St. Paul Lutheran Church
Sarasota, Florida
Tre Ore
April 17, 1987

IN NOMINE JESU

St. Luke 23: 39-43:

> ONE OF THE CRIMINALS WHO WERE HANGED RAILED AT HIM, SAYING, "ARE YOU NOT THE CHRIST? SAVE YOURSELF AND US!" BUT THE OTHER REBUKED HIM, SAYING, "DO YOU NOT FEAR GOD, SINCE YOU ARE UNDER THE SAME SENTENCE OF CONDEMNATION? AND WE INDEED JUSTLY; FOR WE ARE RECEIVING THE DUE REWARD OF OUR DEEDS; BUT THIS MAN HAS DONE NOTHING WRONG." AND HE SAID, "JESUS, REMEMBER ME WHEN YOU COME INTO YOUR KINGLY POWER." AND HE SAID TO HIM, "TRULY, I SAY TO YOU, TODAY YOU WILL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE."

Somewhere out West as you are driving along in a car or a bus you look out the window -- and there way up on the side of a **cliff** -- so high that you are not sure how anyone got up there -- you see in **white paint** that has trickled down from the bottoms of the letters, the message: **"JESUS SAVES."** You have seen similar signs plastered on **billboards**, barns **bumper stickers**, the **concrete abutment of a bridge**, and countless other places: **"JESUS SAVES!"** And if you are **like most** of the people I know -- **including myself** much of the time -- you probably **wince** at the **message.** And that is really a very **strange** and **interesting** thing -- both the **message and the wince.**

God only knows what **kind of a person** climbed up there to the side of the cliff with his **bucket** and **brush** to **slap the words** on. And God only knows **what reason** he may have had for doing it. Yet the effect at least of the words is clear enough: **"JESUS SAVES."** The effect more or less is that we **do wince.** And we wince, I believe, because we are **embarrassed.**

"Jesus Saves" seems **cringingly, painfully personal** -- somebody named **Jesus,** of all names, saving **Carl,** or **Howard,** or **Mary Ann,** or **Joan,** or whatever **your name** happens to be. It is something very **personal** written up in a place that is very **public** -- like the names of lovers carved into the back of a park bench or on a tree trunk!

"Jesus Saves" is **embarrassing** because if you can hear it at all through your wincing -- if any part at all of what it is trying to say gets through -- what it says to everybody who passes by, and most **importantly** and **unforgiveably,** of course, what it says to you is that **you need to be saved. Rich man, poor man, young, old, male, female, educated, uneducated, religious and unreligious** -- the words are **offensive to all -- all of us** -- because what it says in effect to all of us is, **"You have no peace inside your skin. You are not happy, not whole."** Something of **great importance** in **our lives** is **missing.**

not complete

Mod This is an **unpardonable** thing to say -- whether it is true or false but **especially** if it is true. Here we are trying so hard to be **happy** -- all of us are -- to find some kind of **inner peace** -- and all in all not making too bad a job of it **considering the odds** -- so that what could be worse **psychologically, humanly,** then to say what amounts to, **"You will never make it. You have not and you will not -- at least not without help."** And what could be more **presumptuous,** more **absurd,** more **pathetic** than for some poor **fool** with **brush** and **bucket** and **white paint** to claim that the **One** to give that HELP is **Jesus.** If he said, **"God"** -- at least that would be an idea, a **concept,** to be **accepted or rejected on intellectual grounds.** But by saying

"JESUS", he puts it on a level where **what you accept** or **reject** is **not an idea** at all but a **Person!** You see, behind this **Poor Fool** with his bucket of paint there stands the **Prince of Fools Himself -- Blessed is He --in His Own Way more presumptuous, more absurb, more pathetic** than anyone has ever managed to be since.

"JESUS SAVES"..... And the bad thief -- the one who according to tradition was strung up on His left -- managed to choke out the words ~~that~~ which in one form or another -- human beings have been **choking out ever since** -- whenever they have found themselves **crossed up by the world: "Are you the Christ? Then Save Yourself and US" — with the accent on the "US."** If You are SAVIOR -- whatever that means - then **why don't you SAVE US — whatever** that **involves** -- SAVE US from whatever it is that **crosses us all up before we're done** -- from the **world without** and the **world within that crosses us all out.** SAVE US **from** and **for** and **in the midst** of all the **neon-lit criss-cross of roads** that we all travel in this world.

And then the **good thief** - the one on the right -- **rebuked** the **bad one** for what he said angrily -- and then in effect said it again himself - said, **"Jesus, remember me when You come in Your Kingly Power."** And then -- like rain on parched earth finally -- the words of Jesus' answer, **"TRULY I SAY TO YOU, TODAY YOU WILL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE."** They are words which are **no less crude** than the ones **trickling down the cliffside** -- no less **presumptuous, absurd, pathetic** -- words that express **no theological idea as idea** -- but words which took a **mouth of flesh to say** and an **ear of flesh to hear.**

I can imagine that the **guards** -- posted there to see that the execution was carried out **properly** -- must have felt something like **embarrassment** and turned away from the **sheer lunacy** of it all.

& hopelessness

Yet out of the depths of his **own pain** and **utter helplessness** the **good thief** cries, **"JESUS, REMEMBER ME WHEN YOU COME INTO YOUR KINGLY POWER." ..... REMEMBER ME! ...** It is the **human cry** of the **ages.**

And Jesus said, **"I WILL."** The whole thing is **preposterous! "TODAY YOU WILL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE."** Thorn-crowned, blood-drenched **crackpot - Mary's Boy - God's Son?** - flattened out on the face of a **cliff -- crucified - strung up - nailed down -- do you catch the preposterousness? - "JESUS SAVES"? -- the absurdity?**

audacity

This is the absurdity of a God who adorns the **sky at sunrise and sundown** with **colors** no decent painter would dream of placing **together on** the same **cavass** -- the absurdity of **a God Who keeps breaking back into the muck and**

dirt & filth & grime

mire of this world - the **preposterousness** of a God who was **born into a cave** only to **grow up** and **die between two crooks.**

And yet when all is **said and done,** there is nothing more **profound,** nothing more **precious** and more **crucial to say** finally than just, **"Yes, it is true! He does save - Jesus!"** He **gives life** -- He **makes whole** -- and if you are **bold** enough and **humble** enough to ask Him, **You will be with Him in Paradise!** This is the **absurb confession** of the **Christian Faith!** "I BELIEVE IN THE RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD AND THE LIFE EVERLASTING!"

If it is **not true**, then all our religion is **vain** and **total futility**. It is **not Good Friday** at all -- **but Black Friday**! If it is **true**, then it is we who are the **crackpots** and the **preposterous of the earth**, if we do not **draw near** to **Him Who Saves**. **How?** **I do not know**, except that **wanting** to draw near we have **already drawn nearer**.

How do we draw near? Through the prayers **not** just that we **pray in Church** -- God knows -- **but through the anything, anywhere prayer that is "Remember me, even though I don't remember you."**

And if we are **willing** to **draw near** in whatever idiotic **way we can** -- following Him even on **clumsy** and **reluctant feet** and without knowing more than **two cents worth at first** about **what** is involved in **following Him** -- **little by little** we **find out** then that **to be where He is - to go where** He **goes** - to **see through Eyes** and **work with Hands like His** -- is to **feel like ourselves** at last --- is to become **fully ourselves at last** and **fully each other's at last** - and even more than that: **TO BECOME FULLY HIS AT LAST.** **"REMEMBER US, O JESUS, FOR THY MERCY'S SAKE."**

Amen.