

April 18, 2025
John 19:38-42

Good Friday
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Discipleship in Action”

“And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.”

Potter’s Field is the burial ground in New York City for unclaimed bodies, persons who die alone with no one to mourn them, no one to honour their death, and no one to place flowers on their graves. Some of the people buried in this place die with no means of identification; even coroners are unable to give a name to the unknown person brought into the city morgue. Others die alone in their apartments, or on the subway, or in a back alley; while they have a name, they have no one who comes forward to claim their body nor anyone the authorities can contact to make proper arrangements. While cemeteries can by nature be solemn places, there is a sadness to Potter’s Field that is unmatched in any burial ground, since those who are buried there die alone and forgotten.

When our Lord Jesus Christ is crucified on this day at Golgotha, crying out “*it is finished*” before he bows his head and gives up his spirit (John 19:30), one matter remains: who will claim the body of this man who once attracted thousands of people to hear his teachings and witness his miracles? Who would step forward to make proper arrangements for his burial, especially since his closest followers are nowhere to be found? Who will take care of the burial rituals that a man such as Jesus deserved when one of his closest followers had betrayed him, another has denied knowing him, and all have abandoned him? While there were some women who witnessed his suffering and death, would such a patriarchal society allow them to take on a role usually reserved for male members of society? Would the body of Jesus suffer the fate of so many people in our time whose remains are never claimed; would Jesus be buried in Jerusalem’s equivalent of Potter’s Field?

Readers of the Fourth Gospel may have pondered this prospect when the Evangelist presents his readers with a surprise in the form of two persons who appear, seemingly out of nowhere, to claim his earthly remains. The first is Joseph of Arimathea, a person who appears in each of the four Gospels to claim Jesus’ body:

- “When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who was a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be given to him.” – Matthew 27:57-58.
- “Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.” – Mark 15:43.
- “Now there was a good and righteous man named Joseph, who, though a member of the council, had not agreed to their plan and action. He came from the Jewish town of Arimathea, and he was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.” – Luke 23:50-52).

In identifying Joseph as a “secret disciple,” John links him with the Jewish authorities who had come to Philip and asked “*sir, we wish to see Jesus*” (12:20) but who, because of their fear of losing their political power and position within the community will not confess their faith in Jesus (“*But because of the Pharisees they did not confess it, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved human glory more than the glory that comes from God*” (12:42-43). At Jesus’ death, however, Joseph is willing to make his faith public, even going to the Roman authorities to request Jesus’ body for burial; when “*Pilate gave him permission, [Joseph] came and removed his body*” (19:38).

The second person who claims the body of Jesus along with Joseph of Arimathea is Nicodemus, who John introduces earlier in the Gospel as a Pharisee who “*came to Jesus by night and said to him, ‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God’*” (3:1-2). Nicodemus is an ambiguous character in the Fourth Gospel, showing interest in Jesus but never confessing his faith in Jesus Christ as Lord; when he questions Jesus’ teaching that “*very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above*” (3:3), Jesus’ response is incredulous: “*Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?*” (3:10). Nicodemus disappears from the Gospel narrative but makes a surprising reappearance where he abandons neutrality and secrecy and acts out of love and reverence for Jesus. As Mary had earlier brought an excessive amount of perfume with which to anoint Jesus (12:2), Nicodemus brings “*a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds*” (19:39), symbolizing the love that he and Joseph have for Jesus.

In coming forward to bury Jesus, Joseph and Nicodemus show themselves to be true disciples of Jesus, those who love Jesus and live out that love as he has instructed

his disciples at the Last Supper: *“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another”* (13:35). This love is further enacted by the care and dignity with which Jesus’ body is prepared for burial: *“They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews.”* (19:40). The combination of spices and linen burial clothes was normally accorded only to people of wealth or prominence (such as Lazarus who, when he comes out of the tomb at Jesus’ command, appeared with *“his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth”* – 11:44). The pristine condition of the garden tomb also underscores the dignity of this burial: *“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”* (19:41). These acts of dignity and respect for Jesus’ body are in stark contrast to the motivation of those who wished to mutilate the bodies of Jesus and the two criminals who died at his side to further hasten the deaths of these condemned persons: *“So they asked Pilate to have the legs of the crucified men broken and the bodies removed”* (19:31). Instead, the Evangelist reports that *“because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.”* (19:42).

By burying Jesus’ body, Joseph and Nicodemus perform a culturally significant act of respect and faithfulness to Jesus. Burying the dead was an important service of love in Jewish piety; conversely, lying unburied was a great source of shame for the deceased:

- “Then [Tobit] called his son Tobias, and when he came to him, he said, ‘My son, when I die, give me a proper burial. Honour your mother and do not abandon her all the days of her life. Do what ever pleases her, and do not grieve her in anything. Remember her, my son, because she faced many dangers for you while you were in her womb. And when she dies, bury her beside me in the same grave.’” – Tobit 4:3-4.
- “So now, since I am the only son my father has, I am afraid that I may die and bring my father’s and my mother’s life down to their grave, grieving for me – and they have no other son to bury them.” – Tobit 6:15.

Through this public act of piety, Joseph and Nicodemus make known their relationship with Jesus. In some ways, claiming his body and giving Jesus a dignified burial may appear to be a small act in comparison to what Jesus will entrust to his apostles after his resurrection (*“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”* – Acts 1:8), but Jesus has taught that no act is too small or insignificant if it is done out of faith and love for Jesus. In Mark’s

Gospel, Jesus teaches that *“truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward”* (Mark 9:41), and in Matthew Jesus teaches that small acts of kindness to others are as if they were being bestowed on Jesus himself:

- “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me ... Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” – Matthew 25:34-36, 40.

Even as we mourn the death of Jesus on the Cross on Good Friday and remember the discipleship of Joseph and Nicodemus, we know that the grave was not the final destination for Jesus, nor is it the end of his story. Indeed, if the story of Jesus of Nazareth ended with his burial in the garden tomb, then it would not be Gospel, for the good news of the Christian faith is that while our Lord was *“crucified, died, and was buried ... on the third day he rose again from the dead”* (Apostles Creed). Joseph and Nicodemus are never heard from again in the Gospels, but in their act of loving and faithful discipleship they give us a means of understanding what it means to be a follower of Jesus, and that even a seemingly small act of kindness done in the name of the Lord can make a tremendous difference for the sake of the Gospel.

- “For John the burial is the end of the crucifixion; those who are present are not women who will bear witness to the risen Lord on Easter, but men who partially accepted Jesus during his ministry but have been brought by his death to show their love for him.” – Raymond Brown.

There is no indication in this story that Joseph and Nicodemus marked Jesus’ grave in any fashion; but this does not mean that his tomb became the equivalent of a Potter’s Field, where he was laid to rest as yet another unknown person whose body was unclaimed and abandoned. The women saw and knew where these faithful disciples had buried Jesus; on the first day of the week, they would return to the tomb – only to discover that not only was his body not forsaken, but it was no longer present in the place where he was laid. The fact that the new tomb was in a garden is an indication that as gardens are places of new life, there will be a new beginning in a place that appears on this day to be the ending for our Lord and for those who follow him. On Good Friday, Jesus Christ has died and is buried; but his story does

not end in the tomb where Joseph and Nicodemus laid him. For them and for all faithful disciples, “*death is not the end. The end if life.*” (Frederick Buechner).

Amen.