

A failed revolution.  
 Crosses erected by the roadside.  
 Sad people leaving the city behind.

That's the scenario for the end of our movie of the month, *Spartacus*. That's also the same scenario for our Gospel lesson today from Luke, the story of the Road to Emmaus.

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I want to talk about *Spartacus*. But I will also be juxtaposing it with the Road to Emmaus from Luke 24. It's going to be about "compare and contrast." Because *Spartacus* can give us insights into Emmaus, into the way Jesus' followers were feeling after his Crucifixion, and on the day of his Resurrection.

The movie *Spartacus* is based on a real-life character of the same name who led the slave revolt that is known as the "Third Servile War." It took place almost exactly 100 years before Jesus' death. Spartacus led the biggest and longest slave revolt in the Roman Republic. As depicted in the movie, Spartacus's slave-army defeated numerous Roman units that were sent against it. The revolt lasted for 2 years until it was quashed by several Roman armies converging against it. Ancient Roman historians claimed Spartacus was killed in the final battle, though his body was never found. In the movie, Spartacus is shown among 6,000 captives who were crucified to end the revolt.

*Spartacus* shows a slave uprising in Italy a century before Jesus' time. But what we tend to miss is that a similar uprising is what the Romans were afraid of in Jerusalem. Not only was Jesus executed by the Romans out of fear that he was claiming to be the new King of the Jews. Jesus' own followers were expecting him to lead some sort of armed military uprising.

That's what the title Messiah was all about. The Messiah was expected to be a new King like David who would serve as a military commander.

And military uprisings were not new in Israel.

There was one when Jesus was a toddler.<sup>1</sup> 2,000 rebels were crucified outside Jerusalem. Only 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the number compared to the end of *Spartacus*, but still significant.

There was another revolt when Jesus was an adolescent. It ended when its leader was executed.<sup>2</sup>

There was another 15 years after Jesus' death.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 4 BC, suppressed by Roman governor Varus

<sup>2</sup> 6 AD, by Judas the Galilean

<sup>3</sup> c 45 AD, by Theudas

There was another revolt, a huge one 40 years after Jesus' death.<sup>4</sup> The Jews held out for 4 years until the Romans were able to re-capture Jerusalem and destroy their Temple. And there were some scattered Jewish units that held out for another 3 years after that.

There was another about 100 years after Jesus' death.<sup>5</sup> By that time the Romans were so fed up they kicked the Jews out of Jerusalem and turned it into a Roman city. Israel wouldn't be under Jewish control again until 1948.

So Jesus' followers were expecting him to follow a well-trodden military path, a standard playbook. They expected Jesus to lead the people in revolt to free them from domination by the Roman Empire.

It's right there in our Gospel lesson today. It's also our 6<sup>th</sup> Stained Glass window. On the Road to Emmaus the two disciples who are walking home from Jerusalem to Emmaus are dejected because Jesus was executed. These disciples thus assumed that Jesus' movement had ended.

Yet, the Resurrected Jesus walks up to them and engages them in a wonderful and lengthy conversation. But they don't recognize Jesus. So, ironically, they tell Jesus all about Jesus. They tell how Jesus was arrested and put to death. And the clincher is this statement: "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." In other words, 'We had hoped he was the Messiah. We had hoped he was the one who would eject the Romans from our land and make our nation free and independent again.'

The expectation was that the Messiah was going to be a conqueror, that the Messiah would come as a warrior and king. The fact that Jesus was executed as a common criminal, the fact that Jesus suffered and died, meant to them that there was no way that he could have been the Messiah. In their interpretation of the Old Testament, what happened to Jesus meant beyond any shadow of a doubt that he was NOT the one they'd been waiting for.

And so, the two disciples are sad as they are making their trip to Emmaus. They truly believe that their hopes, their dreams, their future lay dead at the foot of the cross. Spartacus's revolt ended with his death. Jesus' sad disciples thought that Jesus' movement was just as dead.

But Jesus is in fact the only one who truly understands what it really means to be God's chosen, God's Messiah.

So Jesus, walking along basically tells them, 'No, no, you've got it all wrong.' He says, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!" And then he asks them, "Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?"

And then, Luke says that Jesus explains scripture to them. Jesus speaks of all the scriptures concerning himself, beginning with Moses, and moving to all of the prophets.

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<sup>4</sup> 66-73 AD, the First Roman-Jewish War

<sup>5</sup> 132-136 AD, the Bar Kokhba Revolt

We don't know exactly what Jesus said. But from the context, we can make a good guess. Jesus apparently shows them that the OT points in many places to a different picture of what God intended his Messiah to be.

The Messiah wouldn't be a general. Instead, he would be God's Servant who would suffer, a Messiah who would give his back to be beaten, a Victim who would be rejected and put to death. Contrary to their expectations, Jesus shows them in their scriptures that the Messiah would come not as a conquering king but as a suffering servant.

In other words, Jesus apparently tells them that the events of Holy Week were not unexpected. Instead they were very much the way they were supposed to be. These things occurred just as they had been intended from the very beginning.

Jesus was not acting and did not intend to act like a military conqueror. Just 3 weeks ago on Palm Sunday, we read Matthew's account of the Passion. When Jesus was arrested, his disciples pulled out swords to get the Revolution going. One of them even cuts off the ear of one of the High Priest's slaves.

And Jesus says, point blank, " Put your sword back into its place."<sup>6</sup>

And then Jesus adds, "Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?"<sup>7</sup>

What we miss in this statement is that the Roman army only stationed 4 legions in the region. And they were a solid week's march away from Jerusalem, even if they could be notified immediately. But Jesus could instantaneously call up an army that was 3x larger if that was God's plan. But it wasn't God's plan. God wouldn't bring salvation through a military uprising.

In other words, Spartacus fought with a sword, lost the battle, and died.

Jesus died, and won the battle through his resurrection.

But I want to return to the movie, *Spartacus*, to highlight a few other things. There are some moments that are congruent with Christianity.

One is the emphasis on human dignity. Slaves were a commodity in Rome, and their lives were expendable. They lived to bring pleasure to their masters. *Spartacus* plays with this theme a lot.

There's one scene where a female slave is brought into Spartacus's cell. And his captors are ogling them from above ready to watch them procreate.

And Kirk Douglas as Spartacus says, "I'm not an animal! I'm not an animal."

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<sup>6</sup> Mt 26:52

<sup>7</sup> Mt 26:53-54

And Jean Simmons who plays the female slave says, "Neither am I."

And then Spartacus asks her, "What's your name?"

And she replies, "Varinia."

They both have names. They both have an identity. And later during the rebellion they will form a relationship based on love and mutuality. Eventually they will have a son together.

In Christianity human dignity and freedom are of high value. And *Spartacus* displays this poignantly.

There's another wonderful scene early on where Spartacus tries to strike up a conversation with one of his fellow trainee-gladiators.

Spartacus asks, "What's your name?"

Draba replies, "You don't want to know my name. I don't want to know your name."

Spartacus says, "Just a friendly question."

Draba says, "Gladiators don't make friends. If we're ever matched in the arena together, I have to kill you."

And yet, a part of the overarching theme of the movie is the way that these slaves do form relationships. They form not only an army, but also a community. They begin to look out for and care for each other.

Spartacus highlights this relationship in a speech where he calls his fellow slaves "brothers." He says,

"I'd rather be here, a free man among brothers, facing a long march and a hard fight, than to be the richest citizen of Rome, fat with food he didn't work for, and surrounded by slaves."

Christianity was also known as a movement where strangers became each other's brothers and sisters in Christ. And in a Roman Empire that was still cruel and dog-eat-dog, the early Christians were characterized by the high degree by which they cared for each other. Even their enemies would say, "See how these Christians love each other."<sup>8</sup>

One of the most famous and stirring scenes in *Spartacus* shows the depths of love for his new community. When Spartacus and 6,000 of his fellow soldiers are captured, the Roman general promises that their lives will be spared if they will turn over Spartacus. And just as Spartacus is about to reveal himself to save all of his comrades, they stand up and claim one by one, "I'm Spartacus." 6,000 men are ready to die with Spartacus rather than to betray him.

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<sup>8</sup> Tertullian, *Apologeticus* ch. 39, sect. 7

Earlier in the movie it was "You don't want to know my name. I don't want to know your name... Gladiators don't make friends." Now, 6,000 brothers are ready to die for each other.

On the Road to Emmaus, Jesus' two followers learn that Jesus didn't just die. He died, and yet was raised from death.

And they recognize Jesus in the breaking of the bread. That would become their movement's sacred meal, proclaiming Jesus' death and resurrection.

Spartacus's movement ended with his death.

Jesus' movement was just beginning at the time of his death. And his followers can share in the benefits of his death and resurrection by being baptized in his name. And they can share in his death and resurrection every time they break the bread and share the cup.

And as we do so, we take on his identity more and more.

The captured slaves could say, "I'm Spartacus."

But we can say,  
"I'm part of Christ's body. I'm taking on his identity. I'm learning to be more and more like him."

The movie *Spartacus* ends with a failed revolution, and crosses erected by the roadside, and sad people leaving the city behind.

On Easter Day, the walk to Emmaus may begin with disciples thinking it was a failed revolution. But it turns out it was a triumphant Resurrection.

There may have been crosses erected by the roadside. But Jesus' cross and Jesus' tomb were empty.

Sad people left the city behind. But their sadness was ended when they encountered the Risen Jesus. And they ran back to that city in joy.

"The Lord is risen indeed," they said.

And he is made known in the breaking of the bread.