

“The King of Truth Appears Before Pilate”

Sermon based on John 18:28-38

Saint Mark's, Watertown, WI

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Introduction: Is There Such a Thing as Absolute Truth?

The Apostle John once wrote: *We have one who speaks to the Father in our defense-- Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.* Amen.

What is truth? Is anything completely true? Is there, finally, any such thing as absolute truth?

You and I live in a “post-modern” culture. Not long ago, certainly no more than forty years ago, we lived in a “modern” culture, a scientific culture. Most people in that culture believed that there was such a thing as absolute truth. Scientific truth, something that could be investigated and proven—that was absolute truth.

But now we live in a post-modern culture. Most people in our culture do not believe that anything is completely true. When asked the question, “Is there any such thing as absolute truth?” the majority of Americans consistently answer, “No.”

Today we’re taking a look at a section of Scripture where one man asks, “What is truth?” and another man “testifies to the truth”. Both will help us this morning in our quest for the truth.

Exposition: Jesus Appears Before Pilate

God’s Word to us today is John chapter eighteen, verses twenty-eight through thirty-eight. It is written on the first inside page of your bulletin, if you’d like to follow along as I read and explain it. This is the first part of Jesus’ trial before Pontius Pilate.

God’s Holy Word today begins this way: **Then the Jews led Jesus from Caiaphas to the palace of the Roman governor.** These *Jews* were the Jewish leaders: the seventy member ruling council, the Sanhedrin, which had met most of the night in an effort to condemn Christ. They had been at the mansion of the high priest, *Caiaphas*—probably near the southwest corner of the temple complex, which was on the eastern edge of Jerusalem. Now, they went to where the *Roman governor* was staying. Normally he wasn’t in Jerusalem. But during this highest festival of the Jewish church year, he was. And he was probably staying a half a mile across the city on its western edge in the fortress there.

By now it was early morning. You see, the Jewish leaders had waited until the first hint of daylight to pronounce Jesus guilty again, in order to make their trial “public” and “legal”.

And to avoid ceremonial uncleanness – I mean, who knows what a dirty Gentile like Pilate had been eating or touching?! – **the Jews did not enter the palace; they wanted to be able to eat the Passover**—that is: they wanted to be able to continue the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread which immediately followed last night’s Passover.

So Pilate came out to them. I imagine he wasn’t especially happy. It was very early, still probably very dark, notably chilly outside; and here he has to deal with these complaining people.

So, he asks: **“What charges are you bringing against this man?”** And they reply: **“If he were not a criminal”** – literally, *an evildoer* – **they replied, “we would not**

have handed him over to you." Basically they're saying, "Pilate, just trust us; we need this guy gone."

But Pilate said, "Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law." You see, the Romans were wise governors. They gave to their subjugated peoples a great deal of elbow room to govern themselves. This was especially true for the fiercely independent Jewish people.

"But we have no right to execute anyone" – literally, *to kill him off* – the Jews objected. And that was true. The Romans did reserve for themselves the right of capital punishment. Else the people they governed would kill off all the Roman supporters among them.

And: This happened so that the words Jesus had spoken indicating the kind of death he was going to die would be fulfilled. You see, had the Jews put Jesus to death, it would have been by stoning—the Jewish mode of execution. But since the Romans put Jesus to death, it was by crucifixion—the Roman manner of execution. And Jesus had consistently – stunningly, really – prophesied his death by crucifixion.

Well, Pilate then went back inside the palace and summoned Jesus, who was in safekeeping in some dark room elsewhere in the palace. He asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" because that was the Jewish leaders' chief accusation—that Jesus was in revolt against Rome, a rival king to Caesar, a genuine national threat!

"Is that your own idea," Jesus asked, "or did others talk to you about me?" And Jesus asked that in love and concern for Pilate. If Pilate himself were asking, Jesus could talk to him about world-wide sin and world-wide salvation found in him. But since others had fed Pilate these words, Jesus would need to start a little further afield.

"Am I a Jew?" Pilate replied. "It was your people and your chief priests who handed you over to me. What is it you have done?" Pilate was saying, "Level with me, Jesus. Where there's smoke, there's fire! What crime have you committed? If you tell me quickly, I'll be more inclined to be lenient with you.

But Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world." And Jesus could prove it. "If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews." True!—and proof positive: Jesus was no threat to the Roman Emperor, nor to Pontius Pilate. "But now my kingdom is from another place." And Jesus was eager to share this, pending Pilate's permission. "You are a king, then" aren't you?! said Pilate. It was like Pilate was saying, "Okay. Now I understand this whole thing! You claim to be some sort of religious king. Of course, I'm not so backwards as to believe you. But that's what's got the Jewish leaders riled. That's their territory. Meantime, I do agree with you: you're obviously no threat to Roman interests."

Jesus, though, graciously sees the opportunity lovingly to explain himself further. Jesus answered, "You keep saying I am a king"—that's the better translation. "In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world" – God became man, and from the very beginning it was – "to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."

To which Pilate replies – less likely thoughtfully, more likely sneeringly – "What is truth?" Pilate asked.

At any rate: With this he went out again to the Jews and said, "I find not one basis for a charge against him." So, in a rather strange little initial trial, at least Pontius Pilate came out right. There was *no basis for a charge against him.* Jesus was innocent of crime. Jesus was innocent of sin. And really, that's the main message of this trial.

Appropriation One: We Sinners Mishandle the Truth

So, what does this trial mean for us? What makes this trial: some nineteen hundred seventy-five years ago and half a world away—what makes this trial more important than the Michael Jackson trial, or the Robert Blake trial, or the Kobe Bryant trial, or the Martha Stewart trial, or ... you get the picture....

Well, first of all, this trial proclaims the truth regarding your sinfulness and mine.

You and I view the jealousy of the Jewish leaders, and their hypocrisy, and their duplicity, and we rightly say, “How dare you condemn Christ to death?!” You and I view the ignorance of Pontius Pilate, and his arrogance, and the consequences of his transgressions, and we rightly say, “How dare you treat Jesus so condescendingly?!”

And then, you and I consider our jealousy (when we want something that’s not ours to have) and our hypocrisy (when we say one thing and do another) and our duplicity (when we pretend we have someone’s best interests in mind, and we only have our own interests in mind). And we consider our ignorance and our arrogance, and we say, “How dare we?! How dare we treat Jesus so condescendingly?! How dare we condemn Christ to death?!” because as surely as Jesus suffered and died, he suffered and died for us!

Appropriation Two: Jesus Is Absolute Truth

So, this trial proclaims the truth regarding your sinfulness and mine. It also proclaims the truth regarding our Savior.

Here’s Jesus.... Even though he is all-powerful to prevent it, he permits himself to be pushed, prodded, and probably punched between the palaces of the high priest and Pontius Pilate. And why?—because he loved you!

Here’s Jesus.... Even though he is utterly innocent, he allows himself to be accused of evildoing and charged with revolting against Rome. And why?—because he was bearing the blame for your evildoing and your revolt! So, those sins aren’t yours anymore!

Here’s Jesus.... He knows for sure he’s facing crucifixion and its asphyxiation. And he could escape. But he doesn’t escape. And why?—so that you’d never have to go through hell in this life or in the next. That punishment is not yours anymore!

And all the while Jesus is desperately trying personally to persuade Pilate.... And he has personally persuaded us! Whatever work it took to get you baptized, Jesus saw to it—and he washed your sins away! Whatever words it took to persuade you more and more to place your confidence in Christ, Jesus spoke them—right here, right in the Bible, words he’s placed in your sight, on your lips, and deep down into your soul! Jesus has so much as given to you the very body which was here condemned and the very blood which was shed there on the cross for you. He must really, really love you!

Application: Now We Handle the Truth Well

And he’s even given you this truth to share with others, for whom it is just as true, as well! It would be worth paying money to be able to proclaim the truth regarding Jesus in your workplace, but you get to do it for free! It would be worth paying money to be able to proclaim the truth regarding Jesus in your home, but you get to do it for free! It would be worth our congregation paying millions of dollars a year in order to buy enough gospel to share with one another, with our community, and with our world, but we get to do it for free! So, let’s proclaim Jesus freely, and widely, and happily!

Conclusion: There Is Such a Thing as Absolute Truth!

And that is the truth. That is ultimate, one hundred percent, absolute truth! Really: the real God, at a real time, in a real place, with real witnesses, really fulfilled his promises really to take on himself our real sins really to wipe them out for us.

That's truth you can count on forever! That's truth you can live by every single day! Amen.

The Apostle John once wrote: *The blood of Jesus, God's Son, purifies us from all sin.* Amen.