

THE BURIAL OF JESUS

1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-4

Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you - unless you believed in vain. 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...

Have you ever heard a sermon on the burial of Jesus?

There haven't been many! In addition, there're very few hymns or worship songs about His burial. We sing about *the old rugged cross*, and *up from the grave He arose*, but not so much about *His garden grave*.

I've got a multitude of sermons in my teaching repertoire on the crucifixion and the resurrection, but not much about what happened to Jesus' body in between.

For those three days the body of Jesus was buried.

And here in 1 Corinthians 15 Paul speaks of the Lord's burial as part of the gospel. He's discussing the gospel that saves us. The gospel in which we stand! This is the gospel Paul received from God and delivered to men.

The gospel changes the eternal destinies of people.

Nothing is more vital to any of us than this divine invitation - this good news from heaven. We all know the gospel includes the crucified Christ, and risen Lord, but verse 4 mentions as part of the gospel, *"He was buried."*

A couple of years ago, Kathy and I hosted a retreat for ministry couples - senior pastors and their wives. We went to beautiful conference center in Rome, Georgia.

Of course, we provided the usual Bible teaching and worship times, but we also wanted to plan some fun for the couples. We hoped to provide them a break... Interject a little levity into their normally serious lives.

So one morning we scheduled a graveyard scavenger hunt! We took a trip to an old, pre-civil war cemetery in downtown Rome. Tombstones covered several blocks.

And we gave the couples details to look for on old headstones... *You got points for strange names - points for your name - points for your birthday - points for memorable inscriptions - points for funny inscriptions...*

And Kathy and I racked up the points...

Hey, we found a gravestone with the inscription, “Graves...” Or how’s this for appropriate, “Killingsworth” - I may be revealing my morbid sense of humor...

Or what about ole Vennable’s inscription, “A great spirit in a frail body, unwavering in honor, love, loyalty, and courage, and a total abstainer of alcoholic beverages.” There’s a story behind the “*total abstainer!*”

Here’s one that caught my attention. In bold letters the top of the tombstone read, “Father.” At the bottom it read, “A voice we loved is stilled...” Here’s a declaration of faith, “Blessed are the dead who died in the Lord.”

I think it was the first time some of the couples had ever spent more than an hour or so in a graveyard. *And their reactions were interesting.* Even though they were pastors some of them were noticeably uncomfortable.

A few weren't sure about graveyard etiquette. *Should we be there or not? What about stepping on graves? Or climbing headstones? Should we be making it a game?*

That morning in the cemetery made me realize just how awkward we all feel in a graveyard. A burial site isn't a place where anybody who's alive feels at "home."

In fact, it's interesting to me, how many people today are opting for cremation over burial. In the United States 33.5% of people are cremated. In Georgia, it's 22.1%.

One reason, of course, is that it's cheaper... But some folks are bothered by the thought of a loved one's body decomposing in the ground... Nature does in 20 years what cremation does in 20 minutes, but like everything else in life, we tend to prefer the instant to long-term...

I'm just saying, our disdain for burials, cemeteries, and graveyards might be why we're not drawn to the burial of Jesus, and have never considered its importance.

Yet this evening I want to take you on a tour of a graveyard. We're going to focus on the burial of Jesus.

Let me start by reading the last five verses of John 19. It records what occurred in the moments after the cross.

Verse 38, "After this (that is, the crucifixion), Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly, for fear of the

Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate gave him permission.”

This was a big step for Joseph. He'd been a secret disciple of Jesus, and a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin. According to Luke, he didn't consent to the death of Jesus. Perhaps he wasn't present at the trial.

We don't know. But to watch his Lord be crucified with the approval of his countrymen, moved him to action.

Finally, the secret disciple comes out of the closet.

Joseph knew he was risking his position, wealth, and power to properly dispose of the body of Jesus. But after what he'd seen that day, this was the least he could do.

It was past time for him to step up and be counted.

Like most Jewish men of means though his hometown was Arimathea, Joseph owned a tomb in Jerusalem.

Students of the OT knew from Zechariah that when Messiah comes the first place He'll visit is Jerusalem, and particularly the Mount of Olives. This is why even today, the Mount is covered with Jewish graves. When Messiah comes they want to be there to greet Him first.

Joseph's grave was a little northwest of the Mount of Olives, near an outcropping of rock known as *the Skull*.

It took Roman permission to take a body down from a cross. Crucifixion was not just a means of torture, it was a deterrent. It was a warning to the locals that Rome meant business. Rebellion would be dealt with harshly.

This is why the Romans usually left a body on the cross for days. They allowed the victim to become food for the vultures, or the wild dogs. It all sent a message.

Mark says Joseph mustered his courage, and asked Pilate for permission to take the body off the cross. After it was certain Jesus was dead, permission was granted.

John continues, “So he came and took the body of Jesus. And Nicodemus, who at first came to Jesus by night, also came...” Joseph and Nicodemus were both rich men. They probably had servants and resources, but this wasn't a task they would delegate or hire out.

They took the body of Jesus off the cross themselves.

It probably required a ladder, a harness, even some rope. Joseph may've brought a crowbar to help him pry the nails from the wood under Jesus' hands and feet.

Imagine, Joseph and Nicodemus lowering Jesus' beaten body: *gently, gingerly, carefully, compassionately.*

The Romans had abused this body for hours - they'd torn it to shreds. But now Jesus would be treated with the dignity and honor due Him, even if it was a little late.

Displayed in Rome's St. Peter's Basilica is a sculpture by Michelangelo, called *the Pieta*. Jesus' crucified body is draped across Mary's lap, as she nurses His wounded corpse. Amazingly, the marble oozes with tenderness.

It's one of Michelangelo's most famous works.

But as warm and life-like as the sculpture appears, it's historically inaccurate. Mary never cared for the crucified body of Jesus. That duty fell to Joseph and Nicodemus.

And imagine, how messy a task this was. His body was covered with sweat, blood, urine, and dust. *Did they carry Him on a stretcher, or cradle Him in their arms?*

After lifting the bloody body off the cross, they took it to a nearby tomb. It was Joseph's family plot. No doubt, purchased at a pretty penny, it had never been used.

According to verse 40, they had with them, "a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds. Then they took the body of Jesus, and bound it in strips of linen with the spices, as the custom of the Jews is to bury."

Imagine, a hundred pounds of myrrh, aloes, and spices. Unlike the Egyptians, the Jews never practiced embalming, so to preserve the corpse in the hot, tropical, Mediterranean climate it was coated with spices and oils and creams. This stifled the smell of death and decay.

And notice, the two men followed "*the custom of the Jews.*" In a Jewish burial the first thing that happened to the corpse was a careful cleansing. Any foreign objects or substances were removed. The body was washed.

Think of what this meant for Joseph and Nicodemus.

Holding Jesus' head in their lap, they picked out the thorns that remained in His brow. Splinters from that old rugged cross had to be removed - as did bits of bone or ivory that burrowed into His back during the scourging.

Imagine, these men cleaning the puncture wounds in Jesus' forehead, and the perforations in his hands, and feet, and side. *I'm sure there were moments when Joseph and Nicodemus didn't think this was real!*

Just that morning they had no idea what the day would hold. *When will He wake up? When will they wake up?*

Days later Thomas will put his finger in Jesus' scars, but he wasn't the first human to touch them. Joseph and Nicodemus had cleaned out those wounds at His burial.

When the work was done, Jesus' body was again bound in strips of linen. At His birth, they were called *swaddling clothes*. At His death, they became *a shroud*.

Verse 41, "Now in the place where He was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid." Matthew says the tomb belonged to Joseph. "So there they laid Jesus, because of the Jews' Preparation Day, for the tomb was nearby."

Mark 15:46 adds one more important detail, "and (they) rolled a stone against the door of the tomb."

The stone probably sat in a channel. It rolled downhill over the grave's opening. *It was the door slamming shut*. The imposing stone had an air of permanence - finality.

And why did Jesus go through this ordeal of burial?

He didn't have to... There was a point during His crucifixion where the Lord cried out, "It is finished."

The price for sin had been paid, judgment had been served. All that needed to be done had been done.

Nothing in the atonement necessitated a burial. If Jesus had been resurrected 30 seconds after he died, or even three minutes, our sin would still be forgiven.

God's power could've quickened His dead body, while still on the cross - just as easily as from Joseph's tomb.

In fact, it would've created quite a scene! An instant resurrection would've surprised quite a few bystanders. His victory would've been immediate and apparent.

But Jesus chose to be buried... *why?*

With the time I have left I'd like to give you six reasons why Jesus' burial is part of the gospel - the good news.

I'll list them... then I'll talk about them briefly...

His burial was **a confirmation of His death.**

His burial was **a fulfillment of prophecy.**

His burial was **a show of humility.**

His burial was **an expression of His love.**

His burial was **an example of His character.**

And His burial was **a test of faith.**

First, Jesus' burial was **a confirmation of His death.**

Before Pilate released the body to Joseph he first sought verification from a soldier on duty that Jesus was actually dead... This is the reason they didn't break the bones in his legs. That was a way to hasten the victim's death, but when they came to Jesus, He'd already died.

Yet just in case anyone missed it, his burial removed all doubt. The cross didn't just knock Him out. He didn't swoon

from a loss of blood, and revive in the chilly tomb.

100 pounds of aloes, spices, and myrrh eliminated that possibility. You don't bury a man, and leave Him in a grave for three days, unless you're certain He's dead.

Second, Jesus' burial was **a fulfillment of prophecy.**

The OT prophets predicted as much. Isaiah 53:9 (NASB) says of the Messiah, **"He was with a rich man at His death."** That's one reason why two wealthy Jewish aristocrats attended firsthand to Jesus' burial.

Yet Jesus also personally prophesied His burial. Earlier that week, after His entry into Jerusalem, Jesus spoke of His death as a seed being buried in the soil.

John 12:24, **"Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain."** A seed nestles in the soil to yield a crop, and likewise Jesus will be buried in the Earth to fulfill all God's plan, and bring many souls to salvation.

Third, Jesus' burial was **a show of humility.**

The point of the incarnation - Jesus' coming **"in carne"** or **"in the flesh"** - **"in the likeness of men"** - was to identify with all men. That meant Jesus went *the way of all flesh*.

His burial speaks of just how low He was willing to go to identify with us... For *the likeness of men* stretched all the way to the grave. Everyone of us will one day lie on a mortician's gurney. Our ashen flesh will reek of death.

Jesus went there too!

And when we have a loved one die in our presence - or when we have to bury a person that we've loved, Jesus wants us to realize that He knows what it's like.

It was said of Jesus, "By death and burial He came down to our level, by resurrection he raised us to His."

Fourth, Jesus' burial is **an expression of His love.**

Jesus knows we're all destined to take a walk through the graveyard. It's where everyone's journey on Earth comes to an end. But Jesus walked it before us and will walk it with us. He wants us to know He cares.

As the poet put it, "No other God have I but Thee; born in a manger, died on a tree, buried in a grave just like me." I wasn't born in a manger, and chances are I won't die on a tree, but one day I'll be buried like Him. This is why His burial is an expression of His love and concern.

He didn't have to go there, but He did!

My wife is a nurse, and she's had to care for the body of patients who just died. You remove the probes, and take out the IVs, and clean off the bandages and fluids.

She told me it's very personal and intimate. Kathy says when a nurse doesn't know the patient personally, she likes to turn on the TV while she preps the body. The distraction keeps the powerful connection at bay.

But when you know the deceased the feelings are overwhelming. You're wiping away the last traces of the life you loved. *You're with them, even when they're no longer with you.* This is a connection you never forget.

Bonds are formed in the valley of death. As David said of the Good Shepherd, “**Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me.**” Jesus is with us in more ways than we know! If we’re counting on the Savior’s love to see us all the way to heaven - then trust Him in the graveyard.

Fifth, Jesus’ burial was **an example of His character.**

Jesus wasn’t afraid of the grave. And He wasn’t fearful of all that goes with it... *the inactivity, the silence, the loneliness, the isolation, the unknown, the uncertainty...*

For a Christian who believes in the future resurrection of the body, burial is **a pause in life.** It’s in-between a salvation believed, and that salvation ultimately received.

What Jesus did on the cross will redeem everything that sin has touched, including what it’s done to our physical bodies... When a person dies an agonizing death. When disease ravages their body, and squeezes the life out of them, often we say, “**At least now they’re at peace.**” *And there’s a truth to that.* I don’t know if their spirit is at peace or in torment, but finally the body rests.

Certainly, we believe as Paul wrote, “**We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord.**” The moment we die our spirit leaves behind this old shell... *but only temporarily.*

Our salvation isn’t complete until the day comes when the trumpet sounds and these mortal bodies put on immortality. That means every cemetery is *a holding area - a waiting room.* It’s a pause, not a resting place.

And you'll discover that all God does includes *a pause!* As soon as Lazarus came down with serious symptoms his sisters sent for Jesus, but we're told, "when (Jesus) heard that he was sick, He stayed two more days in the place where He was." Jesus lingered.

Lazarus needed Him right then... but Jesus waited.

In fact, by the time Jesus arrived the body of Lazarus was already in his tomb. He'd been buried for four days!

Jesus was the resurrection and the life. He would work a miracle and bring his friend, Lazarus, back to life. But first, his burial *represented a pause! All burials do...*

And again, Jesus isn't afraid of the pauses - of what goes on behind the stone, or under the ground, or in the crypt. Jesus is confident! He knows that death has been defeated. He's certain of His own ultimate victory!

Burial is the time in-between death and resurrection. ***And isn't that where we do most of our living?***

We're always dying to something... to ourselves... to our selfish ways... to our personal agendas... to our self-perceived importance... The Christian life is dying to my will and submitting to God's will - then watching God breathe His newness into the thing to which I just died.

Whether it's a dream, or a relationship, or an ambition, or a ministry. There's a time when I let it die, and He resurrects it, and makes of it what He desired all along.

Which brings me to the last reason for Jesus' burial, it was **a test of faith.** It would've delighted the disciples to see Jesus fly

off the cross - superhero style - and be raised to life without delay - resurrected before the eyes of His enemies, torturers, mockers in spectacular fashion...

They would've loved to watch Jesus get the last laugh! But think of the lessons the disciples would've missed...

It took another three days for the deep regret and repentance they all would experience, to ferment. For true repentance to plow up their hearts, and ready them to meet the One they'd betrayed, it took some time.

For the three days Jesus' body was in the ground, the disciple's thoughts ran wild... They recalled His sayings and pondered His promises. *Was it truly over now?...*

They worried about their own plight. As His followers would they now be fugitives and targets for persecution?

The disciples were now fearful of all that Jesus' burial had brought... *the inactivity and silence...* that's why Peter and a few others couldn't sit still and went fishing.

They were afraid of *the loneliness and isolation* - that's why they all were huddled together in the upper room.

And the disciples were now afraid of *the unknown and uncertainty* - that's why the door to that room was bolted shut... In short, the sincerity of their faith was under test.

Here's what the burial of Jesus teaches us...

Even when the stone is rolled in place, and it looks like it's finally over - that God's plans and promises have failed - *they haven't!* God hasn't stopped working.

He's still up to something *behind that stone!* A miracle is still in the offing. And we desperately need to believe.

The disciples would've never learned that lesson... we would've never learned that lesson... had it not been for the burial of Jesus. And that's why it's also good news.

Author Philip Yancey points out that the crucifixion and resurrection have both earned names on the Church's calendar. We call them *Good Friday* and *Easter Sunday*.

But the day of His burial - *Saturday* - is the day with no name. Yancey writes, "Yet in a real sense we live on Saturday... What the disciples experienced in small scale - three days in grief over one man who had died on a cross - we now live through on a cosmic scale.

Human history grinds on, between the time of promise and fulfillment. Can we trust that God can make something holy and beautiful and good out of a world that's full of pain, injustice, and poverty. It's Saturday on planet earth. Will Sunday ever come? It is a good thing to remember that in the cosmic drama, we live out our days on Saturday, the in-between day with no name."

There is a woman who lies buried under a 150 year old oak tree in a Louisiana cemetery. Before she died, she instructed her relatives on what she wanted to be inscribed on her tombstone. It's one word, "*waiting.*"

In a sense we're all waiting... We're waiting for Jesus to come. For Him to right all wrongs, and established His kingdom, and bring His peace to earth. We're waiting on Him to

end disease, and shut down death, and restore this world to what God originally meant for it to be.

It's Saturday... but Sunday is coming.

Sunday was not the day of faith. It was *the day of celebration*. Jesus had conquered. He was the victor. His followers were astonished, thoroughly overjoyed.

Friday wasn't a day of faith either. It was more *a day of mourning and sorrow*. With the terror of the cross in their face, it was probably too much to expect much faith from the disciples in that moment. It was a day of horrors.

That's why *the day of faith was Saturday* - that middle day - the gap day - the day that stood between death and resurrection. Would the disciples believe what they couldn't see behind the stone? *Can you and I believe what we can't see?* The first disciples didn't realize it at the time, but their faith was being forged on Saturday.

Faith was learned because Jesus was buried.

I brought with me a pack of seeds. They're marigold seeds, and when planted they yield beautiful flowers.

But what if I went to plant them and found out they were scared. *What if seeds could talk to their planter...*

What if they were to say, "Hey, we don't want to get planted. Who wants to get dirty? It's nice and clean in this pocket." And I replied, "But it's your job to get dirty. Seeds go into the soil." "Yea, but we're going on strike."

What's the problem with you seeds, do you guys think I'm going to hurt you? "Of course we do. We're afraid. We don't want to get buried. We don't want to die."

That's it? You're afraid to die? "Yes. It's happens to our friends. They get buried, and we never see them again."

But you do see them again. Your friends are those gorgeous flowers that sprout up. "It sure doesn't look like them?" That's because, like Jesus, the old body gets buried, but they rise with a transformed, glorious body.

Finally, my seeds conclude, "Wow, do we get to do that, too? ..." And like the seeds, **we get to do that too!**

Nature teaches us that before we enjoy *the new life of spring* we first have to go through *the death of winter*.

For three months, all the greenery, the life, is buried underground. *In the cold of January, do we believe in the warmth of March? Or do we doubt that flowers will ever bloom again?* I'm sure you have faith. You endure...

Spring is coming! And this is the hope we should have when the last spade of dirt is thrown on the body of a brother in Christ. We'll meet again. Resurrection is real.

This is also the hope we should have when joy fades, and trouble strikes, and problems blow in from the cold, God is still at work *underground - behind the stone*. It might be Saturday, *but just wait...* Sunday is coming!

We learned in 1 Corinthians 13 that God has a trio of graces He bestows on His people - **faith, hope, and love**. And all three play a vital role in this Easter season...

We stand before the cross and look on the crucified Christ for our salvation. He speaks to us of God's **love**.

We rejoice in the risen Lord who's overcome. Because He lives nothing is impossible. He's our beacon of **hope**.

But let's also spend some time at the tomb, outside the stone. Let's acknowledge the burial of Jesus. For in so many ways it's Saturday, and we need greater **faith**.

Let me close with one more tombstone from that graveyard in Rome. It marks the grave of Lily Mitchell.

A poem reads, "A lily grows on every tomb, life's symbol sweet and fair, to bid the heart forget it's gloom, for love lies buried there." *For love lies buried there...*

And love was also buried in Jesus' grave.

Even from the grave our Lord was loving us and teaching us that life is full of pauses, and delays, and moments when we even wonder if God has left us...

The burial of Jesus teaches us to trust in His love.

The stone was rolled over the mouth of the grave, but God's power, and plans, and love keep rolling on behind the stone... *It might be Saturday, but Sunday's coming.*