Were you there? (Easter sermon - part 1)
Matthew 28:1-10
March 23, 2008

> *Were you there when they crucified my Lord?*
> *Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?*

Were you there? Were you there when they nailed him to the tree? Were you there when they arrested him and convicted him and tortured him and executed him?

Of course you were there! You put him there! We all put him there!

We -- you and I -- have accused people, some deservedly and some undeservedly. We have convicted people, some deservedly and some undeservedly. We have tortured people, some ... no, all undeservedly, because no one deserves to be tortured!

And we have killed people. We have killed people -- men and women and children, combatants and non-combatants, enemies and people who just got in the way -- in Iraq and Afghanistan, in Viet Nam and Japan, and within the borders of our own nation, in that most bloody of wars called the War Between the States, the Civil War, the war that engulfed our nation at the time our church was founded.

In that war, the defenders of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness fought among themselves, taking the lives of their own countrymen, taking the lives of brothers and sisters and the children of brothers and sisters.

But isn't it true, in the larger sense, from God's point of view, that every time we go to war -- justly or unjustly, every time we execute a criminal -- justly or unjustly, every time we kill -- for whatever reason and in whatever fashion, we are taking the lives of our brothers and sisters?

But we have been ready to kill anyway, ready to sacrifice the lives of other human beings to preserve our own lives, even ready to sacrifice the lives of other human beings to protect our own standard of living.

We have all been willing to push someone else out of the way to get what we want. We have all been willing to let someone else suffer so we don't have to. We have all been willing to let someone else pay the price for our peace and prosperity ... just like they did! Just like the Romans and Jews did when they nailed Jesus to the tree!

We put him there. You put him there. You were there.

But you were there, too, because he brought you there.

> *Because of our sins he was wounded,*
> *   beaten because of the evil we did.*
> *We are healed by the punishment he suffered,*
> *   made whole by the blows he received.*

You were there, because Jesus brought you there, because Jesus died for you!

It is a mystery, but a mystery that lies at the heart of our faith ... that Jesus' death was not merely an unfortunate tragedy, not an unnecessary martyrdom, not merely a miscarriage of justice, not just an emblem of the intolerance of fallen humanity for genuine goodness ... but that Jesus' death was purposeful, meaningful, efficacious ... that Jesus' death was somehow a critical component of God's plan, somehow the ultimate expression of God's love.

I'm not going to try to explain how Jesus' death "works" for us. I'm not going to discuss theology, because theology can sometimes get in the way. The meaning of Jesus' death is higher and broader and deeper than any explanation can begin to appreciate. It is a mystery.

But this is what we believe, this is what is true, that when Jesus dies, we die with him ... or what is old in us dies with him ... or what is worst in us dies with him ... or the terrible and cruel tyrants that rule us -- jealousy and fear and pride and greed and selfishness -- die with him. When Jesus dies the power of sin to control us, the power of death to hurt us, is broken. You are free!

You are free. So, to paraphrase the Bible, don't keep on dragging a dead carcass around with you! What you were is dead! You were there!

And what you are is alive. What you are is alive with Jesus. What you are is alive in Jesus.