

John 19.31-42 Sermon / COB / 05.10.15

Introduction

- † **[Slide 1: Phillies]** One of the more audacious things I did as a young man was admit that I had voted for Ronald Reagan. You see, I went to a very liberal college. It was known as “Berkley East”; it was a hippie school; and the few people who were Republicans pretty much kept their heads down. When I admitted how I had voted, people chased me and threw things at me. Fun times. My guy had won, of course; Reagan won every state that year except Minnesota. So it took some guts to identify with him at school, but I could laugh as I ran away from my persecutors.
- In contrast to winning, the Philadelphia Phillies of the 1930s and 1940s stunk. They won 30% or less of their games five times in eight years. They should have disbanded; the National League should have insisted they drop from the majors to AAA. Only a die-hard fan would wear a Phillies cap back then; people might laugh at you, even though it was the home team.
 - But they were the home team even if they didn’t win; and Reagan did win even if the people at New College hated his guts. What about aligning yourself with an unpopular loser? Suppose there were two gangs in your neighborhood, the Pink Ladies and the Puce Damsels, and the Puce Damsels ambush and kill all the Pink Ladies, are you going to start wearing your pink colors around the neighborhood? Or suppose you were a royalist after the French revolution, when the winners were chopping off the heads of royalists, would you publically align yourself with the dead king or keep your head down so you could keep your head at all?
 - Today we are going to read about two men who chose to align themselves with Jesus *after* he was killed, even though they knew it might cost them *everything* in this life.
 - Let’s pray and then we will see what’s going on with those two men and how they played a part in God’s plan.

[Slide 2: 19.31-32] John 19.31-32 NET: **Then, because it was the day of preparation [Friday], so that the bodies should not stay on the crosses on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was an especially important one), the Jewish leaders asked Pilate [the Roman governor] to have the victims' legs broken and the bodies taken down. So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the two men who had been crucified with Jesus, first the one and then the other.**

- † The Romans usually would leave the crucified person on the cross to die slowly over several days, and then would leave the dead body on the cross as a further deterrent to crime and insurrection.
- In contrast, Jewish law required immediate burial, and the religious leaders were especially sensitive to having everything be proper for the Sabbath, their holy day, and even more so for this Sabbath, which fell within the weeklong celebration of Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread.
 - So they wanted these Jewish crucified criminals – including Jesus – to be dead and buried before the sun went down on Friday, when the Sabbath would begin.
- † Breaking the legs of the accused would hasten their death. “How?” you might say. “They are already nailed to the cross, why should breaking their legs send them off the deep end?”

- Well, I'll tell you, being fastened to the cross actually was not the worst of it. We think of it like that, we think of the nails piercing the hands or wrists and the feet or ankles when we think of the crucifixion, but the real problem was that in this position it was really difficult to breathe. So you had to push with your legs to raise your chest up to a position where you could take breath. Sometimes the Romans would even put a little foot ledge there to help the accused do this, so that there would be a longer suffering period before death!
- So if the soldiers used a big iron mallet to break the victim's legs, then death would be quicker, because the victim could not breathe.

[Slide 3: 19.33-34] John 19.33-34: But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and blood and water flowed out immediately.

- † Obviously there was no need to break Jesus' legs if he was already dead, but then why stab him with a spear? Probably the soldier jabbed at the body to be sure Jesus was dead, not just passed out.
 - There are medical opinions about how it could be that naturally blood and water might flow together out from the wound. If you are interested in that, see the devotions for this week. God has his ways of making these things happen, sometimes naturally, sometimes miraculously.
- † We might explore here why John bothers to tell us this detail. We will see in a moment why he tells us about the bones not being broken and the skin pierced, but why does he make mention of this detail about the blood and water flowing?
 - One reason might be that such eye witness detail would support the reader's perception that Jesus really died on the cross. When John wrote, just a few decades after this event, already there were heretical teachings about Jesus, two of which were that Jesus only appeared to be human and only appeared to die on the cross. Some cults and other false religions teach these heresies still today, so this is directly relevant for us to understand.
 - In this gospel, John has been careful to emphasize that Jesus was not only fully divine as the Son of God, but also fully human as the Messiah-savior God had promised to the Jewish prophets. In both Jewish and Greek culture at the time, people thought of the body as consisting mostly of blood and water, fluids of life, so there was a meaningful symbolism in both liquids running out of the body together, taking life away.
 - There might be a literary-theological symbolism also. I will leave that to the devotions.

[Slide 4: 19.35-37] John 19.35-37: And the person who saw it has testified (and his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth), so that you also may believe. For these things happened so that the scripture would be fulfilled, "Not a bone of his will be broken." And again another scripture says, "They will look on the one whom they have pierced."

- † There are two fulfillments of scripture, of Old Testament prophecy, here. The first has to do with Jesus being the ultimate Passover lamb.
 - You might recall that the Passover lamb was sacrificed each year to remember the time God provided deliverance from physical death through the shed blood of a lamb, which symbolized how through the shed blood of Jesus, God provides deliverance from both physical and spiritual

death, in that believers who accept Christ's sacrifice on their behalf come eternally alive spiritually and will be resurrected to new physical life on a renewed earth at the end of the age.

- In God's instructions about the Passover sacrificial lamb, God instructed the Jews to not break any of its bones. This foreshadowed the same being true for Jesus in his sacrifice.

† **[Slide 5: pierced]** The second fulfilled prophecy is from Zechariah. In talking about God being the savior and deliverer of the nation, Zechariah said God would be pierced. What? how can that be?

- You see, there is always this tension in the Old Testament: On the one hand, God frequently says he will *bring* a savior to deliver people and the nation, but then God also insists he *himself* is the savior. This tension is resolved when we realize that the triune God of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit provided salvation by the Son of God coming as a man, that Jesus the Messiah-savior is both God and man, fulfilling all these prophecies.
- So at the end of time, according to Zechariah, people will look on the one they have pierced, and that will be the Son of God.

† **[Slide 6: 20.30-31]** In 19.35, John is talking about himself. He has witnessed the crucifixion and is testifying about what he saw; he is telling the truth, and he knows he speaks the truth, and he is testifying about the truth... Why? "so that y'all also would believe."

- In two weeks, we will be looking at what happens after the resurrection, and we will come across the purpose statement of this book: **John 20.30-31 NET: Now Jesus performed many other miraculous signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are recorded so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.**
- Why is John writing, why is he so careful to provide evidence and an eye witness account, even down to the detail about what happened when Jesus was pierced and how that relates to Old Testament Jewish prophecy? Because he wants you to know the facts, so you would believe.
- And that is because he knows that coming to faith, believing in who Jesus is and what he accomplished for you in his crucifixion and resurrection, is the only way God has provided for deliverance from physical and spiritual death.

† My friends, I want you to visualize this with me: We are all in a hole, which we have dug ourselves with our corrupted natures, acts of sin, and guilt.

- If God offers us a ladder out of the hole, free of charge, a gift, are we going to scorn it and say we want a different way? Are we going to question God and say there should be more than one way out for those who don't like ladders? Are we going to deny that the ladder is real when Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John have provided so much evidence? when we can see that evidence and that many others have climbed out by going up the ladder before us? Are we going to say, "No, no, I would rather find my own way out," when we know it is impossible and we really have no hope without that ladder?
- I am saying all this not just for those of you who have not believed in Jesus, this is for everyone in the room. We need God's grace, his salvation, his empowerment every day, and it all flows through the cross and resurrection. If Jesus was not the Son of God and Christ-savior, if he did not pay our penalty on the cross and get resurrected from the dead to prove it, then we have

nothing, we have no salvation and we have no basis for our ethics, we have nothing to offer to a hopeless world.

- But if Jesus is who he said he was and if he did do what he said he would do – and, seriously, my friends, we really do have a lot of reasons to believe this is so, that the ladder really is there – well, if all that is true, then that changes everything, not just our ability to go to Heaven instead of Hell, but our ability to know God, to be guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit, to experience true growth and transformation of our character, to walk with God through faith and obedience, and to effectively help others experience the same hope.
- We need to cling to these truths every day. Getting on the ladder is enough faith to be saved, but if believers climb the ladder out of the hole, that will lead to much further blessing. Some of you refuse to get on the ladder, but more of you are on the ladder and think that's all there is; friends, you are on the ladder, but you are still in the hole! That is no place for a believer to be.

[Slide 7: 19.38-39] John 19.38-39: After this, Joseph of Arimathea, a disciple of Jesus (but secretly, because he feared the Jewish leaders), asked Pilate if he could remove the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission, so he went and took the body away. Nicodemus, the man who had previously come to Jesus at night, accompanied Joseph, carrying a mixture of myrrh and aloes weighing about seventy-five pounds.

- † Check this out, you know what John doesn't tell us here? The other gospel authors reveal that Joseph himself was a member of the Sanhedrin ruling council! He was one of the Jewish religious leaders, but kept his faith secret because he was afraid of the other Jewish religious leaders.
 - That's not so good, since the Sanhedrin just falsely convicted Jesus and had him executed by the Romans. Keeping silent is a kind of complicity in these atrocious sins, isn't it? It's like the good German people who were overwhelmed by Nazism, and in their fear did nothing to stop the persecution and mass murders by the state.
 - But in the end, Joseph knows he needs to make a choice to stand for Christ. After Jesus has been killed – when in human terms, he has nothing to gain – and knowing that he has everything to lose – his position, his social status, his friends, maybe his family, maybe even his life – at this dark moment in history, when most believers have fled into hiding, this is when Joseph steps forward and publically declares his faith.
 - Joseph used his influence to gain access to the Roman governor, Pilate, and to get permission to take the body of Jesus, which normally would have been buried in a special graveyard for executed criminals.
- † Now, Nicodemus we have met before. He also was a member of the Sanhedrin. In chapter three, he liked Jesus but did not understand yet what it meant to be saved or who Jesus was. In chapter seven, he tried to protect Jesus, but still with no indication of faith. Now he too chooses to risk everything to come out and show his faith by his actions, helping Joseph with the body of Jesus.
 - Myrrh was fragrant, so Jews mixed it with aloe gels to coat dead bodies, to fight the smell of decay. Seventy-five pounds was a lot, but not unusual for burying someone considered special, and these men were wealthy and could afford to honor Jesus like this. All this was necessary for Jesus to have a proper Jewish burial, which was part of God's plan.
 - These wealthy men surely had servants to help carry this mixture, take the body down from the cross, and prepare the body for burial. But it was *their* reputations and lives on the line.

[Slide 8: 19.40-42] John 19.40-42: Then they took Jesus' body and wrapped it, with the aromatic spices, in strips of linen cloth according to Jewish burial customs. Now at the place where Jesus was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden was a new tomb where no one had yet been buried. And so, because it was the Jewish day of preparation and the tomb was nearby, they placed Jesus' body there.

- † At dusk, the Sabbath would begin. So these men had to scramble to take the body off of the cross, wrap it in linen with the spice mixture, and get it in a tomb.
 - This tomb was near the crucifixion spot and unused, so they put the body of Jesus in it. Most people assume this was Joseph's tomb, but scripture never says so. I figure they must have paid for the tomb if it did not already belong to them, because it would be offensive to put the body of a slain convict into someone else's tomb.

Conclusion

- † **[Slide 9: tomb]** So now we have Jesus not only dead on the cross, but buried in a rock-cut tomb. He really died, he really was buried. And we learn from the gospel of Matthew that at the insistence of the Jewish religious leaders, the Romans sealed the tomb and posted guards.
 - That's good for us. Because if the Romans sealed the tomb and posted guards, then nobody could have stolen the body, nor could Jesus have walked out if he had only faked his death. And thus when the tomb is found empty on the third day, we can clearly see that the miracle of the resurrection has occurred.
 - That is the theological emphasis of this passage. John, and I, want you to believe that Jesus really died and was buried; next week, we will talk about how on the third day Jesus rose again.
- † The most striking thing about this passage is that two Jewish religious leaders chose to demonstrate their faith at the darkest moment, when it seemed like Satan had won and Jesus the Messiah-king was gone from the Earth.
 - Today we have some advantages they did not have. We have the New Testament to clearly explain that the crucifixion was part of God's plan, and that somehow in that death Jesus paid the penalty for our sins. We have historical evidence that Jesus rose from the dead. We have fellowship in the church and a place in a safe society. We have the indwelling Holy Spirit to empower and assure us. We have these advantages, yet I wonder if we are as open about declaring our allegiance to Jesus as were these men right after the crucifixion.
 - They should inspire us! So what about you? Do your neighbors know that you are a Bible believing, Trinitarian God worshipping, Christian? When you talk to your co-workers, are you open about your biblical ethics and your faith in Christ? When your friends are struggling, do you witness to them about how Christ has helped you?
- † **[Slide 10: Matthew]** If you are a secret believer, like Joseph was, do you think God might see a problem in that? In **Matthew 5.14-16**, Jesus told his disciples, **[NET] You are the light of the world. A city located on a hill cannot be hidden. People do not light a lamp and put it under a basket but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before people, so that they can see your good deeds and give honor to your Father in heaven.**

- If you do believe in Jesus, it is time to publically declare it! If you are on the ladder, let everyone know! Step one is to receive water baptism. If you have not received baptism by immersion or if you received baptism before really coming to faith – like I did as a baby – then you should come and be baptized as a believer to make your public statement of aligning with Christ. That is the teaching of the Bible and the practice handed down from the early church. It also is a great excuse for us to have a party, so please say yes to this step! Come see me to find out how.
- Another step is to be open in discussion about Jesus. Nobody regularly in your life should have any doubts about what you believe about Jesus. Don't be embarrassed, don't be shy... you don't have to be pushy or rude either, but you can bring up your faith and beliefs in conversation, and let people make of that what they may.
- Follow the example of these two men, as they followed the example of Jesus: identify yourself with Jesus no matter what the cost! Standing up for what is right, defending and loving the unlovable, basing your ethics on the Bible, none of these choices will make you more popular or make your life in the world easier, but they will have you walking in the light with Jesus, and you will find you are blessed in more important ways.
- Another step is to live out what you believe. Don't stay on the ladder but in the hole! Start climbing out, away from sin and corruption, into righteousness and purity. Your testimony of faith will mean nothing if you do not show the world that you are different, that you follow Christ instead of the urges of your flesh.
- We have to learn to avoid the things listed in the negative commands of scripture, such as lust and greed; lust can be as little as looking wrongly at someone else; greed can be as small as overeating; we need to stop, we need to have zero tolerance for sin.
- That means we also have to learn to actively pursue the positive commands of scripture, such as becoming passionate about worship; that would mean we come here every week, and we immerse ourselves in it, feeling it in our hearts and minds even if we are not raising our hands or tapping our feet, even if we don't like the songs they are playing.
- You will grow better at this as God transforms you by grace as time goes on, but make a stand now, be determined to represent God in everything you do, everything you say, and even everything you think.
- Let's pray, and ask Jesus to help us with this . . .