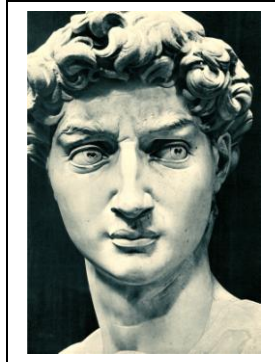


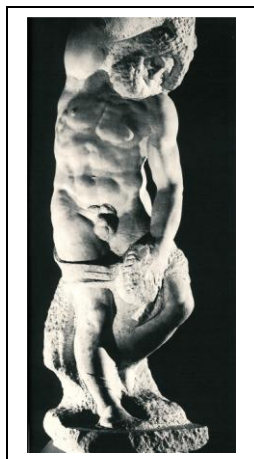
# Michelangelo at the Academia

In the heart of Florence, Italy is the Academia Museum. At one time the building housed an art school and the Hospital of St. Matthew. Today it houses art treasures from the Renaissance. The crown jewel of the collection is Michelangelo's 500 year old sculpture of David. It was carved from a massive 18 foot block of marble that had been rejected by other more experienced artists. The sculpture depicts the young man David waiting for the giant Goliath to attack. He stands poised with his left hand holding a leather sling shot draped over his shoulder and his right hand cupping five smooth stones. He looks determined, confident, and courageous as he calmly waits.



In the Biblical story, we are told that David was a shrimp of a shepherd boy who against the counsel of his older brothers, volunteered to fight the Philistine giant. Michelangelo, however, depicts David as the eternal giant of faith, the embodiment of youthful vitality, and the symbol of masculine virility. Michelangelo was only 24 years old when he completed this breath-taking work and it immediately established him as a genius in the art world.

The sculpture stood for 373 years in a plaza outside the Medici Palace where it weathered dirt, grime, and pigeon poop. Early on some disgruntled peasant who was helping to sack the Medici Palace threw a bench through the window. It struck David, breaking off his arm. In 1873 the city fathers decided to move the original masterpiece to the Academia for safe keeping. Other Michelangelo works were gathered and in recent years a new wing was built. To increase the sense of expectation, the curators have put David towards the end of the museum tour. Visitors are escorted into a long anteroom or corridor called The Corridor of Prisoners. At the far end of the hall stands David in a domed rotunda illuminated by light. In the darkened hallway are four massive blocks of stone each 8 to 9 feet tall and called the Four Prisoners or Four Captives. They



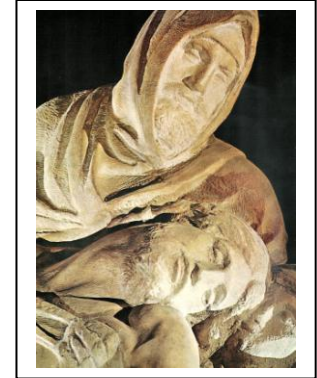
depict four unidentified men trying to break free from their stone entrapments. Their twisted incomplete bodies writhe in struggle as they seek their freedom from the marble.

Michelangelo was sixty years old when he originally designed these sculptures for the tomb of Pope Julius II in Rome, but for some unknown reason they were never finished. They ended up resting in a grotto basement in the Boboli Gardens in Florence for four hundred years. But now they stand as guards to the David giving example of the technique that Michelangelo used in his craft.

For those of us seeking to live as people of faith, I think this collection of sculptures has another message. Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner says that

in this life all symphonies remain unfinished. I think Michelangelo might have changed the metaphor and said, *“In this life, all sculptures remain unfinished.”* As the writer of the book of Hebrews attests, we are pilgrims and sojourners built for another world. Our deepest longings and desires can’t be satisfied on this planet. Everything and everyone remains unfinished like his four prisoners. In this life we writhe in our humanity for freedom from sin and finiteness. But some day we will see our Savior face to face and take on a solid completeness depicted in David. Some day we will move from the darkness of our own corridor of prisoners to the light of a new body and a new vitality. Some day we will traverse from death among the tombs to life with our Lord.

This was a journey that Michelangelo longed to take in his later years. One of the last sculptures that he did when he was in his eighties was of Nicodemus embracing the limp body of Christ. The highly polished works of his youth gave way to the more rough hewn and humble creations of later years. The sculpture is a picture of compassionate union between the Lord Jesus and one of his followers. Michelangelo chiseled his own face to represent the face of Nicodemus. It’s a realistic picture of the Christian life. We hold on to Jesus living with pain and sorrow as we joyfully wait for resurrection and the life to come.



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