

The Burial of Christ

Matthew 27:55-66

The Bible emphasizes the burial of Jesus Christ: “For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3-4). Thus, the Apostles’ Creed: “He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.” Death is a sure thing, and the time before resurrection matters (1 Thess. 4:13). Even when we can’t see how God will bring life out death, He will, and so we must not forget in the dark what we know in the light. There is time before resurrection, and it’s a time of hope.

Summary of the Text

After the centurion and those with him see Jesus die and confess He really was the Son of God, Matthew informs us that many women including Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee’s sons watch from afar (v. 55-56). In the evening, Joseph, a rich man of Arimathea who had become a follower of Jesus, asks Pilate for His body, takes and wraps it in clean linen, lays it in his own new tomb, and rolls a large stone over it (vv. 57-60). Mary Magdalene and the other Mary witness this as well (v. 61). The following day the chief priests and Pharisees gather with Pilate, remembering Jesus’ promise to rise, and therefore advise him to secure the tomb (vv. 62-64). Pilate offers his guard whom that take to secure, seal, and stand watch at the tomb (vv. 65-66).

An Unlikely Disciple

The shepherd has been struck, the sheep scattered, and the apostles are nowhere to be found. Who will take care of the body of Jesus? John’s Gospel tells us Joseph had been a secret disciple of Jesus for fear of the Jews (Jn. 19:38). He had good reason to be because he was a prominent member of the Sanhedrin (Mk. 15:43). Regardless of whether he voted for it or not, Joseph was a member of the Council that condemned Jesus to death. What in the world is he doing now? Loving Jesus and unknowing fulfilling the word of God through Isaiah: “He was taken from prison and from judgment, and who will declare His generation? For He was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgressions of My people He was stricken. And they made His grave with the wicked—but with the rich at His death because He had done no violence, nor was any deceit in His mouth” (Is. 53:8-9).

Joseph decides to stand up and do something for Christ whom he had followed quietly until this point. Taking the body of Jesus would expose him to the hatred and likely violence of the Sanhedrin. Usually the Romans would not bury but rather expose a crucified corpse to the elements and animals. The Jews buried executed criminals in a public graveyard apart from family. Joseph is claiming Jesus as his family, and really more than family (cf. Matt. 10:37). He gives his new tomb and wraps Jesus in clean linen. Although a rich and important leader in Israel, he does the dirty work of handling the battered corpse of the Christ. He takes, wraps, lays, cuts (previously), rolls, and goes away, six actions in service of his Lord. Jesus will rise from this place having completed His priestly work of atoning for the sins of the world. Joseph is an unlikely disciple doing an unlikely thing and it’s unlikely at this point that he understands his role in the history of salvation. It makes no difference. His newfound loyalty, courage and faithfulness sets the stage for resurrection. He is from Arimathea, the same town (“Ramathaim”) as Samuel who anointed David as king (1 Sam. 1:1; 16:13). As one commentator said, Joseph is a kingmaker. Christ can work with the widow’s might or the rich man’s million. The point is to put what you have at His disposal and watch Him work. We often have no idea what will come of our actions, but God multiplies the impact.

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Faithful Women

Women have been present throughout Matthew's Gospel (Matt. 14:21; 15:38; 9:20-22; 15:21-28; 26:6-13). At the crucifixion and resurrection, they play a prominent role, witnessing and relaying the good news. Mary from Magdala, on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, had seven demons cast out of her by Jesus and was part of a group that provided for Jesus during His ministry "out of their resources" (Lk. 8:2-3). She is mentioned twelve times in the gospels, making her one of the most well known. The last time the mother of the sons of Zebedee was mentioned, she was angling for her sons to rule at Jesus' right and left in His kingdom (Matt. 20:21). This was right after Jesus predicted His betrayal, crucifixion, and resurrection, and He instructed her and the twelve that whoever desires to be great among them must become a servant just as the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many (20:26-28). She got the message and clung to Christ through His crucifixion and burial.

The "other Mary", the mother of James and Joses, is named at the crucifixion and burial (vv. 56, 61). When people were astonished and offended in Nazareth by what Jesus said and did, they asked "Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? Is this not the carpenter's son? Is not His mother called Mary? And His brothers James, Joses, Simon, and Judas?" (Matt. 13:54-55). It appears that this is Jesus' mother. If it's not, we are necessarily reminded of her along with "Joseph." We also know Mary was at the cross where Jesus said, "Woman, behold your son!", and to John, "Behold your mother!" (Jn. 19:26-27). Jesus' stepfather Joseph is likely not alive but the names Joseph and Mary signal that Jesus is about to be born again, to become "the firstborn from the dead" (Col. 1:18), the "firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Cor. 15:20). The tomb is a womb and the second Adam is about to receive the breath of life from the Father and walk out. The new community of the church gathers and watches, ready to witness this birth and proclaim the good news. Charles de Gaulle once said that graveyards are full of indispensable men. When men are there, women play indispensable roles in the kingdom of God. And when the men are not there, they are to be faithful anyway like Mary and Mary and Zeb's mom.

Futile Resistance

We've seen how unimpressive the disciples have been, scattering and lying and betraying Jesus. The idea that they will take His body and setup a false religion is laughable, which is probably why Pilate doesn't think to prevent it himself. To all appearances, Jesus has failed: "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree" (Gal. 3:13 cf. Deut. 21:23). The chief priests and Pharisees are nervous anyway, and fulfill Psalm 2 by trying to resist the Lord: "Why do the nations rage, and the people plot a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against His anointed" (vv.1-2). The Pharisees believe in resurrection and take Jesus' claim to rise more seriously than the disciples; they want a tightly sealed tomb and armed guards. The only way Jesus could conquer would be to resurrect, and if He does that, who can stop Him? "He who sits in the heavens shall laugh; the Lord shall hold them in derision. Then He shall speak to them in His wrath, and distress them in His deep displeasure: yet I have set My King on My holy hill of Zion" (Ps. 2:4-6). The gospel is deep comedy. Sealing the tomb and posting guards—the first witnesses to the resurrection—is a funny moment, but the deeper comedy is Christ giving His life to defeat death forever. The quiet sadness that followed His death was the staging ground for the resurrection life that began at Easter and continues to advance in the world to this day.