

Missing the resurrection (Acts 1:15-17, 21-26; Psalm 1; 1 John 5:9-13; John 17:6-19)

History is written by the winners, and Judas didn't win.

by [John Killinger](#) in the [May 16, 2006](#) issue

Imagine being Judas and having your name become synonymous through the ages, in every country on earth, with an act of treachery. That would be heavy, wouldn't it?

Years ago, when my wife and I saw Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd-Webber's rock musical *Jesus Christ Superstar* on a London stage, the cast came down and talked with the audience during the intermission. We met the actor who played Jesus and the one who played Judas, and were told that they switched parts every few nights so other members of the cast wouldn't get to hating them. "Before we did this," they said, "everybody ostracized the one being Judas."

Apparently the early church was quick to build a case against Judas—Pentecost occurred less than two months after Jesus' death—and to vilify him for betraying the Master. Matthew 27:3-10 cites a tradition that says Judas repented of his act, brought back the 30 pieces of silver and flung them down before the chief priests and elders, and they in turn bought a field with it for burying the poor. In Acts, Peter says that Judas was the one who bought it, and the Greek word he uses implies that it was a small farm, not a mere field. The very disparity in accounts suggests a confused rush to besmirch the character of the man who had once been treasurer of Jesus' little band.

It is easy to join in the near-universal condemnation of Judas. Look at the other texts in the lectionary readings: "Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers" (Ps. 1:1). "Whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life" (1 John 5:12). Jesus prayed and thanked God that not one of his disciples had been lost "except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled" (John 17:12). We can hear the drumbeat of condemnation in all of these readings.

Interestingly, though, there are efforts afoot today to rehabilitate the figure of Judas. The same revisionist spirit that animates the *DaVinci Code* crowd is taking another look at the Zealot who may have led the soldiers to Jesus with the intention of forcing a cataclysmic denouement and a speedy arrival of the heavenly kingdom. What if Judas actually had more faith in Jesus' preaching than the other disciples did, so that he believed this would happen and was cruelly rewarded for it by his jealous confrères?

The truth is, we will never really know the truth, because history is written by winners, and Judas, in this case, was a loser. Like military officers slain in battle, he had no chance to defend his reputation.

The reference to Judas in our text, however, is incidental to the transaction of a bit of business: because Judas had dropped out of the picture, it was necessary to appoint an apostle in his place. We have to remember how important the symbolism of Jesus' having 12 apostles was; in the church as the new Israel, the apostles represented the 12 tribes of the kingdom.

The qualifications were simple; actually, there was only one. An apostle had to be someone who had been with Jesus from the beginning of his ministry, when he was baptized by John, and could now witness to his resurrection. There were two candidates: Joseph (aka Barsabbas or Justus) and Matthias. The Spirit was invoked, lots were cast and Matthias was appointed to take the place "in ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place"—*his own place* being generally interpreted as "the grave" or "hell."

Many of us Protestants have lost a sense of connection with the apostolate. We have our bishops and moderators and princes (or princesses) of the pulpit, but we have very little sense of or appreciation for the importance of apostolic succession. Does this mean we have also lost the significance of appointing leaders who can be witnesses to the resurrection? When was the last time, as we were installing church leaders, that we asked the question, "Have you truly, genuinely experienced the resurrection of the Lord?"

Perhaps we should institute some annual ritual, based on this scripture in Acts, by which we memorialize Judas's supposed act of perfidy and the selection of new leaders who have walked with Jesus in all aspects of his earthly ministry, from baptism to ascension. We could make it a kind of Jungian festival, in which we

explore the darker sides of our own personalities, asking where we have betrayed Jesus in any way, and then, asking forgiveness, recommit our lives to faith in the resurrection. Such an occasion might possibly reglvanize our congregations.

Judas, we speculate, didn't witness the resurrection. Too bad. What a story it would have been: "Slain leader appears to betrayer, embraces and reinstates him. Betrayer becomes ardent witness for leader."

Ironically, that's what happened to Peter, isn't it? He went on living, postperfidy, and it was his story, not Judas's, that became part of the church's heroic living legend. That's life.

How do we preach this text? With wonder and passion, of course. But it is clearly the resurrection that makes the difference here. Those who believe in the resurrection are transformed by it, and those who don't—well, they're hardly changed at all, are they?

It's as simple as that—and, in the case of the unchanged, as tragic as that.

Ministers who are themselves motivated by the resurrection will have no difficulty at all finding a way to preach the text.