Let’s read from Luke 23:33-43 (NRSV). This is the story of the crucifixion of Jesus:

When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, “Are you not the Messiah? 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 have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.” Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” He replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

For most of the Gospel accounts, we see the attractive side of Jesus: healing people, protecting the powerless, going after and saving the lost, feeding the hungry. In very few instances do we find Jesus struggling or in sorrow. But today, we do as we recall the crucifixion.

In this text, we find Jesus among criminals dying nailed to a cross after being rejected, betrayed, and despised by his enemies and even friends. Death by crucifixion represented the most shameful and worst way to die. It meant that God (or the gods) had cursed you. The place called The Skull was a place of death. **The sight is that of a horror movie; worse, you could smell the rotting flesh if you were there.**

For Jesus, this moment was like going to a funeral, except that the people coming were not family and friends joining to celebrate a loved one’s memory and life. No, **this was a death-bed among enemies.** Instead of being surrounded by people who loved you, you were surrounded by people who cursed and despised you. And if this was not bad enough, you were not even dead yet, but you were the main attraction, expected to become the last punchline of mocking and humiliation.

It is in this context that we find Jesus’ last moments***.* Jesus is weak, collapsing, tired, miserable. In the eyes of his enemies, he did not die a hero but a criminal. In the eyes of his friends, he did not die in victory but in shame and defeat.**

However*,* **Jesus was not weak, nor was he a victim.**He freely, willingly, deliberately took the journey to the cross.It was not Judas Iscariot’s betrayal, or the hate of his enemies, or the power of the Roman Empire, or Pontius Pilate who brought Jesus to the cross. **What brought Jesus to be crucified before them all was his love for them, his very own enemies*;* he brought himself to this occasion because of his love for each one of us.**

This is the story that gives all people everlasting hope. This story answers the questions many of us have asked: Does God care about me? Can I be saved?

Let me recall, “when they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.” The answer to our questions is right there, among the condemned. **Yes, our healing, love, and grace are found among the criminals.**

Let’s be clear, these vile men had no “good works” to rely on—they knew that. They had no high standard of morality—they were wicked men. There is no way that either could say they had earned God’s favor. They were thieves, lawbreakers, arrested, tried, and condemned. **There was no time for good works, getting baptized, becoming a member of a church, or anything like that—if salvation was to be attained in such a way.**

However, for one of them, the time he had left was enough to mutter one of the most consequential and profound words we read in the Gospel: **“Remember me.”** He had a change of heart. He recognized that Jesus was, in fact, the Messiah, that he had the power to help him. And instead of mocking him, he rebuked the other thief and challenged him with these words: “Don’t you fear God since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.”

This thief felt his guilt, but his faith was also unhesitating, full, confiding. He was able to see beyond the broken humanity of Jesus and recognize him as the king, the Messiah. And he did not ask for a favor, for blessings, even for mercy. In his misery, he dared not to ask anything but to be remembered.

How can any person have such faith in such a dark and hopeless moment? Yet here we have the poorest of them all finally understanding in the grimmest hour his need of God mercy and grace. A true miracle in the making.

And Jesus heard the cry of this poor soul, honoring the exercise of his faith by answering, “I tell you the truth, you will be with me in paradise.” The thief asked Jesus to remember him, but Jesus goes further by saying in essence, “you will be with me, you will not only be in my thoughts but in my presence. You will be home.”

Jesus took this broken, cursed man, a thief that was dying for his crimes, beyond the gates of hell and straight with him to paradise.

**How effortlessly can divine grace raise the vilest, rudest, and worst of us by a simple request just to be remembered?**

This is an amazing moment for all of us. This man found what he had missed his whole life. He found hope where there was only death, pain, and despair. He had made choices throughout his life that pushed people away; he had already been abandoned. He was the shame of his family, yet no one had experienced what he did at that moment. This is love and grace; this is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. **It is the gift only God can give, one that we can’t earn or win.**

After hearing this story, what do you think are the answers to the questions of: “Does God care about me? Can I be saved?” **What do you think?**

I tell what I would say: This man next to Jesus is proof that none of us have to get our lives together for God to accept us as a child. Quite often, we think that God would reject us because of our past (or even present), but we fail to realize that **God does not ask us to be ready just to be willing to accept mercy and grace.**

What does this mean to us? It means that no matter where you are right now in your life, where you are coming from, or what you have done, **hope can find you because is looking for you.** Even if you find yourself feeling forsaken, abandoned, doubtful, confused, or scared to death, **hope will find you.** All you need to do is to be willing to welcome God’s love for you. **You can say like the thief, “remember me” or anything else: “I am here,” “Help me,” “I need you,”** and you will have access to all God’s goodness, love, grace, forgiveness, and hope through Jesus Christ.

This is good news for all of us. **Today, I invite you to trust your life to God, no matter how marred it may be. Hope is looking for you. Don’t be forgotten, be remembered.** Amen.