

What makes Good Friday different?

By [Julian DeShazier](#)

March 23, 2016

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On Good Friday we face conflicting urges, on multiple fronts.

On the one hand, I don't want to be one of the Christians who Gardner Taylor called "a Resurrection people, but not a Crucifixion people." I don't want to rescue Jesus from the cross--the weekly tendency of many preachers, and I think a poor interpretation of "bringing the good news." It is a reality: Jesus died. It was a deeply unjust, profoundly painful death, and we need to have one day to deal with the death. Probably more than one, actually.

On the other hand, I want Jesus' death to point to something more than his death. After all, he did not die for the sake of dying. Billions have died since; why tell this story in particular?

On the other hand (I have three hands), Jesus dying for the sins of the world provides a protective covering for both personal and societal brokenness, and the world is a little too broken--we're a little too culpable--to say, "Jesus will take care of this" or has already. This has long been a convenient excuse for inaction. Texts like Isaiah 53 ("wounded for our transgressions") and Hebrews 10 ("there is no longer any offering for sin") must be used responsibly, or we will never find a way to participate in the fostering of the kingdom "on Earth, as it is in Heaven." Instead we'll assume it's already here, because Jesus died. Atonement is some sticky theology, a honey jar next to a beehive.

On yet another hand (I promise, four hands only), the use of Isaiah in relation to Jesus can misrepresent Judaism or even dismiss it entirely. This tendency continues to cause a lot of pain in the world.

So what do we do with all this?

We know we need to linger at the cross for at least a few uncomfortable moments. We need to be a "crucifixion people." Jesus' death has to hold a significance and meaning beyond pointing-toward-Easter.

We know as well the problems of chalking Jesus' death up to inevitability. Saying "he died because he had to" can give a pass to both human agency and systems of injustice. It's clear both that Jesus made an agonizing decision to sacrifice himself and that others were responsible for his unjust death. Neither point should be lost.

And we know that Jesus didn't intend for his death to supplant Judaism.

So where does Jesus' death point? I think it points to us. All believers are forced to sit high atop Golgotha and ask, "What does this have to do with me?" Am I complicit in systems that perpetuate injustice? How can I help dismantle them? Who are the Jesuses who continue to die? How can I publicly claim my faith and my commitment to Jesus' teachings?

In other words, Jesus' dying should help us make some sense of our living. If it doesn't, then it's just another death. What makes this one different?