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The Burial of Jesus

John 19.28-42

Series: Signs of Life

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I. Introduction

- A. I usually have a novel going
 - 1. Not healthy to read theology all the time!
- B. My latest is one of the classic novels by G.K. Chesterton – the legendary British literary critic, philosopher and writer
 - 1. *The Man Who was Thursday*
 - 2. It's about a man, Gabriel Syme, who is a poet
 - a. He's recruited by Scotland Yard to a secret group of detectives to infiltrate an anarchist council which is planning to murder key politicians and create the kind of havoc one would expect with anarchists
 - 3. Syme is successful in getting himself elected to this council as one of its seven members
 - a. All of whom have code names corresponding with a day of the week
 - b. Syme was "Thursday"
 - 4. He goes about seeking to either expose, or dispose, of each of the other members of the council and so subvert their intentions
 - a. But as he goes about engaging with the other council members, one by one he discovers that all of them are also detectives who are members of the police
 - b. All of them except the president of the council, the man who was Sunday
 - c. And even he, it turns out, is not the anarchist he pretends to be
- C. It struck me the other day
 - 1. What if the church were like that?
 - a. That all the members of the church were undercover
 - b. Were secret Christians
 - c. Hidden from the world
 - d. Identities undetermined and unknown to all but the individuals themselves and to God
 - 2. What kind of church would that be?
- D. The reason it struck me is that the issue of secret Christians is raised in the midst of our study of the Gospel of John
 - 1. In particular, in the events of the passion of the Christ
 - 2. It shows up in the account of, of all places, His burial

II. Text

A. **John 19:38–42** (ESV) —

1. 38 After these things Joseph of Arimathea, who was 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. So he came and took away his body.
2. 39 Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight.
3. 40 So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews.
4. 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.
5. 42 So because of the Jewish day of Preparation, since the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there.

III. **Tender Moments in the Garden**

A. Before we get into the issue of secret Christians, let's not miss the forest for the trees

1. This is a remarkably tender moment in the story of the passion of the Christ

B. Jesus' suffering has concluded

1. Not just because His death has occurred, and all that awaits is the disposal of His body
2. But because Jesus, ever-conscious of His mission, has declared His suffering to have concluded
3. **John 19:30** (ESV) — 30 When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, "It is finished," and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

C. What would you expect, then, to be done with the corpses of criminals subject to the most degrading punishment that a cruel Roman empire could inflict on a human being?

1. Certainly no ceremonial internment among the noteworthy citizens
2. More likely a casting of the body into the local dump to be burned with the garbage
3. Or left out in the wilderness as food for the birds and beasts
4. The best that could be expected is an unmarked grave with the unnamed paupers

D. But here comes two notable members of Jewish ruling upper-crust

1. And they do what is sure to raise the eyebrows of the Roman and Jewish authorities
 - a. They ask to take the body of Jesus
 - b. Not to dispose of the body as would be customary for a criminal
 - c. But with the care and respect of one who might be considered a member of one's family
 - d. Or a nobleman or beloved leader of a community

2. They take the body of Jesus down from the cross
 - a. And one of the men owned a tomb – a family gravesite – that had never been used
 - b. And they took the body of Jesus there
3. And the other man collected the artifacts of a proper burial
 - a. The myrrh, the aloes, and the spices
 - b. The kinds of elements which would delay the decay and putrefaction which would further humiliate the deceased
 - c. No easy task – 75 pounds!
 - d. Maybe that doesn't sound like much; to what would you compare it?
 - e. Closest thing I have is when I replace a 50 pound salt block in my water treatment system; I can do it, carry it about 50 feet – but that's about it
 - f. The one man hauls the 75 pounds of spices some distance to the garden tomb just outside the city
4. The transfer of the body – certainly much more than 75 pounds
 - a. The hauling of the spices
 - b. This is real work, real effort
- E. These are not the efforts of disinterested passers-by
 1. This is the Good Samaritan on steroids
 - a. This is beyond what anyone would expect
 - b. Why not let the Roman soldiers just get rid of the corpse?
 2. But no – these two care
 - a. They have been profoundly affected by the entire sequence of events
 - b. They knew of this Jesus
 - c. They witnessed the trials
 - d. They followed the trail of the Via Dolorosa
 - e. They watched all day the One Pilate called “The Man”
 - f. Writhe in pain, struggling to breathe
 - g. And eventually expire
- F. Moved to pity this Man
 1. Moved enough to give Jesus a proper burial
 - a. In a tomb meant for notable and the wealthy
 - b. Even though through His life Jesus could hardly be said to have owned anything
 - c. Not even a grave
- G. Are you moved as these men were?
 1. Enough to have interrupted your pre-Sabbath preparations?
 - a. To have taken it upon yourself to go to Pilate himself to ask for His body?
 - b. To have expended the extraordinary effort to care for One who no longer walked this earth?
 2. It is a poignant scene, is it not?

- a. A tender scene

IV. Who Were These Guys?

- A. And yet, a cloud hangs over these two men
 - 1. As honorably as they have acted
 - 2. As commendably as they cared for the body of this rabbi
 - 3. Yet question marks abound regarding their standing among the people of God
 - a. Perplexities about their spiritual conditions
 - b. Doubts about what kind of faith they had – in any
- B. State for the record
 - 1. Faith is a matter of the heart of a human being
 - a. It is the heart that God knows
 - b. And it is the heart that we do not
 - 2. **2 Timothy 2:19** (ESV) —
 - a. 19 But God’s firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: “The Lord knows those who are his,”
 - b. and, “Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity.”
 - 3. **1 Samuel 16:7** (ESV) —
 - a. 7 “... For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.”
 - 4. We humans do what we can to discern that state of the heart by outward appearances
 - a. But our perspective is limited
 - b. Often we focus on irrelevant characteristics
 - c. And our judgments are frequently wrong
 - 5. God’s judgment is always right
 - a. But He is the only One who can look beyond the external facades and rightly distinguish true faith from the false
 - 6. Both these men acted commendably, honorably, righteously in caring for the body of Jesus
 - a. But others have done as much or more out of guilty consciences – which is a far cry from saving faith
 - b. And both of these men played some small part in the drama which led Jesus to the cross
 - c. And it’s easy to empathize with the guilt they must have felt when they realized that an innocent man was put to death
 - d. And they had done little to prevent it – though both were in a position to have done something about it
- C. **Joseph of Arimathea**
 - 1. **Wealthy (Matthew 27.57)**
 - a. It was his own family tomb – the tomb of a rich man (**Matthew 27.60**)
 - 2. **“Disciple of Jesus” (John 19.38; Matthew 27.57)**

3. “Respected member of the council” (Mark 15.43)
4. “Looking for the kingdom of God” (Mark 15.43)
5. “A good and righteous man” (Luke 23.50)
6. Significantly – “had not consented to” the council’s decision and action regarding Jesus (Luke 23.51)
7. But the NT doesn’t record a significant protest on his part regarding the decision to declare Jesus guilty and send Him to Pilate for execution
 - a. Evidently, his lack of consent was silent
8. Text: “... disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews...”
9. Evidently, he was an undercover disciple of Jesus
 - a. Never out of the closet
10. He was bothered by it all
 - a. But not emboldened

D. Nicodemus

1. Nicodemus is the man identified by John – repeatedly – as the one who came to Jesus by night (John 3.2; 19.39)
 - a. Reference to coming “by night” is not simply a statement of chronology
 - b. The implication is clear – Nicodemus didn’t want his council comrades to know of his visit
2. His confession
 - a. John 3:2 (ESV) — 2 This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.”
 - b. So far, so good – at least a capable theologian
 - c. But there have been capable theologians who have not savingly believed in Jesus
3. Aside from that – no additional mention of Nicodemus until his assistance of Joseph in caring for the body of Jesus

E. And then no additional mention of either Joseph of Arimathea or of Nicodemus in the rest of the NT

1. Or even in extra-biblical Christian literature of the 1st Century

F. Yet there is this that commends them

1. While they had been closet Christians, clandestine disciples, secret followers
 - a. They had finally come out of the closet, so to speak
 - b. Enough to identify themselves to Pilate and care for the body of Jesus
 - c. Which would certainly have been a public act
 - d. An act which would have been known to the fledgling Christian community
 - e. An act that would be followed by the similar ministry of the women who visited the tomb on the morning following the Sabbath
2. And they had done so – when the other disciples had become clandestine

themselves

- a. And had fled from public view
 - b. Cowering in a room somewhere hoping they would not be rounded up in some kind of grand inquisition
3. The true disciples were nowhere to be found
- a. But these two were moved to present themselves
 - b. And in no small way vulnerable to their own reputation and positions

V. **Can You be a Secret Disciple?**

A. **The Dangers**

1. The NT doesn't exactly commend itself to clandestine discipleship
2. **Luke 9:23** (ESV) —
 - a. 23 And he said to all, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me."
 - b. When juxtaposed against the actual experience of the cross, become all the more powerful
3. **Luke 14:27** (ESV) —
 - a. 27 "Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple."
4. **Matthew 10:32–33** (ESV) —
 - a. 32 So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven,
 - b. 33 but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.
5. **Romans 10:9–10** (ESV) —
 - a. 9 because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.
 - b. 10 For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.
6. Not very encouraging for one who is seeking to be a Christian and stay under the world's radar
7. Why were Joseph and Nicodemus secretive about their so-called "discipleship?"
 - a. Plain
 - b. **John 19:38** (ESV) — 38 After these things Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews...
8. Yet John gives another explanation for this secret discipleship earlier in the gospel
 - a. **John 12:42–43** (ESV) — 42 Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; 43 for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.

9. So it is not only fear that motivates such secret discipleship
 - a. Fear that one might be persecuted by the authorities, imprisoned, even killed
 - b. But it was a sense of social position that was at stake
 - c. They loved the approbation of other people more than the affirmation of God
 - d. Fear of ridicule
 - e. Fear that someone might make fun of you or deride you or mock you
 - f. Fear that you might be deplatformed, kicked off of Twitter, forced off of Facebook
 - g. Fear that you might lose friendship with some who are well-positioned and influential
10. So we're restrained in our public personas
 - a. It's ok that we have some kind of association with Christianity
 - b. But let's not be too outward about it
 - c. Let's not let anyone know that we think that Jesus is the only way or something radical like that
 - d. Let's not let anyone know that we think that one has to believe in Jesus to be saved, and that if one doesn't believe in Jesus they are condemned already
 - e. That's awfully narrow-minded
 - f. Even though that's exactly what Jesus says
11. It's dangerous to be a secret disciple, a clandestine Christian

B. **The Losses**

1. And think about what you lose by being secretive about your relationship with Jesus
2. **Relationship with Jesus**
 - a. Just think about Nicodemus and Joseph
 - b. They could have had 2-3 years of fellowship with Jesus
 - c. They could have listened to 2-3 years of instruction from Jesus
 - d. Their relationship with Jesus reflected no real connection, no real intimacy
 - e. They knew about Jesus; they didn't really know Jesus
 - f. Their relationship was one of distance and separation
 - g. If we approach our Christianity in a similar way, we will also discover that when push comes to shove, and we desperately need Jesus, He's not right there
 - h. We've ignored a real relationship with Him; what makes us think we can conjure Him up like a genie in a bottle
3. **Relationship with God's people**
 - a. If we don't have a real relationship with Jesus, we don't connect with His people either
 - b. The people Jesus loves
 - c. The people who are called the bride of Christ

- d. The people who are the apple of God's eye
 - e. The people who are there to help you grow and encourage you
 - f. The people who, as iron sharpens iron, so sharpen one another
 - g. The people who have walked this road before us, and can lead us onward in our journey to glory
4. One of the reasons for coming to in-person services
- a. We're very thankful for SPTV Channel 13 for those who are unable to come – a special blessing
 - b. But if you're able to come, identify with Jesus and with His people publicly
 - c. You'll know the difference and benefits of the flesh and blood body of Christ
- C. I don't know if Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus were truly believers or not
- 1. I can't know – I can't read the heart
 - 2. But that's not the main question of this passage
 - 3. The main question of this passage is what about you?
 - a. Are you reluctant to identify with Jesus and with His people?
 - b. Are you a secret disciple? Are you a clandestine disciple?

VI. What Will Draw You Into the Open?

- A. What drew Joseph and Nicodemus into the open?
- 1. It was the cross of Christ; His suffering and death
 - 2. That's because the love of God was on display in the death of Jesus
- B. **Romans 5:8** (ESV) — 8 but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.
- C. **Romans 8:32** (ESV) — 32 He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?
- D. Isn't that enough to draw you out into the open?
- 1. Isn't the death of the incarnate Son of God enough to, in spite of the social cost, come out and publicly proclaim your faith in Jesus?
 - 2. Are you willing, somehow, to explain to God, who sent His only Son to die in your place...
 - a. Willing to explain to God Almighty – the gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love...
 - b. Explain to Him that you think He ought to have done more
 - c. That is wasn't enough to give His Son
 - d. To die the death of abject humiliation as a common criminal
 - e. And to die in your place?
 - 3. And you're going to explain to Him that that's why you're going to play the Christianity game on the down-low
- E. No!
- 1. For the love of Christ compels us (2 Corinthians 5.14)
 - 2. Therefore we are ambassadors for Christ, God making His appeal through us. (2 Corinthians 5.20)