word. Some people today, don't really like it. In fact whenever we start talking about things like sin and evil, it sounds a little mysterious, even archaic. But, whether we like the word or not, I know it's not just archaic church talk, because it's a real part of my life. And so whatever you want to call it, it's a real thing. Sin is a real thing in my life and I suspect yours. *"I know I'm not the person I should be."*

It's my ego, addictions, envy, greed, dishonesty, gluttony, sexual failures, gossip, cold-heartedness, racism, workaholism. Call it sin. Call it wrong. Call it evil. But it's all in there. We all have some Barabbas in each of us. It's nothing new, been part of humanity forever. The prophet Isaiah wrote it like this one time.

We all like sheep have gone astray, turning to our own way. (Isaiah 53:6)

My sin hurts me. Guilt, shame and regret. Some people they allow their sin to define them as a person. My sin hurts others. My anger, my temper... we call it abuse. My greed, it leaves some people without. It confines us, it leaves sitting helpless and broken on a dirty prison floor, hopeless. We're all a little bit like Barabbas.

Four prison walls, thickened with hurt, fear, and hate, surround us. We are in jail because of our past, our low-road choices, our high-minded pride. And we have nothing to offer in trade for our lives.

We sit on the floor of the dusty cell, awaiting the final moment. Our executioners footsteps echo against the stone walls. Head between knees, we don't look up as he opens the door; we don't lift our eyes as he begins to speak. We know what he is going to say. "Time to pay up." (Lucado)

Paul, had this recognition about himself...**Romans 7:24 - ²⁴ What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me...?**

I wonder if that's how Barabbas felt.

"I'm not the person I know should be. Who will rescue me?"

And that's why the story of Jesus is called "Gospel" or "Good News". Jesus says, I will rescue you. That's why we talk about being rescued from or

1. Saved from our sin.

Not sure how long Barabbas was in prison. Day's, months. I've often wondered if the lack of food and water left him thin and gaunt. The prisoners in the cells beside him, eventually carried off and never coming back.

Each time wondering when it would be his turn. One day, he awakes, the guards remove one prisoner. He hears them say, *"We'll be back to get the other one in a few mins."* He knows this time it's his turn. The tears begin to run down his face. Time passes, he imagines what it will be like, **(PIC OF MAN ON ROMAN CROSS)** the nails piercing his wrists, hanging on that cross, the struggle to catch his breathe. He'll be tough. He'll last longer than most. But at some point, he will fight for air and it will not come. Sin unchecked, will take your life.

The door opens again. Barabbas hears the footsteps. The key turns. He hears his name, likely for the last time... *"Barabbas..."* And then shock...the words he'll never forget.

"You are free to go. They took Jesus instead of you."

(Lucado 46-47)

Can you imagine that moment? I mean it's an incredible story, isn't it? *"What!?"*

"They took Jesus instead of you. You have been released. Free of all charges. Your

failures, forgiven. You get a second chance.” Disbelief. Confusion. Relief. (Barabbas is thinking April fools??)

He thought they were coming to drag him to a cross, and now he is walking out. What did the sunshine on his face feel like, that day, as he walked out the door?!

The Bible calls this **salvation**. I know that’s another church word and at times it can just carry so much baggage and confusion. But the idea behind this word is just so important and so powerful. Don’t believe me...ask Barabbas!

The first person whose life was saved, because Jesus gave his life...was the criminal Barabbas.

The story of Barabbas invites us to see Jesus’ crucifixion in terms of a stark personal exchange. Barabbas deserves to die; Jesus dies instead, and he goes free. (Wright)

Part of salvation is that we are saved from sin; saved from my evil and brokenness by Jesus. Jesus walks into the jail cell, that sin builds around my life. And he says, *“You’re free to go.”*

Salvation as described in the Bible is about our being rescued from the whole chaotic mess that is our sin.

Romans 7 – ²⁴ What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me...? ²⁵ Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!

You can’t save yourself from your sinful heart. You can’t earn salvation. That’s why we talk about

2. Saved by grace.

“For by grace you have been saved...this is not from yourself...it is the gift of God.”

“Grace is the unbelievable yet true news that you are accepted though you are unacceptable.” (Tony Campolo)

If ever there was an unacceptable person who needed accepted it was this guy, Barabbas. Notorious, murdering, insurrectionist. And God, in Jesus, steps into his shoes and sets him free. Barabbas didn't deserve this. He certainly didn't earn it. It just happened to him.

I know some people will say, *“Well Jesus didn't actually choose to give his life for Barabbas it was coincidence, the people chose to release Barabbas.”* And there's certainly truth to that, but Frederick Buechner put it this way, and I tend to agree with him.

“Pilate told the people that they could spare the life of either a murderer named Barabbas or Jesus of Nazareth, and they chose Barabbas. Given the same choice, Jesus, of course, would have chosen to spare Barabbas too.” - Frederick Buechner

Substitute Barabbas with your name and the same goes...
By grace you have been saved...It's a life-changing experience.

That's why we sing songs about this. *“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.”* (Barabbas never sang that song, because it didn't exist back then, but he would have loved it. He would have known that song was talking about him.

That's church talk for *“Barabbas, you're free to go. They took Jesus instead of you.”*

When the prison of sin in my life wants to build walls and chains of shame, guilt, death and hell...I'm reminded of saving grace offered by Jesus. *"Shaun you're free to go. They took Jesus instead of you."*

If you've been living in the prison of sin. If your life has been wrecked by guilt and shame. I want you to know this morning it' doesn't have to be that way. Jesus wants to walk into your life with His incredible gift of grace. He wants to say to you, *"There is no sin so wretched. There is no shame so deep. There is no guilt so strong. That my grace won't cover. You are free to go. I'm taking your place."*

And I'll just say that's why we can't end the story there. You see salvation in the Bible is never just about what you are saved from...too often that's where we end the story. *"Phew. Saved from hell. Thank goodness, now I can get on with my life."* But you see in the Bible salvation is also about

3. What we are saved for...

2 Corinthians 5 - ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come:^[a] The old has gone, the new is here!

You are "saved for..." new life, radically transformed by Jesus.

I've often wondered, what did Barabbas do with the rest of his life? Did he know who Jesus was? Did he run to Golgotha to see, the face of the man whose life was taken in place of his? Did he stand by the cross that day in astonishment? Did Jesus make eye contact with that filthy, broken, criminal and say, *"Even for you Barabbas. I love you so much. My life, for yours. Now go and leave your life of sin. Go and live differently now, because of my sacrifice on your behalf."*

Grace isn't just about what you are forgiven from, it's about what you are saved for! To actually experience the fullness of Jesus grace, it means you start to live a grace-filled life. Moment by moment, with Jesus.

Easter is when God takes our mess of a life, saves us from the mess and offers us new kind of life. Grace and salvation truly understood, asks for a response from us.

Women at the well, she received grace from Jesus, salvation from her sin and then he said, *"Now go and leave your life of sin."*

Zacchaeus he received Jesus grace, and Jesus said, *"Now leave your greedy heart behind and go live a life of generosity."*

Barabbas received an incredible opportunity that day because of Jesus. But what did he do with that grace. Did he go back to the murdering, thief life? Did he re-enter the jail cell 7 days later?

And in many ways that's the exact same question for all of us to think about. And so here's how we want to end the service today. The worship team is gonna come and lead us in our closing song, and as they do I want you to know that the altar is open.

Some of us in here, today, we recognized our need to be saved from our sin. Never realized that before. "You are free to go, they took Jesus instead of you." If that's you can come up here this morning, kneel, stand, you can pray...But you can come accept/receive the freedom of forgiveness and the salvation of Jesus.

Or maybe some of us in here, we have been living in the prison of shame or guilt of some particular sin. And the story of Barabbas is reminding us this morning, we weren't just saved from sin, we have been saved for new life. "You are free to go, they took Jesus instead of you."

Come this morning, give those prison walls to Jesus.

Nothing magical about coming forward to the altar. But sometimes, that step, that physical step forward confirms something going on inside of us. And so if you feel like you want to come and kneel and pray at the altar you do that.

“May you experience freedom from sin and the joy of new life this week.”