
John 19:17-18a

³⁸ Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus.

Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus,
but secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders.
With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away.

³⁹ He was accompanied by Nicodemus,
the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night.

Brothers and sister in Christ, as we gather this night of Good Friday, we gather at a time when Jesus' body is laid in the tomb.

Reflecting on Jesus' death and his lifeless body should not make us uncomfortable. We all will die at some time, unless the Lord returns first. The two who showed loving respect for the Lord's body remind me of funeral directors, embalmers, and hearse drivers I've met in ministry. Caring people, competent in their profession of meeting with family members at a trying time, trusted for funerals and burials, doing work that few people want to do.

Jesus took our place completely, even to the indignity of being a corpse that had to be washed, embalmed, and buried.

The Scripture tells us that the Lord Jesus Christ, our Saviour, was made like us in every way. He was in every way a true and authentic human being, apart from sin, and he lived a real human life, a life such as we must live ourselves. And, then, he died. His death, to be sure, was like no other human death in one way – it served to redeem the people of God, a people no man can number, and grant them entrance into eternal life. But, in its physical nature it was as any other human death. As a result of the trauma he had suffered, the dehydration, perhaps the asphyxiation that resulted from the position of the body on the cross, and, no doubt, as a result of the tremendous stress placed upon his body by the emotional agony through which he passed there – an agony no human being has ever really understood – his heart gave out and he died. The breath departed from his body, his brain ceased all its functions, everything came to a complete and final stop.

And, then, some good men, friends of his, buried him in that same way they would have buried any man or woman they loved and admired as they had come to love and admire Jesus of Nazareth.

Joseph of Arimathea was, apparently, a wealthy man, with some political pull; after all, he got an immediate audience with Pilate and asked to take away Jesus' body, and Pilate gave him permission. But don't you wonder what he feared? A prominent, wealthy man, yet he feared the religious leaders.

Perhaps if he defied them he would lose position, or business? Perhaps worse?

And then there is Nicodemus, who joins him – a member of the Sanhedrin, he had come to Jesus at night to ask questions and try to understand. Now, he joins in Jesus' burial, brings spices for wrapping the body. And so, Joseph and Nicodemus wrap the body in linen with the spices, and they take it to a garden where there was a new tomb (other gospels say the tomb belonged to Joseph) and they laid Jesus in the tomb. John says they laid him in this particular tomb because it was getting close to sundown and they had to place Jesus in the tomb quickly.

Joseph has a corpse in his hand. Why is he doing this? Why is he exposing himself for a dead person who can't fulfil everything he hoped? What motivated him? Well, you might say, humanly speaking, that he was motivated by his love for Jesus. He just didn't want to see His body thrown away, didn't want to see His body dishonoured, didn't want to see in the dump with all the criminals. Maybe he wanted the dignity of an appropriate burial. Sure he did. He even gave Him his own tomb - tomb, we find out, no one had ever been in so that He could have a burial like the burial of a king, in an unused tomb.

Tombs were used and reused and reused and reused and reused, so how did that work? You put the body there on a shelf. A tomb hewn out of rock might have a number of shelves. Put the body on the shelf. When it decomposes down to the bones, you collect the bones, put them in a box called an ossuary, take the box somewhere else, put that - and put the next person who dies on the same shelf. That's how they did it.

Joseph was, then, going to give Him a shelf in a tomb where no one had ever, ever been. That's kind of a burial fit for a king. So maybe it was all that love and affection. Maybe it was a sense of guilt that he hadn't opened up and acknowledged that he was a disciple of Jesus Christ, but he kept his distance. Maybe all that is true. Certainly he was motivated to give honour to Jesus. So from a human perspective, there were things working on him that made him do this.

In some ways we can imagine what Joseph and Nicodemus were thinking when they cared for the body of Jesus. We all love and care for someone...

But in another way we can't even comprehend what they were thinking, as they held the body of Jesus Himself! What was their the sadness of those moments, and the price they would pay for public disclosure of their love for Christ...?

It is interesting that neither the Gospels nor Book of Acts reveal they ever played a further role on the Sanhedrin or as disciples, but certainly the Cross served as a watershed moment in their lives, and they walked no longer by fear with one leg stuck in the fear of the past and one in their present life of faith in Christ. From this point forward their faith was revealed and they no

longer could hide in the shadows caught between two lives. Their identification as disciples of Christ certainly changed their lives into the future. It could no longer be hidden that they were the ones who took the body down from the Cross.

The events of Jesus' last days had divided and rent families and communities. Death -- any death -- leaves a community grieved. This death -- a violent, dividing, brutal death -- was enough to leave everyone decimated. Grief tore through Jesus' family and friends like a volcano, leaving them terrified, alone, and spent.

But even in the thick of the pain, a tiny seed of unification started to grow. While Peter and the other disciples were reeling from their loss, two others -- Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, and Nicodemus, a Pharisee -- lovingly cared for the body of Jesus. Peter and the other disciples would probably not have been able to persuade Pilate for the favour of removing his body, but respected leaders of the community were given the privilege. Despite the rending of the community, this small act of care was one of the first to begin to rebuild the community -- a new community unified by love for Jesus. People from different sides came together because they loved him and they loved what Jesus stood for.

What we see here, however, is that, while all of the disciples dispersed after the death of Christ, these two men, with much to lose, were given faith (new life) as Jesus died on the cross; they were given new eyes to see (and know) Jesus. What did they realize? On the cross, Jesus was rejected so that they could have an ultimate sense of acceptance. On the cross, Jesus gave up His status as King so that they could have ultimate status as kings; the Apostle Peter calls us a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2). Jesus became empty, destitute, and forsaken on the cross so that His people could have the fullness of new life in Him.

Jesus is lying in the tomb. As Peter and John say in Acts 3:15, "you killed the Author of Life." The Maker is dead. The Prince of Glory lies lifeless in the cold dark tomb. This is the final Sabbath of the old creation, of the old Covenant. But with Christ's triumphant resurrection, a 'new covenant' truly begins...

We live in a society today when death is portrayed in movies and television with all sorts of blood and gore and people are unmoved by it. But on the other hand, in reality, in our day to day lives, we go to great lengths to avoid seeing death. If the average person even saw a steer killed and butchered they would probably be so sickened that they would swear off meat forever. We have an unrealistic perception of death, and perhaps because of that, we have an unrealistic perception of life.

Christ told His disciples in John 14:19, "After a little while the world will no longer see Me, but you will see Me; because I live, you shall live also." This is the hope of every believer. Or in other words, it is the hope that even if we

were to die we would one day, because of Christ's mastery over death, live again not in agony but in the blessedness of His presence.

Nothing proclaims the frailty and utter humiliation of our human condition as powerfully as a corpse. We don't want to look at it. It scares us. It is one thing to say that "dust we are, and to the dust we will return," but to see a dead body, even the body of your kith and kin, is very solemn. The death and burial of the Lord Jesus was another example of Christ's deep humiliation. We often speak of Christ dying for us. Christ tasted death for us. Christ removed death's sting from us in this extraordinary way, by letting it penetrate his own heart and not letting it come out.

Can this hope help us to get through the ups and downs of this life? How could we not! This life, no matter what we may experience in it, is simply a stepping-stone to something better. For we know that whatever we may experience in this life is simply a stepping stone to something far better, the blessedness of Christ's presence. Can we count on this? Absolutely! This is what Christ promised us and we can trust this promise. Why? We can trust this promise because He has so convincingly demonstrated His power over death. we can know for sure that Jesus rose again only if we also know that he was actually once dead and buried. Once we do know this, we never need to worry again about what will happen when we die. Because Jesus has gone into the grave ahead of us, he can lead us out again and on to eternal life. What a glorious gift! Amen.