

“Foundations: Easter, God So Loved the World”

John 3:16-17

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Scripture: John 3:16-17

Sermon:

***Introduction***

I want you to imagine that it's 1945 and you are an American soldier who was stationed in the Pacific to battle the Japanese. Not only are you an American soldier, but for the past 3 years you've been a POW, a Prisoner of War, held by the Japanese, notorious for their terrible treatment of captured soldiers. [pics] For the past 3 years, you've been living on a poor diet of weevily rice, rotten potatoes and the occasional piece of some form of meat that you don't want to ask too many questions about. You spend your days, when not in the infirmary, doing hard labour for the Japanese military, being beaten and abused by your captors.

As difficult as your days are, you and your fellow prisoners are encouraged by the increasing number of US planes you see flying overhead. Rarely do you see Japanese planes flying up to intercept them. You know that the war is not going Japan's way. But then an ugly rumour starts circulating. You begin to hear whispers that as the Japanese army is forced to retreat, they are liquidating all their POW camps. That is, the Japanese are killing all their POWs instead of letting them be rescued by the US forces! Now the signs of US victory carry an ominous overtone. US victory may actually spell your death if your camp is liquidated!

As each day passes, your Japanese guards get a little bit tenser. You can tell the war is not going well for them. Some of them get even more violent. Others start trying to act nicely to the prisoners. The more planes you see flying overhead, the closer the Americans are, the more nervous your captors get!

Then one night you waken to the sound of gun fire! [pics] You roll out of your bunk and duck on the floor of your barracks. Your fellow prisoners quickly do the same. You hear yelling and explosions from all around you. Suddenly, the door to your prisoners' hut bursts open. In rushes a figure dressed in a strange uniform, carrying a gun. He's much too tall to be Japanese. Compared to the starving prisoners, he is immense. He looks around and starts ushering you out of the barracks, speaking in English, yelling, "We're Yanks! This is a prison break! Head for the main gate!"

Dazed and confused, you and your fellow prisoners start wandering around in the dark. You're not sure what the soldiers mean by "the main gate." For years, the only "main gate" you've talked about is the gate to your side of the POW camp. The "main gate" to the outside world is a mysterious, dangerous place that POW's aren't allowed anywhere near.

The US soldiers, calling themselves "Rangers," whatever that means, half drag, half kick you towards the gate that leads to the outside world. You and your fellow prisoners shamble along as fast as you can. Finally, once through the gate, it starts to dawn on you what is happening! You're free! You're actually free! One of your fellow POWs wraps his arms around a Ranger's neck and kisses him on the forehead. All he can say is, "Oh boy! Oh boy! Oh boy!" Another rescued POW, tears streaming down his face, says, "I thought we'd been forgotten!"

"No, you're not forgotten," one of the Rangers says, "We've come for you." [Hampton Sides, *Ghost Soldiers*, p. 278]

Imagine how you would feel? Imagine the shock of being rescued so suddenly from such terrible conditions. Imagine it dawning on you, slowly at first, that you're not going to die at the hands of your captors. Imagine the elation you would feel. Imagine the relief. Imagine the gratitude you would feel towards your rescuers. Facing certain death, unable to rescue yourself, powerless to oppose the forces holding you captive, you find yourself given a new lease on life through the heroic self-sacrifice of others. Strangers to you, these soldiers have prepared themselves and risked their lives for your sake. What an amazing thing. What an act of courage. What an act of love.

[pic] In his book *Ghost Soldier*, author Hampton Sides tells the gripping story of the rescue of hundreds of POWs from a camp in the Philippines by an elite unit of US Army Rangers during WWII. The Rangers worked their way behind enemy lines, partnering with Filipino guerrillas to assault the camp and rescue the prisoners. The book reached #7 on the NY Times best seller list and if you have any interest in history books it is well worth

the read. The movie adaptation of the book, entitled *The Great Raid*, bills this operation as “the true story of the greatest rescue mission ever attempted.”

I love the book. I admire the men who went on the raid. I feel for the terrible trials faced by the captured men. I’m glad they were rescued. But I disagree that it was the “greatest rescue mission ever attempted.” For that, I think we need to read a longer book, not always quite as gripping as *Ghost Soldiers*, but a better seller all in all.

**The Bible is the story of God’s loving pursuit of fallen people for the sake of their redemption and salvation.** The story of God the Son coming to earth as a baby, growing to be a man, ministering with power for 3 short years, dying on the cross and being resurrected on the third day is *really* the true story of the greatest rescue mission ever attempted! Facing certain death, unable to rescue ourselves, powerless to oppose the forces holding us captive, we find we are given a new lease on life through the heroic self-sacrifice of one. Long before we knew him, Jesus died on the cross to rescue us from captivity to sin and death. On the third day after his death, God raised him from the dead. Death could not hold him because he had no sin of his own. Now he sits at the right hand of the throne of the God, the position of honour, power and authority. Through him, millions upon millions of men, women and children have been rescued from being prisoners of sin.

On Easter we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Easter is the most important holiday in the Christian year. Far more important than Christmas, Easter represents the climax of Jesus’ rescue mission, not the beginning of it. **Easter celebrates the day of Jesus’ victory**, not the hour of his going undercover behind enemy lines.

Over the past two months, we have been talking about the foundations of Christianity. We have been talking about what Christians believe in particular, but also about how this is different from what other religions believe as well. Many people believe that all religions are fundamentally the same, with superficial differences. It turns out, though, when you do a bit of research and let each religion speak on its own terms, that all religions are fundamentally different with only superficial similarities!

Today we are bringing our foundations series to a close on the day that celebrates the climax of the Christian story- Easter. And we are looking at one of the most famous verses of the whole Bible- John 3:16. This verse encapsulates the entire message of Christianity, the good news of Jesus. As we break down this verse, we are going to be reminded of some of the topics we went into more deeply in previous weeks. If you want to catch up on some of the sermons you missed, please visit our church website for audio files of the sermons, or download the sermon text to read on your own. If you’ve been here for this series, I hope you will see how these topics all tie together.

### **Context**

Before examining our text in detail, let’s give a little context. John 3 opens with Jesus having a conversation with Nicodemus, a Pharisee and member of the Jewish ruling council. Jesus has told Nicodemus that in order to enter into God’s authority and rule one must be reborn by the Holy Spirit. Nicodemus misunderstands, thinking Jesus means being reborn in human terms. Jesus corrects him, saying that he means being reborn by the Spirit. He goes on to explain God’s plan of salvation for the world. It is in the middle of this explanation to Nicodemus that we find our verses for today.

### **Text**

Read John 3:16-17

### **What It Says**

John 3:16 is one of the most famous single verses of the Bible, if not the most famous. Other passages, such as the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm and the Lord’s Prayer are possibly more widely known, but they are a number of verses long. In John 3:16 we have a summary of the good news of Jesus Christ. Let’s break it down and take a look at what it says.

First, it says that God so loved the world. Wow! That tells us a number of things. First, it tells us that **God’s fundamental attitude towards us is love**. That’s actually rather remarkable when you think about it. Have you ever wondered what God thought of you? Have you ever wondered if God thought about you at all? This verse tells us that God does think about you and that those thoughts are thoughts of love. That’s a remarkable starting point!

But what it love? Does it mean God gets warm fuzzy feelings when he thinks about you? Does it mean God is sentimental about you? No. That's not what love means in this circumstance. In Greek, there are four different words that get translated "love" in English. The words for sentimental love, romantic love and brotherly love are different from this word. This one, agape, is a special word in Greek. Its use has been predominantly shaped by its use in the NT in fact! Before the NT it was not used very much in classical Greek. So what does it mean? **Agape love is a divine, self-giving love primarily concerned with the well-being of others, in particular their spiritual well-being.**

So what does that tell us? It tells us that God's primary attitude towards us and the world at large is one of self-giving. His attitude towards us, his disposition towards us is one of being concerned with our well-being, not his own. It is one of being particularly concerned with our spiritual well-being. This means that God's reasons for sending his one and only Son were not selfish. "God is not acting for his own sake, but for ours; not to satisfy his desire for power, nor to bring the universe to heel, but to satisfy his love." [William Barclay, *John vol 1*, p. 161]

That's a lot packed into just the first three words. What else do we see in this passage? God loved the world. Literally, God loved the "kosmos." This is the Greek word from which we get our word cosmos, by which we mean the whole universe. God so loved the universe that he sent.... God loves all of creation. When he made it, he said it was good. He took delight in it. We are part of that cosmos. We are the crowning achievement of the cosmos, in fact! And so we know that God loves us, as well as our surroundings.

God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son. This tells us several things. First, it tells us that God's love is not merely an emotional experience. **God's love is a love of action.** His love meant he gave. That is an act of generosity. Here we see that "self-giving" aspect of God's agape love. He took action. He was so concerned with our well-being that he moved, he acted, he did something incredible, he gave something generously. He sent his one and only Son!

God has a Son? Yes! The God of Christianity, in contrast to other religions, is a Trinity. God exists in three parts, each of which we label a "person." God's three constituent parts are God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Another way to describe this is that we have God, God's Word (Jesus is called the Word of God), and God's Breath (spirit and breath are the same words in both Hebrew and Greek). God sent his Word, the Son, into the cosmos, into the world he loves, to become a man, Jesus.

For what purpose did God sent his Son? What good did that do? God sent his one and only Son so that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. Wow, that's a mouthful. Let's break it down to see what it's saying.

Ultimately, the purpose of sending the Son, Jesus, is so that people won't die. Verse 17 explains this further, saying, "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him." So God sent the Son on a rescue mission. He sent the Son to save the cosmos. **God sent the Son to save creation.**

But there's more nuance to verse 16 than that. The problem facing creation, the reason creation needs saving is a little bit more subtle. Notice that it is those who "believe in Him" that will not perish. Rocks, trees and animals cannot believe in Jesus. So there is something else going on here. The verse says, "whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life." This is a reference to people. The people who believe in Jesus will not perish but have eternal life. So Jesus came to save people. (The fate of the rest of creation is for another day, although I made reference to it last week when talking about the resurrection.)

Notice that it says "whoever." It isn't the good people Jesus came to save. It isn't the Jewish people Jesus came to save. It isn't the white people Jesus came to save. It isn't the religious people Jesus came to save. (Contrary to Muslim belief.) It isn't just 144, 000 people that Jesus came to save. (Contra the JW's.) Jesus came to save *whoever* believes in him, whether black, white or green, whether you've lived a religious life or not. Because God loves the whole world and it's not about what we do, but about believing in Jesus.

What does it mean to believe? Remember a few weeks ago when we talked about faith? One of the things we learned that day was that in Greek faith and belief were the same word. We are stuck in English that we don't have one word as flexible as the word in Greek. So sometimes we have to use the word believe and other times we talk about having faith. In addition, we talked about the fact that belief is not just mental assent.

Having faith, or believing in something, is like getting on an airplane. You can give mental assent that you think the plane can fly and that it has been properly maintained and that it won't crash. But to have faith, to believe in the plane and crew means actually getting on board. **Belief involves a personal commitment.**

Let's insert that understanding of belief into this verse. "God so loved the world that he sent his one and only Son so that whoever believes and puts a personal commitment in him shall not perish, but have eternal life." It's more than just believing that Jesus existed. It's more, even, than believing he was the Son of God. It's even more than believing God raised him from the dead. What John is saying here is that we must not only believe these things in our heads, but we must also commit ourselves to Jesus for salvation. We must "entrust ourselves to him" [Frederick Dale Bruner, *John*, p. 200] We have to commit ourselves to him to make us right with God, to save us from perishing and to bring us eternal life. That commitment has to be whole-hearted and all-consuming.

We can't believe in Jesus and still try to get there on our own. It means letting go of the steering wheel of our own life and destiny and letting Jesus take charge of it all, including our day to day lives now. We literally "do" nothing. Rather, we "trust Another who has done everything." [Bruner, p. 202] This is what it means to believe in Jesus.

But why? Why do we have to believe in Jesus? Why do we have to commit to him? Because otherwise we perish. That is, otherwise we not only die physically, but we perish spiritually too. That's the depth of the problem of sin. Outside of personal commitment to Jesus, we have no way to escape the ultimate price of sin—death.

Many religions believe in life after death. Christianity believes in life after death too. But Christianity goes one step further and believes in life after life after death. We talked about this last week with the resurrection, a complicated topic to be sure! But in Christianity, we believe that after we die we experience a disembodied existence. However, when Christ returns, all the dead shall be resurrected and those found to be in a right relationship with God will be given a new, physical body that is immune to death and decay. However, those who are not in a right relationship with God will experience eternal separation from God, a deeper form of death than we will have already experienced! This is what we frequently refer to as Hell. Whatever you believe about Hell, it's going to be bad! And this is what Jesus was given to save us from.

But **more than saving us from Hell, Jesus came to save us for something good.** Those who believe in Jesus, with all that it means to believe in, will not only avoid this horrible experience of perishing, but will experience eternal life with God. And that eternal life is going to be something far more fantastic than anything we can imagine here in this life. Why? Because in this life everything good that we experience is at least slightly tainted by sin, by the fallenness of this world. Even if it's just the fact that the good things we experience here are temporary, because we will experience physical death at some point, it's all at least slightly marred. Then, however, we will experience life abundantly and forever.

**On Easter, Jesus was resurrected with a new, physical body that is immune to death and decay.** His resurrection is the sign that death and decay have been defeated. Death could not hold Jesus. His new body is immune to all that death brings. This marked the beginning of a new age of creation. The perfect rule of God has broken into the universe, a rule that does not have room for sin and death. We who believe in Jesus live in both this new age, this rule or Kingdom of God, as well as the age of sin. We live in two ages at once. However, in the future, we who believe in Jesus will be transported out of the age of sin so that we live wholly in the rule of God. In order to exist in that age wholly, we will be given new bodies like Jesus resurrected body. We will be given glorious bodies that do not break down, get sick, decay, wear out or die. And in those new bodies we will experience a perfect, complete, intimate loving relationship with God which is what God originally designed us for.

### ***Why It Means***

So what does this all mean? It seems like an awful lot to get out of just one verse! Well, yes. That's true. Much of what we're talking about today is reflected in this verse, but our understanding of it comes from other work we've done reading the Bible. Today we are drawing on lessons and insights from a number of NT passages and concepts, some of which we've looked at in more depth in the past few months.

But for today, what lessons can we take from these two verses? How do we interpret them? How is this different from any other belief system or religion?

First, and probably foremost, **God loves the world**. This defines the fundamental stance of God towards humanity. This tells us that God is relational. This is contrary to those who believe that God is too distant or too holy to interact with the world. There are some today who believe in a creator, but think that once he started the universe in motion he stopped caring about it. It also tells us that God is distinct from the world. In order to love, there must be another to love. This is why the Trinity is so radical, by the way. **The doctrine of the Trinity explains who God was loving before the creation of the world.** The Father, Son and Spirit were loving one another.

Second, God loves us so much he gave his Son. God's love is a costly, self-giving love. Contrary to any other religion, **in Christianity God provides the solution to the problem of sin. In every other worldview, it is left up to us to pave the way of our own salvation.** (Whatever their view of salvation may be!) This is vital for us to understand. This is at the heart of the idea of grace. It is what we mean when we speak of salvation by faith. It involves the question of the atonement, or the payment for our sin. If nothing else in this entire series on the foundations of Christianity, please walk away understanding this- Christianity is fundamentally different from every other religion because in Christianity alone salvation comes through another, not yourself. In all other religions and worldviews it is up to the individual to do enough good, observe enough of the law, believe in themselves enough, meditate enough or become enlightened enough on their own to be saved.

In Islam, Allah asks you to send your son to die for him. In Christianity, God sent his son to die for you. Wrap your head around that one! Then listen to somebody who says all religions are the same!

Now here's the difficult part. Jesus didn't come to condemn the world, but to save it. But in his coming, the world condemns itself. **Our reaction to Jesus is either positive, resulting in belief in him, or negative, resulting in condemnation.** If you really love music, and I don't, and you want to introduce me to the beauty of classical music, so you take me to a great symphony and after ten minutes you notice that I'm checking my phone, looking around and completely distracted and uninterested, are you the reason I don't like classical music? Of course not! But by my reaction, I have passed judgement on myself that I have "no music in my soul." [Barclay, p. 162]

The story is told of a man who is given a tour through a prestigious art museum. At the end of the tour, he tells the curator of the museum, "I don't think much of your pictures." The curator replies, "These pictures are no longer on trial, but those who look at them are."

God so loves the world that he gave his one and only Son. This is a costly, beautiful, divine gift. We are judged based on our response to that gift.

### ***Why It Matters***

Why does all of this matter? What's the point of it all?

At the beginning, I told you the story of the US Rangers' rescue mission to save the POW's from a Japanese camp.

One of the amazing parts of that story is that initially, many of the POW's didn't respond well to the US soldiers rescuing them. At first, they thought it was a Japanese trick, designed to get them to try to escape so they could be gunned down. Sides writes, "Even when the fear of massacre had passed, even when most of the prisoners understood that the Rangers were Americans come to liberate them, many were still curiously reluctant to go. They seemed suspicious of their good fortune. They couldn't shed the dour pessimism of captivity long enough to understand that captivity was over. Or perhaps on some half-conscious level, they still found it hard to transgress the order of the Japanese, the only authority they'd known for three years." [Sides, p. 275]

In the same way, **many react to Jesus poorly.** Some think it's a trick. They are suspicious of any religion that claims to have the truth or require a personal commitment on their part. Even once they come to realize that Jesus is who he said he was, that he did come to save them, they are strangely reluctant to escape. Many are suspicious of their good fortune, that they can be saved by grace, that another has paid their debt to God, that they need only put their undivided faith in Jesus. Others are so pessimistic about their long captivity in sin that they don't believe God could possibly be offering them a way out. They can't understand their captivity is over. Others, on some level, still find it hard to transgress the law of sin and death, the only authority they've known their whole lives.

**There are those who reject the rescue Jesus has orchestrated. They stand under their own**

**judgement.** In WWII, some of the Rangers physically picked up and carried POW's out of the camp, kicking and screaming. They kicked others in the tail to get them to go. Some of the POW's even argued with the Rangers, asking on whose authority they were acting! But God is a gentleman. He won't pick you up and carry you against your will. He may give you a spiritual kick in the tail to get you going in the right direction, but he won't forcibly remove you from the prison camp of sin. God will not do violence to your will.

But God chose to give his Son for us knowing that some of us would reject him. Because that is the kind of love God has for us! He wanted to give us every opportunity to be reconciled to Him so that we could know him and enjoy him forever. God wants that kind of relationship with you. That is what you were designed for. That is what you were made for. On the deepest of levels, that is what you truly crave and desire, whether you can articulate it or not.

When we read, hear or watch stories about a few daring men going to such great lengths to rescue others, we are noticeably moved. On some level, it just feels right that these prisoners were rescued. They could no longer help in the war effort. Even once rescued, they would not likely be able to go back into battle. They served no utilitarian purpose. They were lost. It would cost a great deal to rescue them. But it feels right. It is right. Why? Because they have inherent worth as human beings. Furthermore, they are in their predicament because they had been serving their country as soldiers. They had put their lives at risk for others, so it is suitable that others put their lives at risk for them. It's the right thing to do.

But what if they were not POW's. What if they hadn't been captured by the Japanese, but instead they had defected to the Japanese? What if, instead of being prisoners of war, they were traitors? What if they were in that prison camp because the Japanese hated them, but they had turned themselves in to the Japanese initially in order to help them? Would it be a great thing to rescue them, then?

I'm not sure what that change would do to the story of a WWII rescue, but I do know that is the truth of the story of God's rescue mission for us. **We have all rejected God, rebelled against him and become traitors. Yet, in spite of that, God's love for us is so great that he gave his one and only Son for our sakes.** He gave his Son to pay for our rebellion, for our treason, so we could be reunited with Him and restored to a good relationship with Him. And this wasn't plan B. This was what God knew would happen from before the dawn of creation. And he created us anyway, knowing we would need just such a rescue. "One reverently imagines the Father and the Son consulting, concurring and cooperating in this greatest of all world actions." [Bruner, p. 201] The Father and the Son knew what it would take to redeem creation if they made humanity able to willingly love them back, which meant also making them able to willingly reject them. And knowing that, the Father looked at the Son, the Son nodded, and the Father said, "Let there be light."

Then, as part of that plan, two thousand years ago, Jesus prayed to the Father, "Please take this cup from me, but not my will but your will be done." The next day he was crucified. He called out, "It is finished." And I believe that was a reference not to his death that day, but to the work of creation and the plan set in place from before creation began to redeem creation through his own blood being finished.

Two days later, God vindicated his Son. Through the Spirit, God raised Jesus from the dead, "the firstborn from among the dead so that in everything he might have the supremacy." (Col 1:18) Jesus is the great victor. He is the one who conquered death, which has conquered every earthly conqueror and empire that ever was or will be. He is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And he wants you. He wants you to put your trust in what he has done for you because he loves you. He did this for his love for you. His love for you is so overwhelming that he gave up his position in Heaven, came to earth as a baby, lived a normal, everyday life in order to connect with you. Then he died in your place in order to be connected with you forever. The Father raised him from the dead, because he was without sin yet paid the price for sin.

[pic] That resurrection is the mark of victory. At the end of WWII, V-E day meant "Victory in Europe" day, V-J day meant "Victory in Japan." Easter could be called "V-U Day" for "Victory in the Universe" day. You are deeply loved by God. For that reason, you have been rescued. You have been rescued at great personal cost to God. Will you celebrate victory with Jesus? Or will you wallow in your prisoner of war camp? I choose to celebrate victory with Jesus! He is Risen! Amen.