

# From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: [home@first-church.org](mailto:home@first-church.org)

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

## *“Sabbath as Execution Day”*

*Matthew 26 and 27*

*(Part 8 of 9 in the sermon series, “Sabbath, the Seventh Day”)*

April 18, 2014

By The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens

Senior Minister

A Meditation delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Good Friday, April 18, 2014, dedicated to all the men, women and children across the globe who “have laid down their lives for their friends” since the last Good Friday and always to the glory of God!

***“Sabbath as Execution Day”  
Matthew 26 and 27***

***(Part 8 of 9 in the sermon series, “Sabbath, the Seventh Day”)***

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Jesus’ death is a real death. His death is historical fact. In fact, nothing in his life is more meticulously documented as his dying and death. As we have heard tonight, Matthew, like the other Gospel writers, spends great detail telling us how our Savior died. Jesus’ death is as real and physical as each of ours will be.

I pray our deaths are nothing like his.

Having been whipped 39 times by nail-laden leather whips while in custody of the Roman Guard in Fortress Antonia, having lost much blood, having been forced (as was the custom) to carry the 110 pound cross beam to Calvary over 650 yards of dusty, steadily inclining streets through mocking crowds, having been nailed to the cross with the nails driven through both wrists and then a single nail driven through the instep of both his left and right feet together, having been hoisted in the hot sun to roast and die – his breathing difficult (causing him to suffocate), his heart stopping, his blood draining, his heart slowing to a stop, his body temperature dropping, and his breath and brain stopping – Jesus dies after three hours of public humiliation, almost absolute abandonment by the men he called disciples and 12 hours of excruciating suffering – three hanging on the cross.

As the sun sets on Friday, he breathes his last breath. The Sabbath of the Jews has arrived as Jesus gives us his spirit to God. An earthquake

hits. The veil in the temple - all 60 feet in length and 4 inches thick is torn in two.

Jesus is executed on the Sabbath Day. The day which God commands us to rest becomes the day in which God's beloved son rests in peace. It is the seventh day. For those who follow Jesus in the centuries to come, it will never be their Sabbath day again. Instead, the Sabbath day will always be the day of his rising.

Years ago, I was present in worship in a synagogue on Good Friday. As I joined with my Jewish brothers and sisters in prayer, a strange feeling came over me. It was a feeling of absolute emptiness and sadness. I couldn't understand why. Through the years, I have always loved worship in the synagogue. I love the music, the prayers, the joy, the language, the text. I love the focus on God as "Creator of the Universe" and all that is herein. So, why the emptiness? Why the sinking sadness?

Then it sunk into my soul. If Jesus had lived through the Sabbath of his suffering and death, he would have been in the synagogue praying, singing, reading Torah on this night. Instead this Sabbath was his dying day. He would never again pray in the synagogue. The essence of all he was, was extinguished on the Sabbath Day.

But, all he ever would be was only just beginning to become real. As we are here on this Good Friday, we must remember that there is more – much more - than the cessation of vital signs and the end of life as he knew it. Salvation came to the hill at Calvary and to all the world this night.

A divine event was enacted in the death of Jesus. His death – willed and sacrificed by him for us – was an offering for the sins of the world. His death conquered death. His death was the death of death. In his death we encounter the greatest mystery of the cosmos. In his death, it becomes clear to us that God comes down in human form and share his life with us in his son, our savior. In him we are recreated – "ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven" as our hymn cries out.

This mystery shapes the way we as Christians live and die, love and believe, forgive and are forgiven. It is salvation, not a coroner's autopsy of the death, that brings us back to the cross every day. Coming back to the cross is not like visiting the cemetery with flowers as we keep the blessed

memory of our most beloved friends and family members in our hearts. We come back to the cross to remember we are and whose we are. We come back to the cross to daily probe in prayer, in spirit and in action how we will live our lives more fully in the spirit of Christ. We come back to the cross to remember - as he laid down his life for us - we too must lay down our lives for others.

As we go forth on this Shabbat of our Lord's Execution, let us carry Fanny Crosby's words in our hearts: *"Near the cross, a trembling soul, Love and Mercy found me; there the bright and morning star, Sheds its beams around me. In the cross, in the cross, be my glory ever, till my raptured soul shall find, rest beyond the river."*

Tonight, we give you thanks O Lord for your sacrifice, for your grace and for your amazing love. In you, we find our true and perfect rest. In you, we will find our Eternal Sabbath. Amen.

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