

**We stand forgiven at the cross**  
**Impact Music festival, Church of the Cross,**  
**Hayfields, Pietermaritzburg, 18 March 2018**

*The festival covered the last week of Jesus leading up to Easter. Readings and summaries of every day were followed with singing to that day's topic. The whole festival had as topic "We stand forgiven at the cross", which was also the message of this sermon, focussing on Good Friday. It is based on Mark 15, 33-41 and the connected passages from the other Gospels.*

Dear sisters and brothers,

I am sitting on a train - a nice window seat, facing forward. Perfect. I had been warned that the train might be very full due to high demand, so I arrived early. Fortunately this was the departing station of the train, and the carriage was almost empty when I came, so that I could choose the best seat. Now it is quickly filling up, and people battle to find a place. At the next station more people get on. Most have to stand. One new passenger stops right in front of my place, looks on a piece of paper, then at something above my seat and says: "Sorry, you are sitting on my seat!" How could I have known? Then he points at the little display stating: Reserved from Heidelberg to Hamburg. Every German traveller should know that. But no-one told this guy from South Africa about it! And so I have to get up, make room, and join all those standing, for the rest of the four hour journey!

This was the last time that I made such a mistake. From then on I always made sure that I chose seats that stated: "empty"

Once, when I knew that the train would be very full, I decided to reserve a seat as well. Lo and behold, when I got there, someone was sitting on my seat. Should I be South African polite and stand? Or should I pretend to be an ordinary German and show him my reservation?

I paid for the seat, I should get the seat! So I did show him the reservation, and he did, mumbling and grumbling, vacate it so that I could sit down. "Platzreservierung" - reserve your place, your space.

Occasionally it also works to your disadvantage: The place that you reserved was left filthy or wet by the previous occupant, or it is facing in the wrong direction, or your neighbour had a good helping of garlic and was having some more on the trip - or a combination of all these. Then you sit there with your reservation and wish that you could move elsewhere - but the train is full.

In Mark 15 we read about the most uncomfortable, unwelcoming, unwanted

place imaginable - the cross, the brutal torture and execution apparatus of the Roman empire.

This cross also has a sign "Reserved" - complete with name: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews" (John 19,19)

He was surrounded by a crowd of people. In the distance were a few who were mourning and crying because it was their beloved Jesus who hang on that cross. Close by were those who had "reserved the seat for him" - priests, scribes, theologians. They laughed and mocked. Don't you like your seat, your place? Come down from the cross if you are who you say you are!

When he cried "Eli, Eli, lama asabtani" they could not decipher the words from this Jesus, who had been hanging on the cross for six hours by now, and thought he was calling Elijah. Laughter again. Let's see whether Elijah will come and set him free!

Why did Jesus not come down? Why did Elijah not come in a flash of lightning and set him free?

Was it the "Reservation sign" that kept him there - the fact that it was His Cross, His space?

Actually - No. Because, when I look closely I see that this sign is covering another one. The other one states for whom this place was originally reserved. This sign carries my name! He insisted to take my place, to travel this terrible journey on my behalf. The amazing thing is: Whoever looks at it closely will see his or her own name on that reservation sign.

Had Jesus come down as the mocking crowd challenged him to do, each one of them would have ended up there.

Dear sisters and brothers, when we look at our lives, and are honest before God and ourselves, we know that the sign on the cross says: Reserved for me! Deserved by me! But then I realise: My seat is taken, my place is occupied by Jesus Christ. Not by mistake, not because he did not know the system. He chose my place so that I can have His seat of forgiveness and life!

As we stand there, at the place of our guilt and failure, at the seat of misery we see: My terrible place is taken. I am forgiven! I may live! My name on the cross is covered by His name. My life's journey becomes bearable, no, better still, becomes enjoyable because he took the place that makes my life miserable! I stand forgiven at the cross!

Amen

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