

Evergreen Presbyterian Church

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10/27/24

Sermon Title: The Burial

Sermon Text: Matthew 27:55-66

Matt. 27:55 ¶ There were also many women there, looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him,

Matt. 27:56 among whom were Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

Matt. 27:57 ¶ When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus.

Matt. 27:58 He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him.

Matt. 27:59 And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud

Matt. 27:60 and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had cut in the rock. And he rolled a great stone to the entrance of the tomb and went away.

Matt. 27:61 Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.

Matt. 27:62 ¶ The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate

Matt. 27:63 and said, "Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise.'

Matt. 27:64 Therefore order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last fraud will be worse than the first."

Matt. 27:65 Pilate said to them, “You have a guard of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can.”

Matt. 27:66 So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard.

Main Point: In his burial, Jesus experienced the completion of his humiliation for his people, receiving their death and being buried in their grave.

Outline:

1. The Precious Sacrifice
2. The Perfection of Humiliation
3. The Polarized Witnesses

Introduction

When I was a teenager, I’ve mentioned before that I was an atheist. And in my worldview at the time, I looked out at the trees and the sky, and the way I saw it all, it was empty, it was dry, and it was lonely. Even other people I just saw as gatherings of Atoms and neurons that some day would go dark. It was a very bleak worldview and a very lonely one – one that Christ eventually overturned and showed me how wrong I was.

But when I was still an atheist, I started reading Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*. Like a lunatic I read *Lord of the Rings* before I read *The Hobbit*. I know. Insane. Anyway, here I was, this atheist kid in what I thought was an empty universe, but as I read the book, I would drive my pickup to school and go out into the countryside and look at the trees (yes, we had trees in Kansas) and I would imagine that elves lived there. I would imagine that there were holes in the ground where Barrow Wights haunted the landscape. And I think I did that because my heart really yearned for there to be more in this world than just empty skies and darkness and nothingness. Deep down I saw some truth in this supernatural world of Tolkien’s that I secretly yearned for, even if I was in some denial.

I didn't really believe these creatures were there, mind you, but I had this need to believe they were there, and it kept my imagination alive. I think this sustained me during a rough season.

But it's interesting – as I think about that, I really felt the need for the supernatural. I felt a need for something beyond all of this, and in my imagination I indulged it. I scratched that itch through fiction. And after I became a Christian, I got really into reading C.S. Lewis for several years, and I came across this quote from Lewis that helped me make some sense of my earlier behavior. Here is what C.S. Lewis said:

“Now the story of Christ is simply a true myth: a myth working on us the same way as the others, but with this tremendous difference that it really happened: and one must be content to accept it in the same way, remembering that it is God's myth where the others are men's myths. The Pagan stories are God expressing Himself through the minds of poets, using such images as He found there, while Christianity is God expressing Himself through what we call 'real things'.”

At first, I was offended that Lewis would call the story of Jesus a myth in any sense; I always associated “myth” with something that wasn't true and was only a story. I realized in time that Lewis meant “myth” not in a negative sense, but in a very positive sense.

Something about this resonated (and still does) with the nerd inside of me. The atheist kid who indulged his imagination in order to cope until I discovered the truth that I had been resisting when I was younger.

Don't let the language of “myth” here make you think that Lewis is saying it didn't happen. In his mind, he's *exalting* it by calling it myth, because he's saying not only did it happen, but in the Gospel, God is also bringing something into the world that we previously only *hoped* for and *wished* could be true. He's saying not only did it happen, but it's wonderful, and it meets the needs and yearning of our hearts.

What C.S. Lewis had been wrestling with in his own conversion was this sense that Christianity really set forth the thing that he had always hoped and believed about the world, the desire he had for a world that previously he believed couldn't

possibly be true. If you read Lewis' book *Surprised by Joy*, he talks about this wrestling, how those in his life had been impressing on him that yes, the Christian story was wonderful, but that it was also actually true. Listen to how Lewis recounts the moment when he realized this:

“I know very well when, but not how, the final step was taken. I was driven to Whipsnade one sunny morning. When we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and when we reached the zoo I did. Yet I had not exactly spent the journey in thought.”

What am I getting around to with all of this?

Simply this: that what we read here today is amazing, but it also really happened. When Jesus died, he really died. He didn't just die in the imagination of a few disciples who wanted to remember him well, but he really died in space and in time. His disciples didn't go away and just say, “Well now we have an emotional itch that needs to be scratched,” and then sort of dream up something extraordinary, and boom – now we have this passage today. No, it really happened.

Because unlike the mythology of Tolkien in *Lord of the Rings*, this is a story that is amazing, and it has the sort of power that I found by thinking about elves and dwarves and all that, but with this important caveat: that this story was actually true. That it really happened.

And that is a huge difference. And we know that it didn't just happen in the disciples' minds because there are so many witnesses here, because it all happens in real time and space, because it induces all of these reactions from people who don't want it to be true, who are skeptical, and some of whom are outright hostile. You also have the disciples taking actions that make no sense unless they really saw these things.

In other words, the death and burial (not even to speak of the resurrection) of Jesus moves people, and it moves the world in a way that a strong man moves people aside in a crowd: it asserts itself on reality regardless of our opinion or our own tastes or judgments.

And so today, I want us to learn three things from the burial of Jesus that we find in this passage: first, the precious sacrifice. He was dead and laid in the grave, but what does that mean? Second, the perfection of humiliation. His life was one long extended humiliation, and the burial was the capstone of that humiliation. And then third, the polarized witnesses. I want us to think about what it means that so many people with so many opinions all bore witness to his burial here.

So, the sacrifice, the humiliation, and the witnesses. That's what we'll focus on today.

1. The Precious Sacrifice

First, we have the precious sacrifice.

Again, as we talk about this remember that we're speaking of real events in real space and time. Joseph of Arimathea comes and is very insistent that Jesus ought to receive a proper burial. He rises to the occasion when other disciples flee. But why is this burial even necessary, and what does it imply has just happened?

Well, we saw the answer last week, didn't we? He suffered horribly. He gave his cry of dereliction ("Why have you forsaken me?"). Though perfectly innocent, he experienced a loneliness and sorrow that no other human being could ever quite understand.

Here is the truth: **that body that Joseph is laying in this newly hewn out tomb is proof that a sacrifice has happened.**

In the Old Testament system, the lamb would be slain, and then laid on the altar. And when that happened, the lamb didn't get off of the altar and run away, because its blood had already been shed and it had no life in it. Instead, the body of the lamb stayed put because the sacrifice had really already been made. The life was now gone. The blood had been spilled on the altar already. The death had really happened. And because of that sacrifice, the worshiper was meant to go free, knowing that his sins had been laid upon another on his behalf. And God spent more than a millennia showing humanity that he accepted these sacrifices.

The lesson was clear: **God accepts sacrifices and makes atonement for sinners by the sacrifice of another.** All of those animal sacrifices were just types and shadows, though (as Micah pointed out in Sunday school last week) pointing to what has just happened here in the narrative: Jesus laid his life down as an atonement for sin, truly removing the dividing wall of separation between God and those who put their faith in Christ. And this moment, as Joseph cradles this body and lays it in this tomb is proof that Christ gave himself completely and perfectly to the very end until there was no life left to give.

Now here *Joseph* is; he lays the body down in haste before the Sabbath begins. And when he does, like the sacrifices of old, the body does not move.

The head is still.

The chest does not rise or fall.

No breaths are drawn.

The heart does not beat.

There is no brain activity.

Jesus is emptied of life.

All of it has been given as a sacrifice.

All of it has been laid down for others, because he loved them to the very end.

The tomb Jesus is laid in becomes a testimony that Jesus really did surrender his life as an atonement for sin. Because his body laid there, we can know that the sacrifice really did happen, and sin really was punished in him.

But the precious sacrifice isn't all that the burial teaches us about.

2. The Perfection of Humiliation

The Second thing that the body in the tomb reflects is the perfection of humiliation.

What do I mean? Well let's talk about humiliation first. Humiliation is the act of being humbled, of being reduced. Think of John the Baptist's statement "He must increase, I must decrease." That was John saying, "I should be humiliated, and he should be exalted." He is more important than me.

Well, all of Jesus' life was one of humiliation, because he constantly gave and gave of himself and went lower and lower for the world he came to save.

The very moment he was incarnate in the womb of Mary was a moment of humiliation, because he came down from where he was at the heights of glory to life an embodied life. He lowered himself for us. He was humiliated. He united his godhood with manhood in his person and entered into our lowly dirty, broken, fallen world. And that was only the beginning of his humiliation.

But the rest of it was humiliation, as well. When we think of a humiliating experience, we think of embarrassment. But that's not what humiliation means here. This is humiliation in the sense of lowliness, of lowering himself. And the only thing lower than being born and suffering throughout his life was dying.

Because here he is, the God of the universe, creator of all things and all of life. And his life is now gone – extinguished. In the grave. He went from sustaining all things to depending on his earthly mother and father, to eventually not even being able to sustain his own breath any longer. It was a long life of humiliation, but his death was the ultimate humiliation. The perfection or completion of his life of humiliation. But there is no more humiliation after this. This moment of being laid in the grave for three days is the end of Christ's humiliation forever. Everything after this is glory.

Let me say a word about that.

In three days, he will be raised up. That's next week's passage. But that being raised up, to use Paul's letter is him being "vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory" (1 Tim. 3:16). When Paul says that his resurrection is "vindication," what he means is that in his life, and during his death, he was accused of so many things: of being a sinner, of being abandoned by God, of being a liar and a blasphemer. People

walked by and shook their heads. They all assumed that because this horrible thing was happening to him, he must have been guilty.

And Paul says that after the burial comes glory. After the burial comes resurrection. But that resurrection is done through the Spirit, and it is a vindication. It means, he was actually innocent of those things he was accused of. He wasn't guilty. He was dying someone else's death. He was hanging on someone else's cross. He was bearing someone else's sins. And so the Spirit raised him up, and in doing so He vindicated Christ, and showed the world his innocence.

You see, the burial is the end of his humiliation. The perfection of his humiliation. But next comes vindication and glory.

Think of the manner of his burial here.

Jesus died and was buried as all human beings are. And in spite of his humiliation, there is one noteworthy aspect of the tomb: it was a *new* tomb that – for lack of a better term – was not “corrupted” by death yet. It is a new tomb, and will forever remain a new tomb. Jesus' tomb is not Adam's old tomb of death, but Adam's new tomb of life. The new Adam has transformed death forever and stolen its stink and sting.

3. The Polarized Witnesses

Third, the burial of Jesus forces upon us this issue of these polarized witnesses.

Think about all of the witnesses to the death and burial of Jesus here. There are really three kinds of witnesses in this passage: those who are eager, those who are indifferent, and those who are hostile.

*These women are what we might call the willing and **eager witnesses**.*

The women are the first witnesses of the death and burial of Jesus. There are so many things we could say about these women, but let me just mention this: they followed Jesus where the men wouldn't. The only man we are told comes to the cross of Christ is John. Beyond that, it appears that all the other men have gone into hiding. They are certainly distant. It appears they sat in a closed room while

Christ bled and died. But in verse 55 we're told that there were "many women" there. They knew what was happening, but they still followed and they stayed and looked on. Think of what it took to do that.

The Roman writer Seneca described crucifixion as "the most pitiable thing in the world." He even asks this question: "Can any man be found willing to be fastened to that accursed tree?" It's crazy, right? The idea that someone would ever be willing to be crucified.

Romans couldn't *stand* to see someone crucified, let alone think about it, even. The ancient Roman statesman, Cicero, said that the "terror of the cross" was so horrific, the citizens of Rome did not want the *thought* of crucifixion to even enter their minds. They would clasp their hands over their eyes and ears rather than see its victims writhing in agony or hear the screams of those suffering the excruciating pain of the cross.

Chuck Quarles says, then, that "These women endured the long hours of watching Jesus suffer, surely not because of any morbid curiosity, but because their devotion to Jesus would not allow them to walk away."

These women loved him. Even if it was too horrible, they had to be there. The fact that these women were willing to be there, to suffer with him, to refuse to leave him be... in the face of the fear of his male disciples should, if nothing else, stand as a humbling truth. Calvin says it this way: "It was in the highest degree disgraceful for his chosen witnesses to withdraw from that spectacle on which depended the salvation of the world. Because of this, when they afterwards proclaimed the gospel, they *must* have borrowed from women the chief portion of the history."

Paul, in one of his letters, tells the church to be brave, bold, and strong, and to "act like men." There is this calling on men especially to be brave and bold. It appears from the Scripture that it's one of our chief characteristics as men, such that to "act like men" means to be brave. But just *being* a man doesn't make one manly. And you see that here. The disciples gave into fear and failed, and so the women did what the male disciples would not: they bore witness to the horrible moment.

These women are the eager witnesses.

You might think of the pagans in this narrative as the indifferent witnesses.

The centurion (27:54) and Pilate (27:58) both serve as pagan and secular witnesses of the death and especially the burial of Jesus, reminding us that the sacrificial death of Jesus took place in real time and space around a diversity of real people. Thomas Weinandy says it like this, speaking of their acknowledgement of his death and burial:

“Thus Jesus’ death objectively enters the annals of factual history, just as the saving effects of his death enter into human history—the sins of historical men and women can be forgiven and they can be transformed, in this historical world and within their historical lives, into holy children of God by the in-breaking of the Holy Spirit into the world of time and history. The kingdom of God is not an ethereal mythological kingdom, but one that is firmly rooted in this present world, for it is here on a rocky crag outside the walls of Jerusalem that Jesus’ cross was firmly planted, and upon that cross he died” (*Jesus Becoming Jesus*, 394).

These pagan witnesses are indifferent in the sense that they see all of this as a Hebrew squabble. They don’t care who Jesus is, or what he stands for, so long as the trouble he represents goes away. And yet their indifference means that they bear witness to the truth of what happened. They may not know *why* it happens, but they never seem to question *that* it happens.

Now, we have another kind of witness here, and that is the Jewish authorities.

In verse 62, following his death, they call Jesus an imposter, and argue that his disciples would try to steal the body if the authorities don’t prevent it. And that’s because these are the hostile witnesses.

They testify to several things here:

- 1) that he predicted his resurrection,
- 2) that they actually understood much of his teaching, and
- 3) that he actually did die and was laid in this specific tomb.

They are also eyewitnesses that everyone was watching the “right tomb” all this time.

These men are hostile. And in their hostility they end up affirming the very thing they seek to deny. Notice this: they go to Pilate, and in verse 63 they seek to prevent the spread of a message that Jesus has risen, and at their behest not only is a guard of soldiers placed at the tomb, but a seal is placed on it for the entire weekend, ensuring that no funny business takes place on Friday or Saturday.

But by putting the guards and the seal in place, when Jesus rises, they have actually eliminated those things they sought to prevent from being possible explanations for what takes place. What they’ve done is ensured the authenticity of what is about to happen in our reading next week, because they’ve eliminated the other possibilities. It can’t be the wrong tomb, because everyone including the leaders knows which one it is. It can’t be that the disciples stole the body because there was a seal and a unit of guards there all weekend. By their actions they eliminate every other possibility. These hostile witnesses end up being the most powerful eyewitnesses to the empty tomb.

When John Chrysostom preached on this passage 1600 years ago, he pointed this out: that in making these arrangements, these men have actually fallen into God’s trap. God calls every bluff that they make here. By opposing Jesus, they end up making what has happened even more certain. This is often the way that God works: he takes his opponents and uses their opposition to his own advantage.

Think about this biblical pattern: young David defeats Goliath by God’s power. Do you remember what happens next? He decapitates Goliath with his own sword.

This is what God is doing here to the religious leaders: he slays them with their own sword. They make the argument for the empty tomb by working to ensure that there is no humanly possible way that it *can* be explained!

Their efforts here are an authentication that this really did happen.

Conclusion

Here is a question to consider: why any witnesses at all? Why didn't God just raise Jesus up, seat him at his right hand, and just tell the disciples, "Jesus has been raised up"? It would have been true, after all. And since it's God speaking they would have been obligated to believe it.

But consider this: the witnesses anchor this event to reality – to our world.

The witnesses are a resounding proof that this was not just in someone's mind. This wasn't like Tolkien's myths. The witnesses instead tell us that Jesus was not just raised up, but that he was meant to be seen, meant to be vindicated, meant to be understood and perceived with the senses so that we would know, this really happened – not just in the hearts and minds of the disciples, but with real atoms and actual life in his body.

His real heart began beating again after three days. His cut and bloodied body stood up, bearing the same scars he was laid down with. Because the forgiveness of sins that he achieved at the cross was as real as those wounds... Not a dream. Not a hope. But a fact. Objective and true and real.

And the body had to be real, and the resurrection had to be real, because if those things weren't real and it was all sentiment then not only was he not triumphant over death and the grave, but it would also mean that his sacrifice was mere sentiment, and our forgiveness was only a noble idea, but not real.

And yet, the spread of diverse witnesses make clear: it was all real. It really happened. We have a real savior who really lived, who really died, who was really buried in the real ground in a real tomb. And he did it for very real people. You and me, if you'll trust him.

As we close, listen to the application that Jonathan Edwards makes: "Christ was laid in a *disciple's* grave. He suffered the death that belonged to us, and he was laid in our grave. He entered into the state of death in *our* stead; he went down into that deep pit where *we* were to have gone. He had no *sin* of his own, so he had no *death* of his own; it was *our* sin and *our* grave, and *our* tomb hewed out in a rock." (*Notes on the Bible*)

Praise be to God. Let us pray.