

# *The Great Plot Twist*

## *Romans 5:12-21*

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*This sermon is part of a Lenten series, “Cross Talk,” where the church considers the different ways Christians have understood atonement.*

A drama plays out on the cross.

It’s a gruesome climax, the hero in defeat,  
accented by a mocking crown, last words  
and in Matthew’s productions, the lights go dark and the whole house shakes,  
and then... the plot twist that no one saw coming.

Act One is all the rising action:

Jesus in conflict with the devil and demons,  
confronting sickness and storms,  
at odds with empire and establishment.

And as Act Two closes,  
it looks as if evil will win, as if the wrong will prevail.  
Defeat is certain, but then . . . an unexpected victory.

The cross, as our tradition depicts it, stands empty to the sky.  
Christ’s life is undefeated by death.  
Christ’s love is undaunted by any opposition.

As one poet put it,  
In the scene set in shadows  
like the night is here to stay;  
there is evil cast around us,  
but it’s love that wrote the play.<sup>1</sup>

Friends, we have atonement with God, at-one-ment with God,  
because God would not let evil win,  
because God gave us a free gift in the grace of one man, Jesus the Christ.

At least that’s how the Apostle Paul puts it in his letter to the church in Rome.  
Paul claims that grace exercises dominion through justification  
leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Bless his heart, Paul is so wordy. And yes, I mean that in the Southern way.  
Bless Paul’s heart. It takes a lot to get through Paul in this chapter.

But ask a stranger to the church and even that person may be able to say that

“Jesus died on the cross to save us from our sin.”

It’s a Christian stock phrase,  
emblazoned on countless billboards in the bible belt.  
Paul would agree,  
as long as you weren’t just talking about sin as that time  
you cheated on your sixth grade math test or how you still cuss in the car.

Paul would agree, only if you made sin a capital “S” Sin.

Scholar Beverly Gaventa writes,  
In Romans in particular, sin is Sin—not a lower-case transgression,  
not even a human disposition or flaw in our nature, but an upper-case Power that  
enslaves humankind and stands in total opposition to God.<sup>2</sup>

In what we just read, Sin itself is a major character; it enters the scene with one  
man, Adam. Sin is one who enslaves, who brings death, who ensnares even God’s  
law. Brought together, these “achievements” on Sin’s resume’ create the portrait of  
a cosmic terrorist.

And yet, Sin’s defeat and demise is guaranteed by God’s action in Christ on the  
cross.

Yes, this sermon is full of “fightin’ words” –  
not my usual style, but that’s the imagery here.  
Defeat, demise. Paul speaks of Sin’s dominion. Other translations call it Sin’s reign.  
This is battle language, indeed.  
Evil is God’s own enemy.  
And Christ is God’s own Victor.  
This is where we see the atonement theory of *Christus Victor*, as it is said in Latin.

The Christus Victor Theory may make more sense to those of you who live and  
breathe battles.

For six years I had the humbling privilege of serving in a congregation where many  
members found their vocations in the military. I would often be invited to pray at  
promotion ceremonies. One such prayer was for a new Army Colonel headed off to  
War College, where officers across the branches get a Masters in Strategic Studies.

Literal combat and tactical battles were not foreign to those I served in Northern  
Virginia. Those folks knew what it feels like to have much at stake.

But it’s not just them, of course,  
not only those who know the feel of boots  
or who wear bars on their uniforms.

We cannot escape knowing someone, loving someone,  
who struggles against depression or addiction;

who fights against cancer or chronic illness;  
who valiantly contends in family scuffles.

On some level, I think we sense this theory of atonement  
even if we've never heard of it before.

The powers of Sin will do their darnedest (and we have seen them try),  
but ultimately love will win, and new life will be victorious.

To say Jesus died on the cross for our sin  
is *not* to say that the only thing that has happened on the cross  
is that our transgressions are forgiven, and we,  
person by person, come to belong to Jesus.  
But rather, on the cross a cosmic shift has taken place—once and for all.

The powers and principalities may not know it,  
but their foundations have been undermined and they cannot last.  
Creation itself has been invaded by God's new way and world:  
a new reign, a new dominion is at play: and it is a free gift of grace.  
And y'all, that is a phenomenal claim.

In JK Rowling's fifth Harry Potter book, *The Order of the Phoenix*,  
Harry is in a bodily struggle with Voldemort,  
just after Voldemort's lackey has killed Harry's godfather.  
It is a low low moment as Harry is under the grip of Voldemort's terrible power, but  
Harry says, "You're the weak one. And you will never know friendship, or love.  
And I feel sorry for you."

That is Christus Victor. Love has already won. Evil is ultimately defeated.

It is almost as if J.K. Rowling stole her lines from the great Desmond Tutu,  
who used to say to the apartheid government in South Africa,  
"You may have the guns, you may have all this  
power, but you have already lost. Come, join the winning side."

But y'all, it doesn't always look like it, does it?

The Sunday I was slated to preach this sermon,  
49 precious children of God were killed senselessly, hatefully, while praying  
in Christ Church, New Zealand.  
That same Sunday in Adult Education, we started reading James Cone's book,  
*The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, where we were confronted yet again with the sense-  
less hateful killing, this time of black bodies after slavery "ended."

I am not fooled. All of that is connected, of course.  
The capital S "Sin" of white supremacy does not yet know it is a defeated power.

But we know. Yes, we know.  
Islamophobia will not win. Racism will not win.  
White supremacy is not of God, even if religion is still used to prop it up.  
That's why the church maintains our interfaith friendships,  
that's why we study books that make us uncomfortable,  
that's why we name out loud what is not true  
and live our lives under the banner of Christ the Victor.

For as Wendell Berry said,  
Hate has no world.  
The people of hate must try  
to possess the world of love,  
for it is the only world;  
it is Heaven and Earth.

But as lonely, eager hate  
possesses it, it disappears;  
it never did exist,  
and hate must seek another  
world that love has made.<sup>3</sup>

Just a few chapters later in Paul's letter to the Romans,  
Paul relents on all his wordy gesticulations.  
Paul sets aside all of his complicated prose  
and finds his stride among the poets.

I read Romans 8 at nearly every funeral I officiate.  
It is likely the text which defines the core of my theology.

"Who will separate us from the love of Christ," Paul asks?  
Will hardship, or distress, or persecution,  
will cancer or depression or gun violence or partisan politics,  
will racism or cowardice or confusion about such things,  
will hate or apathy or anything else in all creation separate our at-one-ment with  
God?

No, Paul says, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.  
I was always stumped by that conqueror language; it seemed to come out of nowhere.  
Maybe because I didn't grow up with all the military lingo.

But I did grow up under the shadow of an empty cross,  
which means that I, like you,  
am a child of Christus Victor,  
and thus we fight for the winning side,  
the side of love.

## Notes

1 David Wilcox, "Show the Way," from the Album Horizon, 1994.

2 Beverly Roberts Gaventa, "The Cosmic Power of Sin in Paul's Letter to the Romans: Toward a Widescreen Edition," *Interpretation*, 58 no 3 Jul 2004, p 229-240.

3 Wendell Berry, "A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems," 1979-1997.