

Secret Disciple no Longer

- Mark 15:42-47
- Dallas Willard wrote, "Discipleship is the process of becoming who Jesus would be if he were you." Mark records two reactions to the news of Jesus' death, and they could not be any more different. Joseph of Arimathea and Pilate. Sinclair Ferguson wrote, "Twenty-four hours rendered the names of the two men immortal in human history." Let's look at this passage today under these main points: Pilate's indifference, Joseph's discipleship, and Jesus' borrowed tomb.
- **Pilate's indifference (verses 44-45)**
- It is late afternoon, what the Jews called the "first evening," the hours between 3pm and 6pm, before the sun went down and the next day began. It is also the day of Preparation, Friday, as Sabbath would begin at 6pm that evening and end at 6pm on Saturday. Not only that, it was Passover. The Jews had a law against leaving a man, even one hanged on a tree, without a proper burial. And so, we see the encounter between Pilate and Joseph of Arimathea. Joseph was a member of the council, a wealthy man, a powerful man with access to the Roman governor. Pilate.
- Pilate will forever be remembered as the man who condemned Jesus to death by crucifixion. And when he hears the news from Joseph of Arimathea that Jesus is dead, he is surprised. Remember, Pilate first marveled when Jesus would not respond to the Chief Priests' accusations, and now he marvels at the news that Jesus is dead, since it had only been six hours and crucifixions normally took much longer. He was so surprised at this that he sent for the centurion who was in charge. The same man who saw Jesus die and testified that he was surely the Son of God comes to Pilate and gives him the news. "Yes, Governor, this man is surely dead." Do you think he also told Pilate that this man truly was the Son of God? Probably not. And would it have mattered? Pilate's conscience may have shown some signs of life earlier, when he was trying to convince the crowd that there was no reason for Jesus to die. But his concern now is not for Jesus but for himself, his power, his political career. He needs to make sure that the job was done, that the King of the Jews is actually dead. And this serves Mark's Gospel well.
- But Mark makes sure the readers also know that Jesus was dead. Look at verses 44 and 45. Pilate is told Jesus is dead. He summons the centurion and asks him if Jesus was dead. The centurion tells him that Jesus is dead. So, Pilate agrees to release the corpse (that word means, "dead body") to Joseph. Why is this quadruple testimony to Jesus' death important? Because resurrection cannot happen without death. Many over the centuries have tried to persuade that Jesus did not die on the cross, but merely swooned. The swoon theory states that Jesus was overheated and passed out, and then the coolness of the tomb revived him. There were incidences of people being buried alive in first century Palestine. Not people who had been crucified by the Romans, but people who died other ways. It was therefore a Jewish custom to safeguard against this by demanding periodic visits to the tomb following death. But in the hundreds of years during which Rome crucified hundreds of thousands of individuals, there is no record of even one ever surviving the cross. No, what will

happen on Sunday will not be resuscitation but resurrection. Jesus was dead. Now he will be buried...

- **Joseph's discipleship (verses 43, 46)**

- Here's what we learn about Joseph of Arimathea from all four Gospels, as he is mentioned by each. He is a respected member of the council, by which Mark means the Sanhedrin, and a man who was "looking for the kingdom of God." Luke says that Joseph was a good and righteous man who did not agree to the decision and action taken by the council. Matthew goes further and says that Joseph was "also a disciple of Jesus." John agrees with that, but says that Joseph was a disciple "but secretly for fear of the Jews." We have a man seeking the kingdom, no doubt has been searching the Scriptures, and has become a follower of Jesus. He is only lacking one thing, and on the day of Jesus' death, he finds it. Mark says Joseph "took courage and went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus." The death of Jesus did not dampen Joseph's faith but calls him forward in it. Perhaps his question is, "How can I serve this man I have grown to love? This man who has himself served so many?" Joseph could no longer be a secret follower. He could no longer stand with those who opposed Jesus. He knew, for certain, that this action would out him to the Sanhedrin, that they and everyone in Jerusalem would know that he was a follower of the Nazarene. I cannot imagine that Joseph was ever welcomed again in the council, not that he would ever go back there, anyway. Especially after what happened on Sunday. But it reminds me of what Jesus said when men asked if they could follow him but first, they had to go bury a father, or say goodbye to their family, and Jesus said, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." (Luke 9:62) This is Joseph of Arimathea putting his hand to the plow, even though it means losing his position as a respected member of the powerful ruling council. It reminded me of this quote from John Stonestreet, President of the Colson Center: "I've said before that we need a theology of getting fired. The time is coming when we may be forced to choose between our faith and our jobs." Paul knew about that. He got fired from his well-respected and probably well-paying job of pursuing Christians to their death and gave his life to following Jesus. He was rewarded with a life of beatings, shipwrecks, stonings, imprisonment, and eventual beheading. Oh, and integrity, peace with God, a clear conscience, and best of all, eternal life. That's how he could write, "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us." (Romans 8:18)
- Joseph is given permission by Pilate, so he bought a linen shroud and took Jesus' body down from the cross. With Nicodemus' help (the other former secret disciple), he wrapped Jesus in the linen shroud and, John's Gospel records, in the shroud he included 75 pounds of spices, a mixture of myrrh and aloes. Then they "laid him in a tomb that had been cut out of the rock. And he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb." That leads us to the last point,

- **Jesus' borrowed tomb (verses 46-47)**

- Matthew tells us that this was Joseph's own new tomb. John tells us that no one had ever been laid in it before. We would find that curious. I mean, of course it was unused. Who gets buried in a used grave? But tombs during the first century consisted of several burial chambers, cut into the side walls. A new tomb usually had three benches in it. A body was wrapped with spice-filled linen and laid on one of the benches. Remember, Mary enters the tomb on Sunday and sees a young man sitting on the right side, presumably on one of the benches. When John raced Peter to the tomb on Sunday, John could see the linen cloths Jesus had been wrapped in laying there (on one of the benches, we assume), and the face cloth lying by itself. What normally happened was the body was left on a stone bench inside the tomb for a year. If a stone was rolled in front of the tomb, the stone was there to protect the corpse from animals, but only the very wealthy had this luxury. After a year, when decomposition was complete, the bones were removed from the bench, and put in an ossuary, which would be a place dug out into the rock beneath the benches, making room on the benches, or "niches" for future use. But this was a new tomb, never used, and it turns out that the first person who used it did not need it very long.
- The Psalmist wrote, "For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption." (Psalm 16:10) Peter mentioned this prophecy on the Day of Pentecost, and Paul did the same when preaching in Acts 13. Jesus' body did not decay, as we will see and celebrate again next Sunday, Lord willing.
- Jesus borrowed a tomb. As I was working on this sermon, I remembered a newspaper column I wrote years ago, "Some things you just don't borrow." I will share it with you here, as we close.
- How many of you remember your Mom's stern warning to you as a child: "Do not borrow anybody's comb!" My Mom was pretty convinced that if I ran someone's comb through my hair, I would instantly be infested with microscopic creatures that would eat through my scalp and destroy me and life on the planet, as we know it. She even said I would be better off drinking out of somebody else's water bottle than to use their comb. So, I went through my childhood with an irrational fear of hair germs and would break into a cold sweat when I saw teens sharing their combs willy-nilly (or their picks...remember those?) without regard for life or limb or scalp. I was convinced that's why this kid in high school named Chad went bald at 18. He was probably sneaking behind the gym with borrowed combs almost every day. There are some things you just don't borrow. Like mouth guards, if you are playing on the basketball team, riding the pine, and suddenly the coach yells for you to get in the game. I never expected to be put in the game. We couldn't be enough points ahead for the coach to put me in the game. But here he was, calling my name, and I can't find my mouth guard. Hey, better to risk losing all my teeth in the lane as I am bumping armpits with my head, while trying to get a rebound, than to borrow a mouth guard from Lewis, the kid on the bench even further down the roster than I was. I am pretty sure that Lewis kept his mouth guard inside his tennis shoes when they weren't on his feet. For all I knew, he may have thrown his comb in there, too. No way am I borrowing his mouth guard.

There are some things you just don't borrow. Like burial plots. I mean, once you are dead, you're dead, right? There is no way you can borrow a burial plot. You can only borrow something that you intend to give back.

Check the records. There is a burial plot in Jerusalem owned by a certain Joseph of Arimathea. When Jesus was crucified nearly 2000 years ago, Joseph asked Pilate if he could take the body of Jesus. He put Jesus in "a new tomb that had never been used." Three days later, that tomb was available again because Jesus was raised from the dead, just as he said he would be. You know what is interesting about the Son of God? He entered the world through a virgin birth. He entered Jerusalem for his final week on a borrowed donkey colt, one that had never been ridden. He was laid in a borrowed tomb on Friday, and he gave it back on Sunday. There are some things you just don't borrow. But I will be eternally grateful that Jesus borrowed his gravesite. That means I will only be borrowing mine for a while, too.

- Prayer
- Greet One Another