

Lenten Midweek 5 – 2025
The Burial of Christ and Courage
(The Antithesis of Cowardly Paralysis)
2 Corinthians 5:1-10
John 19:38-42

St. John tells us that Joseph of Arimathea was a disciple of Christ, but a secret one (John 19:38). Fear kept it a secret. Joseph's fear. Nicodemus also helped bury the Lord Jesus. Nicodemus came to talk to Jesus by night (John 3:2). Everyone since forever believes that Nicodemus came at night because he didn't want anyone to know that he was talking to this upstart rabbi. Were both men wealthy? Did both men occupy positions of stature within their community? Popularity is a heady tonic. Losing one's place among one's peers has paralyzed the hearts of great men and not-so-great men. Fear doesn't really care whether the world regards you as great or not-so-great. Listen to this editorial remark in John's Gospel: "... many even of the authorities believed in him [Jesus], but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God" (John 12:42-43).

Did Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus see the glory of God in a corpse? Jesus was dead. His body was slipping into postmortem rigidity. Christ's commanding voice, His inspiring voice was stilled, silent. Miracles were in short supply at Golgotha, or so it seemed. What had transpired appeared to be the opposite of a miracle. Emptiness ravaged the hearts of those who witnessed it. They beat their breasts as a gesture that everything was wrong (Luke 23:48). Powerlessness and the cruelest disappointment sank their sharp teeth into the hearts of Christ's people. Perhaps by beating their breasts they are indicting themselves because they did nothing to stop this travesty. Cowardice is difficult to absolve when you are the one pronouncing your own absolution. Of all the unhappy things that we know about ourselves, cowardice yells the loudest in our conscience.

Perhaps, after the Lord died on that cross, perhaps Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus just didn't care what people thought anymore. Perhaps their grief swamped their fear, their cowardice. It must have been a compelling moment. I'm confident that Joseph and Nicodemus knew that goodness was being unjustly judged. They knew that Jesus had captured their hearts. They knew that truth emanated from Jesus. They knew that they needed what He had, that they were "more" in His company, that they didn't want to go back to what they were apart from Him. Does that sound familiar? Have I just described you?

Aristotle said that courage is the First Virtue because it makes all the other virtues possible. Do you believe that? Wisdom needs courage to act – both Winston Churchill and Martin Luther King, Jr. said something to that effect. Does faith need courage? Are they easily separated? Why did Peter sink, as he was boldly walking to the Lord on the sea? What was the relationship between faith and courage, faith and fear? How much of a self-indictment did Peter go through after that episode? How much failure did Peter endure until he said "Enough!"? Peter wasn't there when our Lord was buried. The shadowy disciples Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus were. Is fear like a straightjacket that Joseph and Nicodemus finally threw off? Were tears the catalyst for abandoning fear?

If you could pick any event, any scene from Jesus' life to be present at, what would it be? I suspect that many of you would pick His birth. The shepherds, the wonder of God first revealing His sacred face, the pastoral setting, the inherent glory – it would be a joy to see. I also presume that some of y'all might choose when the paralytic was healed or when Jesus turned water into wine or when He rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Not many of us would choose when He was buried. Why is that? Is it because of grief? I have known folks who seem to enjoy holding onto grief. Please don't misunderstand me. Loss is real. The pain of loss is often uncontrollable, it lingers and it imports a melancholy that doesn't want to loosen its grip. But it is also true that some refuse to see silver linings, refuse to see the resurrection, refuse to see that death is not the victor. Why would we not choose to go to the garden tomb with Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea on Good Friday?

Does love give you courage? Looking at Christ's corpse, do you see love? They beat their breasts but there was something transcendent in Jesus' dead body. What seemed meaningless had meaning as nothing else had meaning. The wounds in His flesh announce victory, announce completion, announce divine love, divine commitment, divine achievement. The dead body of Jesus defines Christianity. God, who created heaven and earth, gave His life for me and now the vessel of His triumph is laid tenderly in a tomb. With no reservation, the Son of God gave His life for you. Would you not want to see Him laid in His tomb? No one has ever loved you like this. In spite of your selfishness, your petty vindictiveness, your amoral animosity toward your neighbor and God's very commandments, this Savior gives Himself to you unreservedly. His corpse is laid into humanity's tomb. Adam and Eve's bones lie beneath Christ's resting place. Satan's unrelenting grip on our throats is released by the righteousness of this dead Messiah. Do the eyes of your heart see this? Does your faith see this?

That's enough, you know. We walk by faith, not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). So we are always of good courage (2 Corinthians 5:6). That isn't a motto, or a biblical sound bite. That's the open door to living well. In this life we live in a tent (2 Corinthians 5:1). A tent, by definition, isn't permanent. In heaven we will be further clothed, adorned with a permanent dwelling (2 Corinthians 5:4). Christ's sacrifice is permanent. Jesus' dead body guarantees that you will have a heavenly body. Fear of death is the thing that makes shadowy disciples. Desiring the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God makes people shadowy disciples. The uneasy self-absolution for cowardice is more frequent for shadowy disciples. Christian cowardice is an oxymoron, it's an emotional straightjacket, a spiritual straightjacket that Christ came to cast off of all His people.

I would suggest to you that Lent makes Christians, not Easter. An Easter Christian is the shadowy variety. Lent is more than waiting for Easter. Lent is gladly going to His tomb. Seeing Jesus laid in the tomb and bending the knee to His glory in that priceless moment is to have all the clouds of unbelief and fear and dread and self-concern stripped away. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea are icons for us – humble, steadfast, unconcerned about their standing in the public square. I get the sense that nothing could tear them away from their solemn yet holy task. I get the sense that they went home changed. I get the sense that when Easter came that they interpreted the resurrection in light of placing Jesus in the tomb and not the other way around. Maybe I'm wrong. Either way, courage bloomed in almost everyone. Joy bloomed in almost

everyone. Panic was awakened among the Pharisees and the Roman authorities. Christians remembered Jesus' teaching, Jesus' courage.

Jairus' daughter was pronounced dead. Jairus' received the news while in Jesus' company, while he and the Lord walked gravely to Jairus' house. The news might have paralyzed you and me. Jesus said: "Do not be afraid. Only believe" (Mark 5:36). What did the Lord say to her? That little girl, what did the Lord say to her? "Little girl, I say to you, arise" (Mark 5:41). Those words come from the mouth of the One who laid in our tomb, who died our death, who paid the price for our sin, who triumphed over our enemy, who rose and who still has the marks of the nails in His flesh. When Jesus was buried, the earth was prepared to erupt with new life. Courage, my friends. Great and abounding and steadfast courage – its basis is sound.