

**November 20, Reign of Christ C (Luke 23:33-43)**

## **In a blockbuster movie, this is when our hero would leap from the cross.**

by [Martha Spong](#) in the [November 2022](#) issue

On a recent Sunday, the church I attend had an evacuation drill at the end of worship. The congregation left the sanctuary in an orderly fashion and regathered across the street for an outdoor fellowship hour. While people of my generation may have been reminded of school fire drills, our younger friends have a different frame of reference. We need to know what to do if someone shows up armed and determined to kill.

Who saves us? The question has been on my mind since the Uvalde school shooting. Security footage showed law enforcement officers standing, waiting, doing what amounted to nothing for an excruciating length of time. I compare this to the pastor at the church I attend, who saw an unfamiliar figure wearing a large backpack come into the sanctuary during a service the day after the synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh and launched into a power-stride down the side aisle, heading toward the possible trouble rather than away.

I suspect we all subscribe to some mythology about heroes. They give battlefield speeches in Shakespeare, raise a cheer when they appear at the crucial moment in Marvel movies, and rush into the burning building rather than away from it. And finally, in our contemporary popular culture, they appear in a variety of gender and racial identities. What they all have in common is their commitment to save whoever needs saving, to leave no one behind, to vanquish evil.

Who saves us? We meet different expressions of Jesus on the capstone Sundays of each liturgical year. Year A brings us Matthew's parable-weaver, and Year B offers a conversational chess match between Jesus and Pilate. Only Year C takes our hero to the cross, to those anguished, liminal moments when Jesus hangs crucified and suffering. The crowd includes some of his grieving compatriots, but the voices we hear belong to people caught up in the moment and in their collective power to

destroy someone they have decided is a threat, someone they have decided has an inflated view of himself. It's not enough to kill him. They want Jesus to know how wrong they think he is. They dare him to prove otherwise.

Luke includes three examples of their provocative taunts. The religious leaders scoff. "Let him save himself!" The soldiers mock. "Save yourself!" Even one of the robbers crucified beside him derides Jesus. "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"

In a blockbuster movie, this is when our hero would leap from the cross. He might cry, "Enough!" He would call for his hammer or shoot lightning bolts from his fingertips. His comrades would appear from the crowd, throwing off homespun cloaks to reveal their true identities. They would unsheathe their weapons or employ their powers. They would change the ending, then fly off to the next adventure. The robber would go home and never commit a crime again.

But Jesus—who just the night before prayed for the cup to pass from him—instead lives out his commitment to save us. He offers forgiveness to the ones putting him to death. He extends one last act of healing in his pledge that the robber will be with him in paradise, a promise that we hope includes us. Even though things are terrible right now, this trial, this trouble, even this death will not be the end.

We live in a time when many things feel threatening or unmanageable. It is tempting to focus on what we need for ourselves or what will keep our smallest possible unit of loved ones safe. It is tempting to avoid pushing too hard, to wait and see what happens next, or to hold out for someone else to somehow make things right.

Yet it is in the last act of assurance Jesus offers that I see both purpose and hope for those who follow him in all times. As he offers comfort to the crucified robber, he points us not just toward an eternal hope but toward the ministry he desires for God's commonwealth of love. He does not reign over a kingdom centered on the privileged. Even as he is dying, Jesus offers gracious inclusion to a person on the margins of both community and life itself. He presses us to consider where and how we might do the same, whatever the cost might be.

Who saves us? The one who did not save himself.