SERIES: The Good News, as Reported by Matthew
SERMON: **The Burial of Jesus**
SCRIPTURE: Matthew 27:57-66
SPEAKER: Michael P. Andrus
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Over the past six weeks we have considered Peter's denial, Judas' betrayal, Jesus' arrest and religious trial, His political trial, His crucifixion, and His death. Today we come to the burial of Jesus. A question that may cross your mind this morning might be, "Is the burial of Jesus really worth a sermon all by itself?" Many apparently think not, for His burial is frequently passed over quickly in commentaries and sermons as being simply a necessary bridge between His death and resurrection.

But historically the Church has considered the burial of Jesus an important aspect of the Passion story. The Apostles' Creed includes a statement about His burial, separate from His crucifixion and death: "He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, *and was buried*." Why is that so important? Primarily because burial is the proof of death. You don't bury people unless you're absolutely certain they are dead. In Jesus' case that is critical because of the allegations that have periodically been perpetrated by His enemies that He had not really died but only lost consciousness.

But the burial of Jesus is important for other reasons as well. Our Scripture text today is Matthew 27:57-66.

> *As evening approached, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who had himself become a disciple of Jesus. Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body, and Pilate ordered that it be given to him. Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock. He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb.*
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> *The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. "Sir," they said, "we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise again.' So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first."*
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> *"Take a guard," Pilate answered. "Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how." So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard.*

The burial of Jesus reveals the transformed hearts of two secret followers. (Matt. 27:57-60, John 19:39)

One of these secret followers is identified as Joseph of Arimathea. Joseph was a wealthy and prominent member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish governing council. But according to the other Gospels he was also a good and upright man, was looking for the kingdom of God, and had not consented to the decision and action of the Sanhedrin in condemning Jesus to death (Mark 15:43, Luke 23:50-51). We don't know if Joseph just abstained from voting or if he openly expressed his disagreement, but at least he did not approve of what they had done.

The reason he didn't go along with the Sanhedrin is revealed by the Apostle John who tells us that Joseph was "a disciple of Jesus but *secretly* because he feared the Jews" (John 19:38). Now, however, we find Joseph going boldly to Pilate to ask for the body of Jesus. Mark tells us that Pilate wondered whether Jesus could be dead so soon, and only after he is assured by the Centurion that Jesus is indeed dead does he grant Joseph's request.

How does the Centurion know for sure? Well, his soldiers had used a mallet to break the legs of the two thieves to hasten their death but had refrained from doing so to Jesus because it was obvious He was already dead (thus fulfilling a prophecy from Psalm 34:20 that not one of His bones would be broken). However, one of the soldiers did thrust a spear in Jesus' side, an act called "the death stroke," done to remove all doubt as to death having occurred. (This, too, fulfilled a prophecy in Zechariah 12:10: "They will look on me, the one they have pierced.")

Now the reason given as to why the deaths needed to be hastened is that the Sabbath was approaching in just a few hours and the Jews were insistent that the bodies be removed and buried before the Sabbath began. They have no compunctions about murdering an innocent man, but they sure don't want to defile the Sabbath by having his body hanging on a cross after that day begins at 6 P.M!.

The other secret follower involved in the burial of Jesus is identified as Nicodemus in the Gospel of John (19:39). Nicodemus is also a member of the Sanhedrin and a prominent Pharisee to boot. He is the same one who early in Jesus' ministry was fascinated by His teaching and came to talk to Jesus under the cover of night, as revealed in that most familiar third chapter of John. Jesus told him he must be born again. Nicodemus was apparently converted during that encounter with Jesus, but he remained a secret disciple.

These two men–Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus–were essentially people pleasers. They had convictions about Jesus but squelched them because they were afraid of their peers. The power of the Cross, however, is seen in the transformed lives of these two men. They have now had enough of casual closet Christianity. They come out of the shadows of secrecy and request the body of Jesus. They are ashamed no longer to be openly identified with Him. What they have witnessed from the life, and especially the death, of Jesus gives them the courage and strength to be known as His followers.

Isn't it interesting that the disciples who had openly followed Jesus during His lifetime ran away at the end, but the two who had kept their faith secret while He was alive come forward publicly at the end to give Him an appropriate burial?[i]
Secret disciples, sadly, were not that unusual in the first century. We read in John 12:42-43, "Yet, at the same time, many even among the leaders believed in him. But because of the Pharisees, they would not confess their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the praise of men." Nor are secret disciples unusual today. Fear of being ridiculed and a desire for popularity are still primary deterrents to openly confessing allegiance to Christ.

Some people are afraid it might hurt their business, or their reputation, or some important

relationship. Maybe you are one of them. If you are, your fears are probably legitimate. Your identification with Jesus may indeed result in unpleasant experiences, but there is no permanent danger in it. In fact the danger, comes in *not* openly confessing Jesus as Savior, for that has eternal consequences. Listen to the words of Jesus:

> "*Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my father in heaven."* (Matthew 10:32-33)

Openly confessing and identifying with Jesus entails significant eternal reward. Listen to the words of Paul,

> *"If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved"* (Rom. 10:9-10).

Have you considered becoming a Christian but are afraid of what others might think? Confess your sinfulness before God. Believe in your heart that Jesus died for you. When you do, forgiveness, reconciliation, freedom and eternal life will be yours.

Maybe you are already a follower of Christ but, like Joseph and Nicodemus, are hanging back in the shadows because of fear? If so consider the example of these two men and forsake being a people pleaser. It's not too late to state your allegiance. Joseph and Nicodemus were accepted and even honored in God's Word, though they were tardy in their commitments.

The burial of Jesus proclaims Him a personal King. (Matt. 27:60, John 19:39)

Why did Pilate give the body of Jesus to Joseph? The custom of the day was to take the bodies of executed criminals and place them in a common grave outside the city, or just pitch them over the city wall into the gully known as Gehenna. (That is a term Jesus borrowed to speak of hell, because fire was constantly burning the garbage there). But because Joseph was a known member of the Jewish religious council, Pilate may have assumed he was acting in behalf of his colleagues on the Sanhedrin. All we can say for sure is that God superintended the situation so that Jesus' body was given to someone who would treat it with respect and honor.

Joseph and Nicodemus do two significant things in this regard. Nicodemus brings about 75 pounds of spices to prepare Jesus body for burial. Jews, you know, did not embalm bodies but simply encased them in strongly perfumed burial cloths to help mask the decay. The amount of spices used for Jesus is unusually large–what one would expect for a royal funeral. Second, they bury Jesus in a private tomb by Himself. Matthew tells us that it is Joseph's own tomb, a new one he had carved for himself. This is the tomb of a wealthy, influential man, a burial customarily given only to those worthy of great honor.

In the process of burying Jesus in his own tomb, Joseph of Arimathea actually fulfills a key OT prophecy. In Isaiah 53:9 we read of Messiah, "He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death." No doubt this is a reference to the fact already mentioned that victims

of crucifixion were almost always buried with common criminals–that would have been Jesus' assigned resting place. However, God intervened and arranged for Him to be buried with the rich, in a royal manner. Joseph and Nicodemus proclaim by their actions that Jesus is their King.

You know, the New Testament makes no distinction between Jesus as Savior and Jesus as King. There are a lot of people today who want Him to be their Savior but not their King. They want to control their own lives–work, play, financial security, relationships. But Jesus is presented to us as the legitimate ruler over every aspect of our lives. In the book of Revelation He is worshiped as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. This is the way the Hebrew language expresses the superlative. In other words Jesus is the Best Lord and the Best King. There is no one better.

The burial of Jesus attracts true worshipers. (27:61)

Verse 61 tells us, "Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb." The scene is full of pathos. As noble as Joseph's actions were in taking care of Jesus' body and burying it in his own tomb, verse 60 tells us that "He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away." Like a lot of men Joseph seems to be task oriented. He has done what he came to do, and he has done it well; there's no reason to stay around. But the two Marys remain–sitting there opposite the tomb. They have no task to complete, just a tragedy to contemplate and broken hearts to heal.

There is a lot of tradition about Mary Magdalene that is not supported by the NT. All we know for sure about her is that Jesus once cast seven demons out of her and she was forever grateful. The other Mary is identified by Mark as the mother of James and Joses. We will hear of these women again next Lord's Day as we find them returning to the tomb on Sunday morning to receive the announcement of the angel that Jesus is no longer in the tomb and then to actually see Him and talk to Him. I think it is fascinating that God chooses these two who alone mourn at the grave side to be the first to witness the resurrected Christ.

The burial of Jesus causes the Jewish leaders to seek extraordinary security to prevent fraud, leading inadvertently to strong proof of the Resurrection. (27:11-15)

The request of the chief priests and Pharisees. (62-64) The religious leaders of Israel have undoubtedly heard by now that the body of Jesus has been given to Joseph of Arimathea. It makes them very nervous to discover that His body is in the hands of sympathizers. So they go to Pilate and remind him that Jesus had predicted that He would rise within three days of His death. Isn't it interesting that His disciples seem consistently to have misunderstood these prophecies (and there is no evidence that they remember them even at this time), but His enemies do remember them.[ii]

Although Jesus is now dead, they are still concerned about His continuing influence. The last thing they want is for His disciples to stage a mock resurrection by causing Jesus' body to disappear on the third day. Such a deception, they claim, would be worse than the deceptions He perpetrated with His teaching during His life. They request of Pilate, therefore, that the tomb be made secure until the third day. After the third day, of course, it will not matter, because Jesus' prediction will not have been fulfilled.

I think, too, they are hinting that a missing body could be worse, not only for them, but also for

Pilate himself–because it may stir up Jesus' followers to continue the fiction of a King other than Caesar. Pilate apparently sees the point, because he grants the permission.

The permission of Pilate. (65) Pilate tells them to "make the tomb as secure as you know how." He will provide the soldiers but he gives them the overall responsibility of putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard. With a free hand in this matter of guarding the tomb, they cannot come back later and complain if things go wrong. Do you have any doubt that the religious leaders took Pilate's permission literally and made the tomb as secure as humanly possible! Why take any chances?

So what security measures do they take?

The security provided. (65-66) First of all, a stone is placed in front of the tomb. Joseph was planning to use this tomb for himself, so he naturally had provided a sufficiently large stone to provide security from grave robbers and wild animals. This stone could be rolled into a depression directly in front of the opening. While one man might be able to roll the stone into the depression, it normally took several to roll it out. The Gospel writers take pains to inform us that the stone in front of Jesus' tomb was unusually large and consequently very heavy. Mark observes that when the women came to the tomb early Sunday morning they were debating among themselves how they might move the stone. Obviously it was too large for even three women to move.

It was not normal to seal tombs in Palestine because the stone was usually sufficient to keep any grave robbers out. Besides, unlike the Egyptians, Jewish people normally didn't bury anything valuable with their loved ones. But the religious leaders choose to add a seal to the stone. The normal way of sealing a tomb was by means of a cord laid across the stone, set in wax at both ends and stamped with the Roman seal. Anyone attempting to move the stone would break the seal and the vandalism would be obvious.

Furthermore, the guard posted is not just one soldier. We learn in Matthew 28:11 that there are multiple guards. The soldiers would have been well-trained and quite aware that the punishment for sleeping on one's post or allowing a prisoner to escape, even a dead prisoner, was immediate execution. These guys are dead men walking if they let Jesus' body out of that tomb.

There certainly is no danger of these soldiers collaborating with Jesus' disciples. The Roman seal affixed to the stone before Joseph's tomb was far more sacred to them than the memories of a man who "went around doing good." Soldiers cold-blooded enough to gamble over a dying victim's cloak are not the kind to be hoodwinked by timid Galileans or to jeopardize their necks by sleeping on duty.

To summarize, the Jews and the Romans leave nothing to chance. They are going to keep that body in the grave until the fourth day or die trying! Ironically in going to such lengths to prevent theft, Jesus' enemies inadvertently remove every possible human explanation for what happens next. But then I don't want to steal next Sunday's thunder. And thunder it will be!

Conclusion: Years ago Tony Campolo preached a sermon that has since become quite well-known, at least its title has. He called it, "It's Friday, But Sunday's comin'." Some of you are no doubt facing a Friday of your own. You may be still grieving the death of a loved one, as were

the two Mary's. You may be grieving the loss of financial security. You may be depressed because of the loss of an important relationship. You may be extremely worried about the global economy and the international dangers we face.

I encourage you to come to grips with the fact that God is still in control despite the darkest of situations. He is setting up kings and taking them down, strengthening His people, bringing secret disciples out of the shadows, and using the machinations of His enemies to work out His own purposes.

When we cannot understand why Friday is so dark, why we have to go through such trouble and conflicts, we need to hold on to the certainty that He is God. The Psalmist wrote, "Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him" (Psalm 115:3). The prophet Isaiah quotes God as proclaiming,

> *"I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me.*
> *I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please."* (Isaiah 46:9-10).

After a period of divinely-inflicted insanity because of his arrogant pride, even the pagan Nebuchadnezzar confessed . . .

> *"God's dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation.*
> *All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: 'What have you done?'"*

And David prayed,

> *"Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, O LORD, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all.*
> *Wealth and honor come from you; you are the ruler of all things. In your hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all.*"

Despite the death and burial of His one and only Son, God was still in control, and He is still in control today. It's Friday, but Sunday's coming!

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i. Robert L. Thomas and Stanley N. Gundry, *The Harmony of the Gospels*, 250.

ii. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 730.