

 **Main Street**
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



John 19:31-42
“What Happened To The Corpse?”

March 29, 2015
(6th Sunday In Lent)

Pastor Phil Thrailkill
Main Street UMC
211 North Main St., Greenwood, SC 29646
Church Office: 864-229-7551
Church Website: www.msumc1.org

“Following Christ From City Center!”

"WHAT HAPPENED TO THE CORPSE?"

//2:13-25 Judgment Of Temple (Jesus Exceeds Passover)

1) vv.31-35 DAY OF PREPARATION, JEWISH REQUEST OF PILATE, ACTIONS TO BODY.

Good Friday, End Of Crucifixion Account, Concern = Ritual Purity

a) v.31 Request Of Pilate Granted, Jesus Certified As Dead (Dt. 21:23, Josh. 8:29, 10:27)

No Act Of Mercy, Leaders Do Not Want Jesus To Die On Sabbath,

[Time]

31 Since it was **the day of Preparation**, 18:28, Romans Left People On Cross Till Death: Took Days, Left For Vultures

PILATE in order to prevent the **BODIES** from remaining on the cross on the Sabbath Anxiety About Ritual Purity, 3 Victims (for that Sabbath was a high day), Dt. 21:22-23; Josh. 8:29, 10:27, This Passover Was A Sabbath (Saturday)

LEADERS **the Judeans** asked **Pilate** that their legs might be broken, //v.21, Ex. 12:46, *Crucifragium* Hastens Asphyxiation and that they might be **TAKEN AWAY**. (4x), Josephus *War* 4.314-317, On Jewish Burial Of The Crucified Concerned About Purity Issues After An Innocent Man Dies! Pollution Of Land!

b) vv.32-34 Jesus Twice Certified As Dead By Soldiers On The Death Squad.

Priest/Sacrifice: 1:29, 19:14 (Lambs), 18 (Isaac), 19:2 (Tunic); Blood, 1:7, 2:2, 3:5

SOLDIERS

32 So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first, Used Iron Mallet, Archaeological Evidence (1968) and of the other who had been crucified with him; Suspense = Is Jesus Next? No

33 1 but when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, Certified As Dead, Pierced

2 they did not break his legs. 5:31, 2 Great Symbols, What They Did Not Do: Break

34 2' But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, Thomas 20:27-28, What They Did Do: Pierce

1' and at once there came out blood and water. Life, 6:27, 53, 7:37-39, 3:5 + 6:53, 13:9-10, 1 Jn. 1:7, 5:6, No Apparition 3:6, 6:53, Ezek. 47:1-12, Pagan Gods/Goddesses Did Not Have Blood, *Iliad* 5.340-341

2) v.35 TESTIMONY OF BELOVED DISCIPLE TO TRUTH AND PURPOSE. Pause

Reliability Of Eyewitness Source! Remarkable Aside From John's Church

EYEWITNESS

35 a He who saw it has borne witness: //2:22, 6:64, 71, 12:6, 16, 33; 18:9, 32, *Beloved disciple?* 19:26

b his testimony is true; Johannine Community Speaks, 20:30-31 // 21:24-25

a' and he knows that he tells the truth: Event + Truth + Faith, 8:14

b' that you also may (continue to) believe. 3:16, 15:13, What? The Dead Jesus Was Bodily Raised!

Faith + Evidence, Incarnation Continues (1 Jn. 1:1-2, 4:1-2, 5:6-8, 2 Jn. 9)

2') vv.36-37 TESTIMONY OF SCRIPTURE TO GOD'S PURPOSES IN JESUS.

Jesus As Paschal Lamb Of New Covenant, David As Righteous Sufferer, 1 Cor. 15:7

SCRIPTURE

36 a For these things took place that the scripture might be fulfilled, 1:29, 35; According To Divine Purpose

b "Not a bone of him shall be broken." Ex. 12:10, 46, Num. 9:12 (Lamb), Ps. 34:20(righteous sufferer)

37 a' And again another scripture says, Not Some Awful Accident, Echo/Prophecy: 1, 2

b' "They shall look on him whom they have pierced." 3:14-15, 15:13, (Num. 21:8-9), Zech. 12:10 (MT), 20:27-28 (Thomas' evidence), Possibly Also Is. 35:5, 10

1) vv.38-42 DAY OF PREPARATION, REQUEST OF PILATE, ACTIONS TO BODY.

Joseph & Nicodemus: 2 Witnesses/ Continuity, Women Not Noted

a) vv.38-40 Request Of Pilate Granted, Two New Witnesses Handle The Dead Body. Unclean

Not A Relative, First Appearance Of Joseph, Courage: Respected In Sanhedrin

[Time]

38 1 *After this* Joseph of Arimathe'a, *12:32, 42-43, Mk. 15:42-43 (Wealthy, Waits For Kingdom), Lk. 23:50-51, Name (1)

FRIENDS 2 who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly, for fear of **the Judeans**, Mk. 15:43, Mt. 27:57-59, Is. 53:9, Character (2)

3 asked **Pilate** that he might **TAKE AWAY THE BODY** of Jesus, Handled: (3x) The Body (3)

and Pilate gave him leave. Philo In *Flaccum* 83 (e.g. body to family), Official Government Action

So he came and **TOOK AWAY HIS BODY**. No Swoon, Truly Died, Burial Place Was Known

39 1' Nicodemus also, Came "at night" Earlier; Now Takes A Risk! 3:1-2, 14-16, 19-21; 7:50-52, Name (1)

2' who had at first come to him by night, Audience Knows Action Is Misguided, Character (2)

3' came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds' weight. The Body (3)

40 They **TOOK THE BODY** of Jesus, Disposition, Probably Slaves, No Uncleaness, Num. 19:11

and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. 20:7, 2 Chron. 6:14

Death Catalyzes Public Acts Of Hesitant Disciples

b) vv.41-42 Jesus Is Buried As Dead By Two Witnesses: Really Dead! From Humiliation To Honor

Both In Church Of Holy Sepulchre, Not Criminal, Honor To King Of Jews

41 Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, 18:1//20:15, Mt. 27:60, Inclusion With 18:1-12 Garden

and in the garden a new tomb where no one had ever been laid. Is. 53:9, Uninhabited, No Confusion About Corpses

42 So because of **the Jewish day of Preparation**, Ending? Last In Long Series Of *Hand-Overs* Begun With Judas

as the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there. 3:16, Acts 13:29, 1 Cor. 15:3-5, Church Of Holy Sepulchre Site

Stand Up For Jesus! Secret Disciples Become Public! Died As Criminal, Buried As King!

Real Death Of Human Being, Completes Jesus Obedience, Part 1 Of Glorification, Defeat Of Satan, Magnet For The World, All For Us

A Brief Treatment Of John 19:31-42

This thought unit is part of a larger section (19:17-42): John's crucifixion scene. The form of vv.31-42 is a four part concentric pattern (1. vv.31-34, 2. v.35 // 2' vv.36-37, 1' vv.38-42). Inclusions in 1 // 1' are *the day of Preparation* (v.31 // v.42a), *the Judeans* (v.31a // v.38), *bodies/body* (v.31b // vv.38-40 [3x]), *Pilate* (v.31c // v.38b), *taken away/ took away* (v.31d // vv.38-40 [3x]), the time signatures *Since it was the day of Preparation* (v.31a) // *After this* (v.38a), a request of Pilate granted (v.31 // v.38), the death certified by soldiers (vv.33-34) // the death certified by Joseph and Nicodemus (vv.41-42). At the center are two testimonies which interrupt the narrative: 1) an eye-witness to the truth (v.35), 2) a dual testimony from Scripture to Jesus' identity (Pascal Lamb, Innocent Sufferer) and God's providence (vv.36-37). A chain of witnesses and custody is established so the body is not without supervision: from Pilate to soldiers to Joseph and Nicodemus to a tomb in a garden. Jesus is truly dead and visibly buried. It's over.

That year, as every seven, Passover and Sabbath are the same day which made Friday *the day of Preparation* for Passover with lambs slain from noon till 6:00pm. According to Dt. 21:23, "... his body shall not remain all night upon the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is accursed by God; you shall not defile your land which the LORD your God gives you for an inheritance." Since Jesus must be buried before sunset to avoid ritual impurity upon the land, and since the crucified sometimes lived for 2-3 days, a request is made for Pilate to order soldiers to break the legs of the three to prevent them from pushing up on their legs for a breath and thus soon suffocate (i.e. *crucifragium*). They assume Jesus will be *taken away* with the others for a common burial or else released to family (e.g. Philo, *Flaccus* 83). Will the dying be further mangled? The answer comes in vv.32-34 where the soldiers take an iron mallet and break the legs of the others since they are still alive, but Jesus is already dead and so is spared. To guarantee death, a soldier shoves a lance between Jesus' ribs to puncture the pericardium and heart; out spurt blood and serum (water). Since gods and goddesses in the ancient world did not have blood but water in their veins, Jesus is shown to be genuinely human, not an apparition. The symbolic meaning of the double flow is that, even in death, Jesus is the life-giver (e.g. eucharist and baptism).

The flow of the narrative is broken in 2. v.35 and 2' vv.36-37 with two examples of testimony from the gospel writer. The first is a statement of truth by an eyewitness (the beloved disciple?). The one who *saw* bears true witness; his purpose is that the church continue to believe the incarnation continued all the way through death and in the surprise of a bodily resurrection. That even these brutal events are under the guidance of God's providence is made clear in echoes of Scripture. Like the shank bone of the Passover lamb, "Not of bone of him shall be broken" (Ex. 12:10) and, like the innocent shepherd of Zechariah 12:10 (MT), the people of Jerusalem "look on him whom they have pierced." Jesus is the final Passover lamb and the fulfillment of the type of the righteous sufferer. His death, its manner and details, are not an accident of history; behind the unfolding script is the deep purpose of God as echoed in Scripture.

In vv.38-40 a pair come out of the shadows in fulfillment of 12:32, "...and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, *will draw all men to myself*." A dead Jesus calls disciples! Joseph goes to Pilate to ask for the body. Following a living prophet is dangerous, a dead one less so, and Torah must be fulfilled. Is it because of his status in the Council that it's granted? Yes. Servants likely did the work to shield Joseph from corpse-defilement and its seven day cleansing. Nicodemus, who consulted with Joseph, buys seventy-five pounds of spices- a royal amount- to keep down odor so mourning at the site may occur. Family cannot help; others are called from the wings. The body is wrapped in linen and buried in a new tomb on a stone shelf. In a year Jesus' bones will be collected and placed in an ossuary box. It's over.

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE CORPSE?

“So they came and took away his body.”

From the cross to the tomb the corpse of Jesus was handled.

Johnny Barbee was a giant of a man and a faithful member of Monticello Methodist, one of four churches that formed the Fairfield Circuit where I served my first appointment from December ‘79 through June ‘84. Six foot three and somewhere north of three hundred fifty pounds, Johnny was an imposing presence. Big belly, huge arms and hands, several boar-like bristles at the tip of his bulbous nose, a forest of course hair in each large ear, most often found wearing a loose fitting overhauls with the buttons open on each side for extra room. To see Johnny in what counted as church clothes was to know just how uncomfortable a man could be. His dress shoes were the largest and widest that could be bought- triple E or something, nearly square in shape - then unlaced and opened up for extra space.

He was once- I am told- the meanest drunk in the western part of the county; that was before he had a vision of the devil who’d come to take his soul. You did not want Big John standing between you and the screen door when it got hot in a local joint. Broken pool cues and doors left swinging on hinges were his specialty. Johnny wept as he told me how one day when he was intending to drink himself to death, Jesus appeared in his bedroom just after the devil’s arrival and how the Savior shoved the dark, swarthy angel aside, “Johnny’s not gonna die a drunk. He belongs to me.” Johnny’s account is that he walked down the hall behind the two visitors, after which they vanished. He then poured out the quart he was mostly through with and never drank again. The next Sunday Johnny was in church. I’d find him waiting when I pulled into the first of three Sunday morning stops on a thirty-mile circuit, and on most Sundays his equally tough, though-not-quite-as-stout wife Geneva was with him. We had a ritual. I’d say “Johnny, why don’t you lace up your shoes?” and he’d say back, “Can’t preacher; ain’t no shoes made big e-nuff for feet like these!” and then he’d wiggle his toes and laugh before standing up to shake my hand.

The day Johnny told me the story of his conversion from Jim Beam to Jesus we must have looked like Jack sitting down with the Giant in the land atop the great green beanstalk. Johnny built cedar furniture, and the rocking chairs were all built

for people his size, not mine. I crawled up into one of the huge rockers, wide as one of those new super-sized wheel chairs, and when my back was to the back of the chair my short legs stuck out straight only about a foot beyond the front of the seat. I remember thinking, “This is how a three year old feels at the dinner table.” And when I rocked back, so long was the arc of the rocker, I felt like I’d fall off the edge of the earth backwards, and when I came forward I had to hold on to keep from being launched into orbit. Johnny said, “Preacher Phil, I couldn’t find no furniture to fit a man my size, so I decided to make me some.” There we sat under his car port.

My best Johnny Barbee story, however, is one that happened when Geneva died of cancer. It was just before the evening visitation at Pope Funeral Home in Winnsboro. I was sitting beside Johnny across from the open casket when he looked out the window, “Oh no, here she comes.”

“Who, Johnny?”

“That ole lady Julia always lookin’ for a husband. Whenever a married woman dies in this county, she shows up at the visitation to check out the widower to see if he’ll suit her. Been doin’ it for years, and ain’t found no new husband yet. Shows up even when she don’t know the dead nor any of their kin. Comes dressed up too, matchin’ purse n’ shoes n’ earbobs n’ everything.” This I had to see.

I heard the door of the funeral home open with a long ring of the mechanical bell ringer. I couldn’t see her, but I heard her speak. To a member of the staff that met her, she asked, “*Whar’s the corpse?*” I couldn’t believe it! Not, “Which room is the Barbee visitation?” but “*Whar’s the corpse?*” Not whispered either, but loud. I looked at Johnny; Johnny winked, “She ain’t right, preacher, and I ain’t got no interest in her at all. Who’d wanna marry a woman like that?”

About that time she turned the corner, “Oh, is this Mr. Barbee? Why I’m so sorry about your loss.” But to this very day, every time I enter a funeral home I’m tempted to ask, “*Whar’s the corpse?*” Life’s funny if you pay attention.

I tell you this memory of my early days for several reasons, the first of which is it’s true; I was an eyewitness. When I got home I said to Lori, “You won’t believe what just happened.” She has now learned to reply, “I can’t imagine; please tell me, dear.” Secondly, it may keep some of you from trying to pick up men or women at funeral homes! And thirdly, it gives us the question beneath the surface of John’s story, and the question is, “*Whar’s the corpse?*”

TURNING TO THE TEXT

Pilate Grants Permission To Hasten Jesus' Death (vv.31-35)

I've been with people when they died. It always leaves me shaken and in awe, not least because it will one day be me! I was in the room alone with my father when he died. When I went to sleep on the cot, he remained with us - his personality still indwelling his failing frame; when I woke half an hour later I knew at a glance, "He's gone. My father's dead." I marked the cross on his forehead and wept. When such a man dies, it's as if someone burned down a library. And while I am no expert in the physiology of clinical death, there is a transition. I've seen it. Someone's there; then they're gone. Human presence in all its particularities is now palpably absent. *Elvis has left the building!* The soul is gone, the body still with us, a vacant building.¹

We are used to people entering and leaving our presence and think nothing of it. But here is something strange: the body is present, but the person has left. The unity between body and soul has been cleaved in two by death. The personal animating principle is now missing for the first time since conception, and that something is *the soul*, the essential self or human personality, or- as one British physicist and priest puts it- the software has now been downloaded from worn-out hardware onto God's server to await installation in a new resurrection body at the end of the age.² To confirm death in the ancient world you looked for movement, felt for a pulse, put your ear to the chest for a heartbeat, or placed a mirror in front of the mouth and looked for condensation. You waited to make sure it was final. It's why we have coroners to confirm death and make sure it was not aided or hastened.

Roman death squads were good at their work, and they had ways- even if the victims lingered for days- to bring a short end when needed: break the lower legs with an iron mallet so they can no longer push up to breathe. The sick thud of a club

¹ For a defense of the soul by a Christian philosopher and apologist, see J.P. Moreland, *The Soul: How We Know It's Real And Why It Matters* (Chicago, ILL: Moody, 2014); also his paper, ""Naturalism And The Crisis Of The Soul," www.sebts.edu/faithandculture/pdf_docs/naturalism_and_the_crisis_of_the_soul. His pithy summary is, "I'm indivisible, possibly disembodied, a possessor of free will; my brain and body aren't." His lecture, "What Is The Soul and is it Real," is on audio at <http://cct.biola.edu/resources/what-is-the-soul-and-is-it-real>.

² John Polkinghorne, as referenced by N.T. Wright in See David Van Biema, "Christians Wrong About Heaven Says Bishop," *Time*, Feb. 7, 2008, <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1710844,00>.

against flesh, a scream, a collapsed form with perhaps compound fractures protruding, the onset of convulsions, and death in minutes.³ So common was the practice it had a Latin name: *crucifragium*, bone-breaking for the crucified. ISIS is bringing the horror back, and we are repulsed. We are naive about evil, aren't we?

Even quicker is to thrust a lance tip between two ribs through the pericardial sack into the heart. Depending on how long the victim's been dead, serum might have begun separating from blood and be distinguished as they spurt out the wound from accumulated pressure.⁴ Death was science to these brutal men who stood watch to make sure there were no rescue attempts. So in answer to Julia's question, "*Whar's the corpse?*" the answer is, "It hangs limp and breathless on the cross."

This is the crucifix found in Catholic and Orthodox churches; most Protestants display the empty cross of resurrection. But we need both. A crucifix at the front so as we come into church we see a Jesus who knows the pain of the world we've just left for an hour, and on the back wall an empty cross so as we leave the building we enter the world to meet the risen Jesus. Both are history; both are biblical; and we Protestants have become a bit squeamish, haven't we? We sing "When I Survey The Wondrous Cross" but we don't want to look at it much; it's not happy or positive!

The last paragraph before the current one ended with three actions of Jesus which demonstrate he's no mere victim, "He said, 'It is finished,' bowed his head and handed over the Spirit."⁵ The Good Shepherd voluntarily lays down his life for the sheep. Not a swoon or a coma or state of suspended animation, but dead.

The facts are first that Jesus was certified as dead by multiple witnesses- first hostile, then friendly. Secondly, that he was buried in a known place by two

³ On medical details, see William D. Edwards, M.D., et. al., "On The Physical Death of Jesus Christ, *JAMA* 1986: 255:1455-1463; Edwin Blum, "Jesus And Jama," *CMS Journal*, Fall 1986, 4-11; on archaeology, see Vassilios Tzaferis, "Crucifixion: The Archaeological Evidence," *BAR*, Jan./Feb. 1985, 44-53; for a later review of the evidence, "The Crucified Man from Giv'at ha Mitar: A Reappraisal," *Israel Exploration Journal*, Vol. 35, No. 1, 1985, 22-27. An update for shroud fans is Rick Lanser, "Some Ruminations on the Shroud of Turin," www.bible archaeology.org/post/2014/07/24/.

⁴ Ben Witherington, *John's Wisdom* (Louisville, KY: WJK, 1995), 311.

⁵ 19:30.

prominent Jewish leaders; the women and beloved disciple knew where. Why the overkill on death? Because resurrection is *from the dead*. If there is no real death, there can be no talk of resurrection, which is one reason the Koran rejects the death of Jesus that Friday.⁶ Deity can't suffer; someone died in his place as a double. No death, no resurrection; no resurrection, no ultimate vindication, and if not vindicated by God, then Jesus is not the final reveler, so guess who comes along six hundred years later with a new and better word? Mohammed! But it is historically certain Jesus died on the cross. And if raised, as we confess, he's a class all by himself.⁷

Looking back, it's clear the story is told with emphasis on the death to clarify the nature of the resurrection. Jesus did not reawaken in the coolness of the tomb; a mangled Jesus would not be mistaken for a risen Lord! It was not the wrong tomb that was found empty. His appearances- while numinous- were not ghostly; the marvelous new resurrection body was touchable and bore the identifying marks of the cross, wounds Thomas was invited to probe.⁸ It was the same man. Jesus was buried because he was dead.⁹ What happened to Lazarus is not what happened to him. Lazarus came back to this life in a revived body and died later on; Jesus went not just *into* but *through* death, was given a new body with new powers fit for a new world, then came back to show it off and relaunch his movement. He is alive!

The assertion about God is that God was active even here, as signaled by the theme of the fulfillment of Scripture. Jesus' cross was not an historical accident. What happens is within the divine plan, and to this event the beloved disciple was an eyewitness along with others. It is only in light of resurrection that the historical details acquire their deep, layered meanings. No one cared about the details of the

⁶ See Michael Licona, *Paul Meets Muhammed: A Christian-Muslim Debate On The Resurrection* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006).

⁷ On the continuing dialog over Jesus death, see Michael G. Fonner, "Jesus' Death By Crucifixion In The Quran: An Issue For Interpretation And Muslim-Christian Relations," *Journal Of Ecumenical Studies*," 29:3-4, Summer-Fall, 1992, 432-450. On how early Christian heresies (e.g. Sethian Gnosticism) on the Arabian peninsula shaped Muslim misunderstandings of Christianity, see Alister McGrath, *Heresy* (San Francisco, HarperOne, 2009), Chapter 10, "Heresy and the Islamic View of Christianity," 222-229.

⁸ 20:19-31.

⁹ Paul independently confirms the burial in 1 Cor. 15:4.

other two who died that day; we don't even know their names, just two more misguided Jewish patriots held up as examples why not to commit sedition against Rome. But the details about Jesus were remembered precisely because of what began to happen a bit over thirty-six hour later. Without Easter, Jesus is just another dead Jewish wanna-be who underestimated the treachery of nation's leaders and the brutality of Roman power. But with Easter at full strength we have God's ultimate endorsement of this one life as divine revelation.¹⁰ The living God says, "Jesus historical story is my hidden story; it's where I'm to be found, at his address."¹¹

It's Friday afternoon but not yet sundown and the beginning of Passover, which that year was also a Sabbath Saturday, so doubly holy. To have a corpse on a cross after sunset brings ritual uncleanness on the whole of the land.¹² This is why Jewish leaders, likely the chief priests, asked Pilate the Roman governor to break legs so all three could be quickly buried in a plot reserved for the executed.¹³ Verse 31, "... the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken, that they might be lifted off and taken away." After all, "We have a law to uphold, a holy festival to celebrate. Get Jesus out of sight; break his legs; the clock is ticking!" This is why running a religion is so dangerous; you can easily grow blind to where God shows up!

Unless there's intervention from family or powerful friends, Jesus will be buried dishonorably in tomb reserved for such outside the city. Only after a year can the bones be moved to an honorable location. The sick part is that Jerusalem temple leaders are unconcerned about an innocent man they helped kill and greatly concerned about the details of ceremonial purity. Morality is out; religion is in, and when that happens, you can lynch a man on Saturday night under a flaming cross and sing "Are you washed in the blood?" Sunday morning. It was a jolt, and a bit of an ugly family secret, for me to learn recently that both my grandfathers were Klansmen, but then so were lots of white men in the south in the 1920's. Not excusable but

¹⁰ For sermonic essays, see my *Resurrection: A Pastor's Reading of the Major New Testament Resurrection Passages* (Fort Valley, GA: Bristol, 2015).

¹¹ For an historical and theological reading of Jesus' death, see N.T. Wright, *Simply Jesus* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2011), Chapter 13, "Why Did The Messiah Have To Die," 167-180.

¹² Deuteronomy 21:21-23.

¹³ m. Sanhedrin 6:5, t. Sanh. 9:8 for a later witness to such a burial plot.

common place; of the details I know little, just enough to make me shiver. But bad religion is bad wherever it's found, in ancient Palestine with Jewish temple leaders getting Roman to break legs or here in the southland with Methodists and Baptists wearing white hoods or now in Mosul with radical Muslims. No faith is immune to this type of moral blindness and atrocity, including Catholics with their coverups of child abuse. Humans are capable of such, and it's apparently easier under the legitimizing cover of a faith. They hated Jesus; they were glad to have him finished off. "Go ahead and smash his legs; the clock is ticking to Passover."

Certified By The Death Squad (vv.32-34)

It takes a blow to shatter a bone. An iron mallet will do it every time, verse 32, "So the soldiers came and *broke the legs of the first,*" of the second as well, and would have done the same to the prisoner hung between them, but Jesus was already dead. Just to make sure, a swifter method was used, a lance between the ribs, and as they had seen before- being men of experience- out spurted fluid that was already beginning to separate, what John calls *blood and water*. Jewish leaders have their way, but not as they wished. Jesus beat them to the finish line. Like the shank bone of the Passover lamb, he was intact, so the symbol worked.

Because we do not live in that world, a world where the one God of Israel faced off with the many gods and goddesses of ancient paganism, we miss something John intended and his hearers would immediately understand. It is the affirmation that Jesus was a real human being, not just a heavenly being hiding out in human disguise, a belief also held by some later Christians whose idea was that deity can't suffer.¹⁴

Pastor John Dickson once spoke on the wounds of God at a university in Sydney, Australia. During the questions, a Muslim man rose to explain "how preposterous was the claim that the Creator of the universe should be subjected to the forces of his own creation, that he would have to eat, sleep, and go to the toilet, let alone die on a cross." His remarks were intelligent, clear, and civil. The man went on to argue it was illogical that God, the "cause of all causes" could have pain inflicted on him by lesser beings. Dickson thought for a minute but couldn't come

¹⁴ "Early in the second century, the influential Gnostic thinker Cerinthus popularized this idea of Jesus being possessed by a divine force at this baptism. The crucifixion would then have marked the moment that the power of Christ abandoned the man Jesus" (Phillip Jenkins, *The Jesus Wars* [San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2010], 45-46).

up with a knockdown argument or a witty comeback. Finally he simply thanked the man for making the uniqueness of the Christian claim so clear and said, "What the Muslim denounces as blasphemy, the Christian holds precious: God has wounds."¹⁵

Ancient pagans believed the bodies of their gods, male and female, contained not blood but water. In a scene from Plutarch, Alexander the Great resists those who would make him a god by pointing to the blood that comes from his wound. He said, "This is blood, as you can see, and not blood-water (i.e. water as blood), *such as flows in the holy gods.*"¹⁶ Whatever else Jesus may be, he is a genuinely human, not an apparition, and if he is- as John says, *the Word become flesh* - then the incarnation, the union of God the Son with the human Jesus endures through the suffering of the cross. In Jesus God suffers by identification with us.

The Christ or the Spirit or the Divinity did not *lift off* Jesus before the cross to avoid pain. The incarnation- the union of divinity and humanity- is permanent. The resurrection flesh of Jesus, which bears the memory of his history and the scars of his death, is welded into the Trinitarian life of God. That the church interpreted the blood as a symbol of communion and the water as baptismal is a natural development but not John's point. The question is "*Whar's the corpse?*" It's right there where it was nailed six hours ago. Jesus humanity is not a temporary disguise.

Two Vital Testimonies (vv.35-37).

Thus far in our story we've dealt with the enemies of Jesus: Jewish leaders, Pontius Pilate, cruel soldiers, the forces of death. But is the Father of Jesus and the Spirit who accompanied him able to use such blind hatred to further divine purposes? Yes, so while God did not directly will evil, God uses its inevitability and predictability to witness to divine creativity. The first sign is that the beloved disciple is allowed to be present as a male eyewitness with credibility. This is the eyewitness at the heart of John's Gospel. So six decades later, sometime perhaps in the early nineties of the first century, the church is still remembering that what they believe about Jesus, and what they've experienced of him in worship and through the Holy Spirit, is not something made up; it's warranted by one who saw events first hand. So think of

¹⁵ Timothy Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering* (New York, NY: Dutton Adult, 2013), 120.

¹⁶ *Moralia* 180.e, quoted in C. Talbert, *John* (New York: Crossroads, 1992), 245.

John 19:31-42 12

verse 35 as an explanatory footnote which breaks into the story as a personal testimony, “He who saw it has borne witness: his testimony is true; and he knows that he tells the truth: that you may continue to believe.”¹⁷

It’s all myth, some say, all rumor, all hype; nothing to it! No, says the church; there were eyewitnesses, some of whom lived a long time. The beloved disciple saw Jesus die, saw him pierced, and likely - with the women- taken down and buried. The same man saw Jesus alive in a resurrection body, and if you count a person sane and honest on other grounds, perhaps you should believe what he says about Jesus. My policy is that when people who are stable tell me of an unusual experience they’ve had- say a dream or a vision or a word from God or an angelic visitation- I do not treat them skeptically. Now if they are flaky or nutty or prone to prevarication, I’m a bit more skeptical, but the fact is that God interrupts the stable and unstable alike.

So in the telling of what happened, John pushes the pause button, first for a word from the beloved disciple in v.35, then for a Bible lesson in verses 36 and 37. Like the Passover Lamb, and like the righteous man whom God protects, not a bone of Jesus is broken, which echoes both Exodus 12:10 and Psalm 34:20. One of the great projects of the early church was to re-read the Old Testament in the light of Jesus’ life and to see how many clear and not-so-clear connections could be found.

The second citation is from Zechariah, “They shall look on him whom they have pierced.” What happens to Jesus, before and after death, is within the will of God. What the beloved disciple saw, Scripture echoes. The governing leaders thought they had total power of Jesus, but there was One- an invisible One beyond them- who so shaped events that the church’s message would have biblical evidences and unmeasurable eyewitnesses. Such is the genius of God’s providence.

Two Hesitant Followers Come To Jesus’ Aid (vv.38-40)

That the hand of God is active is even more clear in the final paragraph where two highly-placed Jewish leaders, Joseph and Nicodemus- both members of the ruling Council- come out of the shadows of fear to side with Jesus and ensure he receives a respectful, even lavish, burial. He dies as a criminal and is buried as a royal.

¹⁷ On the control of eye-witness testimony in the gospel, see Richard Baukham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), Chapter 15, “The Witness of the Beloved Disciple,” 384-411.

If there were these two, I wonder how many more men were fascinated with Jesus, even believed in some sense, but who - for political or family reasons- did not openly identify with him during the ministry? Even today, there are secret disciples among Muslim leaders, among powerful Washington politicians, and in the halls of media elites. They keep a low profile, some with a guilty conscience because of cowardice, others with a clear conscience because God had instructed them to keep quiet for now and earn respect through excellence. You may be sure God has people everywhere, waiting in the wings for assignments. To side with Jesus the upstart prophet in public was risky, and while we may regret their hesitance- that Joseph lived in fear of his peers and that Nicodemus first came to Jesus at night, they came forward with a burial plan.¹⁸ Their sense of honor and respect was greater than fears about their future, and that day they became men in a new sense, *his men*, no longer part of the secret service of undercover disciples.

Joseph used his position to procure the body from Pilate; Nicodemus supplied linen and spices. These are the duties of disciples for a Master- what the disciples of John the Baptist did for him- and when Peter and the rest fled, God called others out of the shadows. If we fail, God will call someone else to do the work. If United Methodists yield to cultural pressure and veer away from apostolic faith and practice, God will raise up new movements to carry the torch we willingly dropped to embrace the fashions of our age. He once raised up the Methodists, and he can raise up others, as is happening now. As with NASA, the Lord has multiple redundancy and layered backups built into the strategies of divine providence. Our disobedience will have consequences for us, but it will not thwart God's purposes, and there is both challenge and comfort in this thought.

What I note is what's repeated. The words *bodies* and *taken way* which appear once in verse 31 appear three times in verses 38 through 40: *take away the body... took away his body... took the body of Jesus*. Why the density of repetition about a body and its movements? Because, if you remember, John's underlying question is "Whar's the corpse?" And his answer is, "It was never out of sight." The beloved

¹⁸ C.F. Evans offers an insight I've not seen before, "Because the Jewish Council (or Sanhedrin) delivered Jesus to the Roman authorities for execution, it was incumbent upon them to arrange for a proper burial (as in *m. Sanh.* 6.5). This task fell to Joseph of Arimathea" (Craig A. Evans, "The Silence of the Burial," in C. Evans, N.T. Wright, *Jesus, The Final Days* (Louisville, KY: WJK, 2009], 60).

John 19:31-42 14

disciple and four women, including Mary Magdalene, witness the whole thing.¹⁹ “They,” meaning the team of Joseph and Nicodemus- or at least their slaves in order to avoid ritual contamination- took the body down from the cross and prepared it quickly for burial with linen wrappings and an obscene amount of spices, enough for a king! John is clear: Jesus died an innocent and was buried as a king, *The King of the Jews* is what the sign said, wasn’t it? So God mocks their mockery by arranging for men of influence to take care of final arrangements in style.

Note the end of a long chain of ten public handovers that began in the Garden of Gethsemane and concluded in a garden tomb:

Judas hands Jesus over to the soldiers;
the soldiers hand him over Annas;
Annas passes him on to Pilate;
next Pilate to the soldiers for scourging,
then Pilate to the death squad for execution;
they then pass Jesus onto the cross
where Jesus passes from life into death;
Pilate finally passes the corpse to two Jewish leaders
who pass the corpse into a newly-hewn tomb in which King Jesus lies in state.

It is a veritable production line of hatred and cruelty with dignity only at the end. And- this is very important- it was not the wrong body and not the wrong tomb. *So whar’s the corpse?* Answer: “It’s under the watchful eyes of a series of people whose activities are documented; there is a chain of custody and evidence.”

Everyone knew Jesus would rot in the tomb; spices keep down the odor so family and friends could mourn near the tomb, even within it.²⁰ In a year the bones would be arranged in an ossuary box to leave the shelf for the next occupant. That Nicodemus way over-did it may be the offering of a guilty conscience, at another level the providence of God witnessing that Jesus is the rejected king of the Jews.

Notice that John’s telling is all about - almost obsessively- *the body*: the crucified, human, suffering, pierced but unbroken, dead body of Jesus. *Whar’s the*

¹⁹ 19:25b-27.

²⁰ On mourning within a tomb, see Evans and Wright, *Jesus...*, 44.

corpse? It was a body that died, a body that was then transformed by the glorious and life-giving power of the Holy Spirit.²¹ The continuity of history is the physical body of Jesus, the raw physicality of his flesh. *Whar's the corpse?* Well, let's keep reading because it's not yet come to its resting place.

Jesus Buried (vv.41-42)

The soft limestone around Jerusalem makes for relatively easy excavation. People with money hired workers with iron chisels and hammers to dig out a chamber with a low entrance, a small room, several flat shelves on which the bodies are laid, and a grove at the entrance into which a round stone is rolled to keep out the scavenging animals and discourage thieves who want to steal and resell linen. Such was the *new tomb* in which Jesus was placed, and he is its first occupant.²²

The new tomb was close by in a garden, and soon the body was prepared and placed on a low shelf.²³ The stone rolled in place with a thud. Mourners would come early Sunday, but Sabbath was drawing nigh, and everyone stopped work, even the public work of grieving. Such was custom, except in emergencies, and by their swift action Joseph and Nicodemus avoided such. They were Jewish leaders, and only later would they learn how perfectly timed was their public identification with Jesus. Trust in Jesus is personal, but never merely private, and if it does not at some point go and remain public, it's a fantasy and not worthy of the name. If you wear a gold band to announce you're married, why are some so hesitant to speak the name of Jesus with love and respect? Are you- like Joseph and Nicodemus- a secret disciple?

²¹ Ibid. N.T. Wright, Chapter 3, "The Surprise of Resurrection," 75-108, also his essay, "Can a Scientist Believe in the Resurrection?" in *Surprised by Scripture* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2014), 41-63.

²² On the recent archaeology of ancient tombs and mausoleums, see John Dominic Crossan & Jonathan L. Reed, *Excavating Jesus* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 2001), Chapter 6, "How To Bury A King," 230-270; for an historical weighing of the burial evidence, see C. Evans, "The Silence of the Burial," in Evans and Wright, *Jesus...*, 39-74; also his essay, "Getting The Burial Traditions and Evidence Right," in Michael F. Bird, et. al., *How Jesus Became God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 71-93.

²³ On the crucifixion and burial sites see "Golgotha: A Reconsideration of the Evidence for the Sites of Jesus' Crucifixion and Burial," *Bible and Spade*, Spring 2002, www.biblearchaeology.org/bookstore/product.aspx?id=14,

What will it take for you to blow your cover and side with him and his people?

CONCLUSION

Christian psychiatrist Dr. John White tells a story of his days as a med student. For one of his classes, he missed a practicum about venereal disease and had to make it up at the clinic. When he arrived, White ended up in a line with a string of patients who needed antibiotics. White barged up to the front, "I need to see the doctor."

"That's what everybody says," the head nurse snorted back, "now get in line."

"But I'm a medical student."

"Big deal," said the nurse, "You got it the same way as everybody else; now you can stand in line like everybody else." John White writes:

“In the end I managed to explain to her why I was there, but I can still feel the sense of shame that made me balk at standing in line with the other men who had an embarrassing disease. Yet Jesus shunned shame as he went to the cross. And the moral gulf that separated him from us was far greater than that separating me from the men at the clinic ... But he crossed the gulf, joining our ranks, embraced us and still remained pure. He identified with those he came to save. He became like us.”²⁴

Good Friday says this is how far God goes to identify with us and open a new way for us to come home. The cross was not tacked onto Jesus' life; it was his trajectory from the start. His confrontation with current management is inevitable. So *Whar's the corpse?* Jesus lies in dark silence in a new tomb as its first inhabitant. His voice stopped, his life taken, the light of the world snuffed out. Those in Jewish and Roman power think they're done with the trouble-maker. Good riddance!

Our religion is not very spiritual- if by spiritual you mean non-material. In fact, it's all about a Jewish male body. Conceived by the Holy Spirit- a fetal body floating in an inland ocean; born of the Virgin Mary- a helpless tiny body with a bloody cone-head, circumcised on day eight; crucified under Pontius Pilate- a tortured body, dead, buried, a corpse pale and waxy, wrapped in linen, pickled in spices. So “*Whar's the corpse?* Is there another move coming? Is this his final resting place? It's the Sabbath; even God waits to act in the defense of Jesus. Come back next week.

²⁴ John White, *Excellence in Leadership* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 1986), 24.
