

God Moves... to the Grave

April 19, 2019

John 19: 31-42

³¹ Since it was the day of Preparation, the Jews did not want the bodies left on the cross during the sabbath, especially because that sabbath was a day of great solemnity. So, they asked Pilate to have the legs of the crucified men broken and the bodies removed. ³² Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who had been crucified with him. ³³ But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. ³⁴ Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out. ³⁵ (He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth.) ³⁶ These things occurred so that the scripture might be fulfilled, "None of his bones shall be broken". ³⁷ And again another passage of scripture says, "They will look on the one whom they have pierced." ³⁸ After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so, he came and removed his body. ³⁹ Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. ⁴⁰ They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. ⁴¹ Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden, there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. ⁴² And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

Last night as we gathered for Maundy Thursday worship, hands were washed as we entered the sanctuary for worship. This reminded us of how Jesus knelt to wash the disciples' feet. We also remembered the institution of the Lord's Supper as we celebrated Holy Communion. Our passage tonight picks up with the next part in the story as Jesus is tried, beaten, and crucified. In our passage tonight, we began with Jesus predicting His betrayal and desertion by His own. Then Jesus predicted Peter's denial and then moved to the garden to pray. It was there that Judas betrayed Jesus and that the Lord was arrested. During the time at the high priest's house, Peter indeed denies Jesus. Jesus appears before Pilate, then Herod, then Pilate again – each time being found innocent. Finally, the crowd drives Pilate to concede, to turn Jesus over for crucifixion. Let us pray...

Tonight's reading, known as the passion of the Christ, is a hard read. It is the story of how a man was unjustly accused, was tried for crimes that He did not commit, was beaten, whipped, and mocked, and was put to death by being nailed to a cross. Tonight, as we read this story and gather for worship, we are drawn into the circle. For me, the scene that unfolds on the cross is much like being in a hospital or hospice room when a person peacefully draws their last breath and exits this life. There feels like there is a finality to the scene on the cross.

Tonight, we join with those who have not turned away. We join those who walk with Jesus through this horrendous experience. We join those who have seen it all unfold and now wait for the inevitable. After caring for His mother's well-

being, Jesus gets a sip of wine vinegar and then simply says, "It is finished". With that, John reports, "He bowed His head and gave up His spirit". Jesus takes a peaceful exit from this life. He exits on His own terms.

Now, we begin with the cross. Jesus has completed what He came to do - the lifeless body hangs on the cross. As those there did that afternoon, we certainly join them in prayer and meditation upon what has happened. As those there that afternoon undoubtedly felt, we too can feel discomfort and unease, and are made to sit with our grief and pain. And as I am sure some of them did, we also invited to linger. We are invited to remain present and to allow all the emotions and thoughts to come and go, to return and to depart.

Then, in the story, time passes. For most, the excitement of the crucifixion is over. It sounds odd to say, but it is true. The "show" is over, so the jeering crowds, the curious onlookers, they depart. And most of the followers who loved Jesus have also all drifted away. The three bodies hang on the crosses. It is a desolate image. It is a hard reality to envision. In the moment, it seems like a time without hope.

It is at this point that Joseph of Arimathea goes to Pilate to ask for Jesus' body. We know only a little bit about Joseph. We know that he *"was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews"*. In recognition of Jewish preferences, the body should be taken down because the Sabbath is about to begin. Pilate grants Joseph permission. Here Nicodemus steps once again into the story. Nicodemus' presence seems odd because he is a Pharisee

and a member of the Jewish ruling council. But it is evidence of Nicodemus' growing faith and belief in Jesus.

We recall first meeting Nicodemus in John 3 when he went under cover of night to talk with Jesus. Here he hears the message that he must be born again. It is a message that Nicodemus wrestled with. A few chapters later Nicodemus utters a brief, half-hearted defense of Jesus as the chief priests and Pharisees debate what to do with this Jesus. But it is evidence of his continued wrestling with Jesus' invitation to be born again. We do not know for sure, but perhaps Nicodemus was one of those cheering on the parade route a few days earlier on Palm Sunday – just a face in the crowd. As a Pharisee, he was surely present among the crowd a few days later that shouted, "Crucify Him"! As Nicodemus has been drawn closer and closer to Jesus, those shouts must have stung.

In our passage tonight, we read that it was Nicodemus who brought the spices and the aloes to prepare Jesus' body for burial. Like Mary and the perfume she used to anoint Jesus' feet, Nicodemus was giving an offering to Jesus. After Joseph and Nicodemus take down the body of Jesus, they care for His body. In verses 41 and 42 we read, *"Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden, there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there"*.

Through the brief glimpses into his life, we see Nicodemus' faith growing, his love of Jesus deepening. Nicodemus is now at the point that he is willing to step forward to care for Jesus' body. Perhaps Nicodemus' story is not unfamiliar to us. We can all think back to the first time we really wondered who this Jesus was. Was He more than the Bible stories? Could I really have a personal relationship with Jesus? So, we began to question and to seek answers, to wrestle with ourselves. As we learned more and came to love Him more, we too came to a point of timidly defending Jesus and our faith in Him. It may have seemed unimportant at the time, but upon reflection we see it as another step forward on our journey of faith. Eventually we get to the point in our faith where we find Nicodemus at in today's story: we are willing to stand and be counted as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

I leave you here tonight, to consider your faith and what Jesus means to you. The body has been laid in the tomb. God has moved Jesus to this point. Just as the disciples did, in just a little while we will return to our homes to ponder the events of the last couple of days, to consider the service tonight, to consider that Jesus dies for each of us. As we continue in worship, we turn to the Reproaches or the laments of Jesus. Amen.