



# LESSONS IN LIVING

## *Making Sense of the Easter Story*

### *“Part 2: Barabbas”*

A St. Andrew’s Sermon  
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby  
March 15, 2026

**Scripture Reading:** Mark 15:6-15 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

*Now whenever there was a festival, Pilate would release for them one prisoner—anyone they asked for. There was a prisoner named Barabbas who was jailed along with the rioters who had committed murder in the uprising. When the crowd came to ask that Pilate honor the custom, Pilate rejoined, “Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?” Pilate was aware, of course, that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed Jesus over. But the chief priests incited the crowd to have him release Barabbas instead. Pilate again asked them, “What am I to do with the one you call the King of the Jews?” The people shouted back, “Crucify him!” “Why?” Pilate asked. “What crime has he committed?” But they shouted all the louder, “Crucify him!” So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas to them, and, after having Jesus scourged, handed him over to be crucified.*

## Sermon

Easter is always a very interesting time for me. One difficulty I have is asking people to believe something that may or may not be true as the foundation of their life, of their faith. I don't think that's what the symbols of scripture are supposed to do. I think they're teaching stories. I think they're very profound wisdom stories. But when we take them literally, we can miss the whole point of the story.

The other challenge I always feel is the anti-Semitism that just haunts the story. Clearly, they were already being persecuted, and they wanted the Romans to be mad at the Jews, not at the Christians, which doesn't seem very courageous to me. But Pilate would not have released a revolutionary so that he could punish a religious figure. Rome did not care what you believed. They were trying to protect their empire. They felt that both Judaism and Christianity were threats to that. And Christianity used to be a revolutionary religion before it became an institution.

I mention that because some of you know we've been getting in a little heat, a little hot water, with right-wing religions. For the most part, James Talarico's candidacy has brought in new friends. It's introduced us to a lot of people, but a lot of the people are less than friendly. This week we've been called the "Synagogue of Satan." And I trust these fundamentalists. They, I think, speak for Satan very well. (*Laughter*). I've been called a wolf in sheep's clothing. Which, you got to admit, this is a great sheep costume [*points to clothes*].

But I don't think they understand what a wolf would symbolize, right? They think that we're getting all of our ideas from the culture. We worship at the altar of Oprah, although I've never watched Oprah. But I don't think they understand that what Jesus is talking about in this culture, wolves unfairly were considered to just be predators. They would invade the flock and devour. And Jesus was saying a lot of religious officials are like that. They live off and take advantage of their people.

One thing I believe that liberal churches need to learn, and just liberals in general, is this is not a conversation. A lot of people think there's two sides to every conversation, and so we're being just as intolerant to get in the way of the bully. This assault on humankind is not a conversation if you're an immigrant. It's not a conversation if you're LGBTQ. It's not just a conversation if you have a transgender child that you're trying to keep from committing suicide.

And these roosters from the church are coming, knowing almost nothing and speaking as though they knew everything, speaking for God, speaking in the name of the one who commanded us not to judge, a message of judgment.

I used to think there was a sideline and I was innocent sitting on the sidelines watching these political struggles, and I was above politics. Until I realized that holding on to my masculine privilege is *politics*. Holding on to my white privilege is *politics*. Holding on to my Christian privilege is political as it gets. Defending the status quo is political. Being patriotic in a church service, praying for our side but not the other side, that's all as political as it could possibly be.

When I got to college, I realized that I'd been propagandized. I still loved Jesus and Christianity, but I knew that the Christians in my life were sometimes some of the meanest people there are. Some of the most ignorant people, deeply, deeply ignorant. And in their simple-mindedness, they thought anybody that was smarter than them was a devil, was trying to trick everyone.

I have empathy for people lost in that religion. But I have a duty not to stand on the sidelines when they go out hunting for people. Fundamentalism is not a victimless crime. It's a predatory understanding that you stand at the center, that by definition you're better than other people, and God is wanting you to interfere in their lives. If the Church stands on the sidelines, we're as guilty as anyone then.

We love everyone, but that doesn't mean that loving the bully and the oppressed is the same type of love. It can feel very different. What we're talking about is not judging individuals, but that dynamic by which anybody suffers under a hierarchy. The dynamic which anybody's asked to pretend to believe.

Do you realize how the Church has set people up for a lying leader by telling them that belief means to pretend to know something that you don't know? See, Easter, that's very painful for me. You have a lot of visitors that come in who've been told their whole lives to pretend they know Jesus got up from the grave. *Maybe*. But I wasn't there.

I don't think the Jesus I know would want me to base my life on a hypothetical. I believe the stories are *teaching* stories about what is happening all of the time. I believe the resurrection is the movement of life *all of the time* for *everybody*. *Everywhere*. *All of the time*. It's told in a simple package of one person getting up.

But we have to realize we're seeing it in nature, we're seeing it in life, we're seeing it in each other. We're seeing it in what seems like a hopeless time now. There's a deeper creativity which calls us into being that we need to remember and give ourselves to and to be expressions of it.

So, we're going to look at today the story of Jesus and Barabbas. We're not going to say the Jewish people didn't recognize the Messiah. That's incredibly arrogant. What I'm going to try to do is tell you a couple of things that you can't see in English. One of the gifts I try to give is to study the text in the original language to give you something that you can't see that in English. You can check me out. Wikipedia, I suppose. *(Laughter)*

The first thing that I think enriches this story enormously is that Barabbas is actually an Aramaic word meaning “the son of the father.” The son of the father. Patriarch. That's all the religion some people knew. Do you remember Jesus being called “the son of Mary?” A lot of times, that meant they don't know who the father is. They don't have the paperwork. He didn't have his birth certificate. So, he couldn't vote, couldn't get a driver's license. *(Laughter)*

In that parable, in that mythology, what is being said is that Jesus represents the outsiders of the world. He *was* an outsider. His worth came from nothing other than being nakedly human, and that was enough.

Jesus may have been born illegitimately. That's one of the ways of understanding “the son of Mary.” I find that a very beautiful possibility, that he had none of the credentials of the world that the moralists approve of. But he was coming not only to teach theological things, but to redeem people's view of each other.

In this culture, they believed not only that certain *foods* were unclean, but there were certain people born unclean by their nature. I won't go into the list, but you'll feel like throwing up if you check it out. It's much more than LGBTQ people. People with disabilities, people through no fault of their own being considered unclean. And Jesus came to declare that *no one* is unclean. That's not always easy to see in the Gospels, but in Acts it's absolutely clear.

Jesus came to end the idea that any person is unclean or inadequate. What the Church has done is say that Jesus came to overturn the *food* laws, but *not* the Levitical code for human beings. Do you really think Jesus came and died so we can eat pork rinds? *(Laughter)*

It's *obscene*. It's *obscene* not to realize that the people that the Church is judging in the name of the one who commanded them not to judge are the new temple. Remember Jesus saying, these are the stones of a new temple, the stones that the builders rejected. The people that the Church has rejected are the new temple. That's the punchline that's there.

So, Jesus called himself friend of sinners. He wasn't saying that because he thought people were sinners, I don't think. I think what he's saying is the people *you* think are sinners, the people that *you* think are outcasts, are your *human family*. And if you call God your sacred parent, your heavenly parent, and you don't realize that that means that humanity is your family, you haven't understood anything.

The Church gets their parses that God is male. You've seen that recently with the [Talarico] campaign. These poor people who only speak English and are teaching at a level that they have no idea what they're talking about, don't realize that the word for “spirit” is female. And nobody loses sleep over that one.

But Jesus didn't come to talk about God. Jesus came to reveal who *we* are. And he used religion, he used the culture, used everything he possibly could to say you are a beloved expression of the creative principles of the universe. Don't let anyone judge you.

*And* his teaching is conditional on you not judging anyone else. Have you ever heard the saying, “judge not lest you be judged?” *That's* the New Covenant. Judge not lest you be judged. Not, I'm going to bleed and that'll get God satisfied. He wants to hurt you, but he's going to hurt me instead. It's not that. Is that there are no outsiders.

So, when you're choosing a church, a lot of churches saying we're not a true church, and I'm happy to talk about that, but I don't think that bus goes where they want it to go. Because if Jesus gets a vote on what he taught, they don't have a leg to stand on. That's not what Jesus said. “*I've not come to judge the world, but repair the world, to heal the world.*”

I think Jesus should get a vote in what Christianity means. But to do that, you have to say “no” to the religion of Barabbas, the patriarchy, the system of domination, hierarchy. That's the religion people want. It's the religion of MAGA, the heresy, the blasphemy of MAGA. So that's the first thing, that when you're looking at a religion, you're going to have to choose: are they going to judge the world, or are they going to heal the world?

Second is, in the Greek, the word for “crowd” is usually a negative idea. The *crowd* chooses Barabbas. Once people become a lynch mob, just because they have crosses doesn't mean a thing. If you are *hunting* your human family, if you're *judging*, if you're *converting* people, you don't love them. Why would you change somebody that you love? Because you're afraid of Hell. You're too afraid to step back and think, “this doesn't make any sense.” The message *can't be* “God loves you very much, and if you don't believe that, he's going to barbecue you for all eternity.” (*Laughter*). It's *insane*. But we can be too afraid to step back and say, that's *ridiculous*.

When I got to college, I ran across a quote by Albert Schweitzer that changed my whole religion. It said there are two religions that call themselves Christianity. One is the religion *of* Jesus, which is on the Sermon on the Mount. The other is all the countless religions *about* Jesus. It has all the salvation schemes and all the moralistic systems and stuff that Jesus never talked about at all. And that's when I realized I was playing on the wrong team.

Let me ask you this question. If you are a MAGA Christian, which is more central: that you believe in Jesus Christ or that you believe in Donald Trump? Which is more *definitional* of that term MAGA Christian? I would suggest it's Donald Trump at the center. Instead of "God first" or "Jesus first," it's "America first." But it's the America of white, patriarchal, heterosexual hierarchy. And you as a Christian are called out of that. The word "church" means to be called out, be called out of.

We *have* to leave the systems of oppression. Even if we get our identity from them, even if we get our treasure from them, even if that's what makes us feel safe in the world, Christianity needs to be called out of that.

I fell in love not with the Christianity of Calvin or Luther, but of Albert Schweitzer, Martin Luther King, Tolstoy. Very different religion, because they put Jesus at the center. Jesus said that if you have love, you have everything that you need.

The Orthodox Christian Church says that they are the original message of Jesus Christ because they managed to kill every other variant. Does that sound convincing to you? That they are the spokespeople for Jesus Christ because they killed the mystics? They kicked people out. They wouldn't have to do that if they could convince people.

I love the church, but it's a crystal meth mama. It comes in and out of sanity on a regular basis.  
(*Laughter*)

So, to realize that even though many of us love the church, we can't surrender responsibility to it. We cannot let the church think for us, feel for us, or make our decisions. There was an old-time evangelist that used to say, "being in a church no more makes you a Christian than being in your garage makes you a car." (*Laughter*)

So, when we choose between religions, do we choose the ones that make the story about themselves and their rituals and their rules and their beliefs? Or do we go with the communities that make themselves sacrificial vessels like Jesus did? Jesus did not hold on to his dignity status. He loved too much. A church that doesn't love enough to do that is not following Jesus Christ.

Here's the last thing. What you sometimes can't see in the text is that in some of the earliest manuscripts, Barabbas had a first name. It was "Jesus." So, you have "Jesus Barabbas" and "Jesus of Nazareth," or "Son of Mary." But it's asking you almost directly to choose what kind of Jesus you're going to follow. Just being on the club is not enough. Just satisfying the clergy is not enough. Because the clergy often through history has been the worst enemy of the message of the Gospel. The worst.

Do you know clergy fought against anesthesia for women because the Bible says that women are to give birth in pain? Think of the stupid things that people have done. Galileo. “You've got a telescope. Just look through it and you can see what I'm saying is true.” “No, here in the Bible it says it's not.” You're called out of that kind of ignorance and stupidity. It's the *truth* that will set you free.

I'll repeat what Schweitzer said.

*There are two things that call themselves Christianity. One is the Sermon on the Mount and following the love and the compassion. The other is all the 10,000 salvation schemes that really make no sense and can't talk to your heart. They can only make you afraid.*

So, the last thing when you're looking at a church— the religion of Barabbas is a religion of power. How do you know that Jesus is God? *Jesus rose from the grave.* That proves it. *Does it? If Hitler rose from the dead, would you follow? No!*

Love is its own proof. When you love, you know you're already there. You're already on the right path. Nothing else can replace that. When Jesus said love your neighbor, that *implies* not bombing them. Seems to me. I don't want to twist scripture. But it seems not putting children in detention camps, not supporting governments that are bombing civilians.

Isn't it amazing these pro-lifers? They love the babies until they're born. And then they're on their own. Bombing little babies in Iran does not bother. Where are the protests of the pro-lifers? They're not there.

This *church* had a bomb threat. Pro-lifers said they were going to bomb us and our preschool because we're pro-choice. Now that's somebody that's not thinking first rate. People so afraid, so wounded that they think if they're not cruel that God will punish them. You're called out of that.

So, the last little clue when we're looking at, is this a true church or not? Does it look more like a wolf or a lamb? We're being attacked for being wolves. But are we the ones *hunting* people? Are we the ones *judging* people, *criticizing* people? Is it possible they're afraid of the lambs? Because *that's* the symbol of Easter, a lamb on the throne. Not that Jesus is going to rule the world, but that gentleness will overcome violence, though it takes thousands of years.

So, we have a decision to make. When people say we're false Christians because we love the wrong people, we need to take that seriously and realize that there is no neutral side. If you're not standing *up* for people, you're a brick in their wall. You're a part of their oppression.

Jesus was killed by the Roman Empire not because of some biblical theological matter. The compassion that he taught was a threat to empire itself. It still is. And so, I think this question of Jesus or Barabbas is saying, “what kind of religion do you give yourself to?” A religion of judgment or a religion of grace and forgiveness? A religion that's an insider's club, a gated community, or one that leaves its privilege and goes out to the outcasts to help build the temple with the stones the builders have rejected?

And then finally, honestly looking in the mirror, it's saying, "when I live out my religion, do I look more like a wolf or a lamb?"

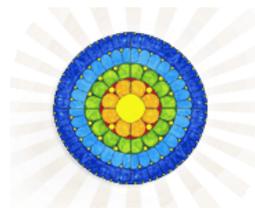
So, that's my wrestles with the text. We'll take a moment for you to think how you would approach this. If you could do better, don't tell me. Until tomorrow. *(Laughter)*

## Benediction

Rev. Carol Johnson

And now, as you go out, may Love be the center that holds even when everything falls apart. And may Joy arrive without permission, not as a solution, but as a companion, a stubborn companion in the midst of all that is happening. And go out with all three Loves: the Love that birthed you and to whom all of us will return, the Love inside of you, and the Love that holds us together. Amen.

*Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.*



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