

Dead and Buried

John 19:31-43

Preached April 5, 2009 by Dr. Dwight Kilbourne

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. Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who had been crucified with him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out. (He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth.) These things occurred so that the scripture might be fulfilled, "None of his bones shall be broken." And again another passage of scripture says, "They will look on the one whom they have pierced." 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. Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. 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.

Introduction. One morning I received a call that no pastor wants to hear. The six-month old child of a couple in the church had died of SIDS. I immediately went to the hospital to be with this couple. I will never forget the scene of seeing a grieving young mother holding the lifeless body of her

child and the father with tears streaming down his face. For what seemed to be an eternity, I sat with that couple as they clung to the child's body. That day is forever seared into my mind.

During those moments and the days that followed, there was such enormous pain. The reality of death hurts. There was that ever persistent question, "Why?" Was there any purpose for this tragedy? In that hospital room, I had come as one to be present and give comfort but to also be an agent of hope. Was there any promise ahead for this family?

More than a decade later, there is still pain and I imagine at times tears. But out of that soil of tragedy grew a couple of Jesus disciples whose love for God, their family, their church and community has grown deeper and stronger. God blessed them with a second beautiful and bright daughter who is now 11 years old. The church was in the midst of a building program at the time of the first child's death and named the children's wing after the child, Eden. It is called "The Garden of Eden."

Most of us here know the realities of death because we have experienced and felt it when someone we loved died. We are attuned to its pain. This morning as we take time to think about Jesus' death and burial, we cannot escape its pain. But I want us to try to move on to see the purpose and promise found in his death as well.

The Pain. Dying on a cross was a cruel way to be executed. People have theorized that some crucifixion victims died of asphyxiation because they eventually lost the strength to lift the body so as to relieve the pressure on the chest in order to breathe. Some may have died of hypovolemic shock, severe loss of blood to the degree the heart could not pump the blood and vital organs failed.

After Jesus and the two criminals had been on the cross for a few hours, evening was approaching. This factor

heightened a level of sensitivity among the religious faction of the Jews because they did not want bodies left on crosses overnight. This was especially true on that day because it was the onset of a special Sabbath. According to Deuteronomy 21:22-23, the bodies of those executed by hanging on a tree were to be removed before nightfall so the land would not be defiled.

It seems to be rather ironic to hear of the religious sensitivities of the religious people in the story of Jesus' crucifixion. Earlier they refused to enter Pilate's house because they did not want to be ritually unclean (18:28). They were so concerned about their external rules but ignored the matters of justice and condemned an innocent man. The gospel writers seem subtle but powerful to highlight their hypocrisy.

To prevent the defilement of the land and the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to break the legs of those being executed in order to speed the death. Without the support of one's legs, he would soon not be able to breathe. When the soldiers came to Jesus, they saw he was dead. So instead of breaking the legs, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear.

Readers are given no reason or clue why the soldier did this. We might speculate it was to see if Jesus was "truly dead" by testing his reflex to the spear or maybe it was another cruel act. It appears on the surface to be an odd detail John includes.

When the soldier thrust in the spear, the writer tells us, blood and water came out of the wound. Again this eye witness detail seems to be unique. Perhaps the spear pierced either the pericardial sack (around the heart) or the pleural space that surrounds the lungs where the serum had collected causing the flow. (Thanks to Dr. David Wendt for information regarding this process.)

As most of you know, it is not uncommon for some to question the

historicity of many of the biblical events, including the death and resurrection of Jesus. As one reads the gospels, it seems clear each evangel anchors Jesus' death in historical fact. The details and sequence of events may vary but they claim his death was real. The perspective of executioners, witnesses and morticians testify of his death. The death is real and the pain is felt. During this Lenten season, several of our worship services have been designed so our hearts could feel the pain of Jesus' death.

Purpose. Why did Jesus die? It is one thing to feel the pain of Christ's death but it is another to understand and to appropriate his death. John moves his readers beyond the historical reality of death to its theological significance. He gives his readers clues of the purpose of Jesus' death.

Sometimes people dig for meaning and make interesting conclusions. A non-native Tennessean sent me this story: In New York during a dig, copper wire was discovered at the 100 year level of the soil. It was concluded New York had a telephone system 100 years ago. A few months later, a dig in Los Angeles found copper wire at the 200 year level. They concluded LA had phone service 200 years ago. After hearing this, an amateur archeologist in Chattanooga dug down to the 300 year level and discovered nothing. He concluded that Chattanooga was already wireless 300 years ago.

Well, I would not regard John as an amateur theologian but a master. What he points toward here in this text gives great meaning to Jesus' death. He gives meaning to the details he included in the text.

John refers back to the detail of Jesus' legs not being broken and claims this was to fulfill the scripture that none of his bones would be broken. In the OT, there are a couple of places to which John may be referring. One is in Psalm 34:20: *He keeps all their bones; not one of them will be broken.* The psalm is speaking

of God's care of the righteous. The second place is found in the instructions regarding the Passover lamb that none of its bones are to be broken (Exodus 12:46).

Dr. Gail O'Day (who was with us a couple of years ago), in her commentary on John, claims the author is making a connection of Jesus to the Passover lamb. She suggests John is pointing us toward how God protects us (blood on the doorpost at the Passover) and leads us into freedom and life (NIB, IX, 834). I believe she is right.

But I think the suggestion of John's gospel at this point takes us even deeper. If we allow the richness of the text to carry us, we can hear profound things of the atonement of Christ. In Jesus' death, our relationship with God is restored.

John clearly connects the flow of blood and water from Jesus' side with a passage in Zechariah 12:10 that reads: *"they shall look on the one they have pierced."* The prophecy speaks of the mourning that comes when the people kill their king. The text of that particular prophecy ends with some intriguing words: *On that day a fountain shall be opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and impurity.* (Zechariah 13:1)

A fountain is open that brings cleansing from sins. As I meditate on those words, I think of passages such as Ezekiel 36:25 which speak of being sprinkled with clean water and having our sins cleansed. I think of Hebrews (9:22) which reads that without the shedding of blood there is not remission of sin. I believe here John is pointing us to the reality that through Jesus' death and suffering, the amazing love of God flows and brings forgiveness of our sins. Through his death, we are cleansed from our sins. No longer do they defile us or our relationship with God.

The Promise. For more than 30 years, I have served as a pastor. During that time, I have conducted the funerals of several hundred persons. At the graveside, I usually read the

words that speak of the mortality of each human but the hope of all Christians: *earth to earth, ashes to ashes, looking for the general resurrection and the life in the world to come.* Those words speak of the reality and finality of death but the hope of promise beyond. When we stand at a grave we need the hope of promise.

When Jesus had died, his body needed to be buried. On to the scene stepped a man by the name of Joseph from Arimathea. Mark and Luke describe Joseph as a member of the Jewish council who had not given approval for Jesus' execution. Matthew and John describe him as a disciple. John says he was a secret disciple. He went to Pilate to ask for the body of Jesus so he could give it a proper burial. John reintroduces Nicodemus as assisting Joseph in burying the corpse. Nicodemus had come to Jesus at night to ask questions.

Here we find a message of hope and promise. In the death of Jesus, two men step forward to affirm their trust and love for Jesus. Up to this point they had done so in secret. In burying the body, all would know of their affection for Jesus. They did this at high risk to their positions on the council. Their faith and love became greater than their desire for position.

Many of us find by looking at the death of Jesus an assault on our own importance and position. Christ's humbling himself in death often spurs us to humble ourselves before him and before other humans. The lesser things of life that have held us, loosen their grip in light of the shadow of the tomb of Jesus.

The burial of enemies of the state throughout history nearly always belittles the enemies. If the state buries the person, it is often in a "pine box" with no fanfare. But here in John's gospel we see a different picture. These private disciples now public, give Jesus an honorable burial. They wrap his body in linen, which was generally reserved for just those who were wealthy. They anointed the body with a perfume mixture weighing

nearly 100 pounds. That is a lot of perfume.

I remember when my sons entered their teen years and their interest in girls was growing more intense, Patty and I could hardly stand to ride in the car with them. Their cologne was overwhelming because of how much they used.

One hundred pounds of perfume was an extravagant amount to use on Jesus' corpse. John's description of the burial points us to an extravagant love these disciples had for Jesus. As we think about the expressed extravagant love of Joseph and Nicodemus toward Jesus, we can't help but see the extravagant love that Jesus has toward us. (Greater lover has no one than this, that he lay down

his life for his friends.) Out of Jesus' death and burial, there is the promise of his extravagant love for us.

Several chapters before our text of the morning, John begins to set up the final scenes of Jesus' life. In what is a statement of foreshadowing the promise that lies ahead, John shares these words of Jesus: *Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.* (John 12:24)

A little over a month ago, I planted a few tomato seeds in some soil in a container I have placed near a sunny window. For about 10 days there was no life. But one morning I noticed a small green sprout breaking out of the ground. By evening, two leaves

perched atop of a tiny green stem were soaking in the life of the sun. That lifeless seed now was alive. In about 2 ½ months, it will be bearing fruit.

As Jesus was laid in the tomb, few if any realized that the seed had been planted. That which was dead seemed lifeless. But something was preparing to stir in that seed. Easter was coming.

Thank God. Easter is coming. The seed was planted. Resurrection life springs forth.

Invitation. There is pain, purpose and promise in Jesus' death. May you by faith understand and accept the purpose of his death and enjoy forever its promise.