

GOOD FRIDAY - A Cold Corpse

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[0 : 00] Our God, we pray that you will feed us from your word and that it may bear much fruit for your glory in our lives. Amen.

I used to have childhood nightmares of being buried alive. Well, not so much being buried alive, but being buried and then finding that I'm not really dead and waking up in a coffin six foot under the ground and trying to shout and scratch my way out to no avail.

It was one of my standard childhood nightmares that I haven't had for years and years now. I guess it wouldn't have been quite so terrifying if I'd lived 2,000 years ago.

For there, if people were buried, it was not so much under the ground, six foot under, in a wooden box, but wrapped in a cloth and put in a tomb that had space to at least get up and walk around, even if you weren't able to get out.

Ancient tombs often had either niches where the bodies would be slotted down, a little niche in the wall of the little tomb, sort of lengthways, or sometimes it would be not so much a niche into the wall but just a ledge or bench inside the tomb area.

[1 : 15] A small tomb might have three spaces for bodies, on either side and one across the far end, but if it was a bigger tomb, there might be space for two there and maybe two or three there.

Some of them were quite elaborate and large. Cheap tombs were in caves. The expensive tombs were cut out of solid rock.

Quite an effort in the ancient world to do that, all for putting dead bodies there. After a year, perhaps the body would have been fully decomposed and the bones would be then stacked up in a little box, a bit over 18 inches long, called an ossuary, and they would be kept either in the tomb or in some other collection areas.

The expensive tombs, those that are cut into solid rock, would have a groove cut at the front entrance of the tomb and a wheel-like or disc-like rock would be cut and would slide down the groove in front of the door.

It would be easy to close the tomb because it would roll down into place, but it made it much harder to open the tomb because it would mean rolling the rock up the incline to get the door of the tomb open.

[2 : 34] Sometimes the tombs were sealed with clay or even wax or mud, not so much to keep people out because that wouldn't be so strong, nowhere near as strong as the rock itself, but rather just to make it clear that if anybody did get into the tomb, the evidence would be there from the outside.

The clay or the mud or the wax would be disturbed. Sometimes even a cord was tied or a rope tied around or fastened the rock on the front door. But again, that wouldn't prevent people so much as getting in, as just making it clear that somebody has disturbed the tomb.

There are many tombs that have been found from 2,000 years ago, from the time of Jesus around Jerusalem, many along the southern valley, the Hinnom Valley, and many even in the place reputedly where Jesus was buried, marked today by the Church of the Holy Sepulchre or Holy Tomb.

Possibly Jesus' tomb's been found. It's impossible to tell and we'll never know. And in the end it doesn't matter because, of course, even if it has been found, there's no body there.

One of the interesting archaeological finds of recent years has been two ankle bones and a spike through them. Somebody who'd been crucified. That's all we have left.

[3 : 56] The two ankle bones, because the crucifixion would have happened where both legs would have had the one spike through the tomb. In that case, obviously, the nail or spike has been taken out of the cross but it was very strong or strongly fastened into the ankles so the person was just buried with a spike through the ankles.

Most criminals, of course, were just tossed into a trench or a semi-open grave, not marked by any tomb or any particular grave.

In fact, if the Romans had their way, they would have just left the bodies to sit on the ground and be devoured by the dogs and the vultures as often happened. The Jews, though, demanded burial.

For them, it was highly offensive if a body was left out overnight. Cursed would be that person. And so, the Jews demanded burial and the Roman law allowed families to come and claim the bodies of criminals who'd been executed and then to go and bury them.

Of course, Jewish burials take place very quickly even today. For us, it's not unusual to go five, six, even a week sometimes between death and burial. But for Jews, it's much closer.

[5 : 10] You may remember when Prime Minister Rabin was assassinated 18 months ago. His funeral service was just a couple of days after the event. Very close, really, especially for a state funeral.

One of the difficulties, of course, for somebody like Jesus is that his family and friends, if they had any tombs, would have had them in Galilee because that's where he came from. They're also probably poor and probably couldn't afford to have anything elaborate.

But nonetheless, rather than be thrown into an open tomb or a trench, Jesus was buried. Every time we recite the creed as we've just done, we recite the fact that he was buried.

He was crucified, died, and was buried. Or he suffered death and was buried. Why is Jesus' burial so important?

Why is it in the creed? We can understand his death being in the creed and his resurrection in the creed, but why the burial? Is that really so important as his death and resurrection?

[6 : 19] Paul, when he wrote 1 Corinthians, which is not all that long after Jesus' death and resurrection, perhaps about 15 years at the most, said, I passed on to you as of first importance that Christ was crucified, died, was buried, and that he rose from the dead.

There again, very early on in Christian tradition, the burial of Jesus is regarded as of first importance. It's a gospel fact that Jesus was buried.

But why is it so important? In preparing this sermon, I pondered this and I decided I'd look up the index of a number of theology books that I had. I looked up about a dozen and in no case was the burial of Jesus mentioned in the index of topics covered in the book.

Now maybe somewhere they'd mention the burial of Jesus in passing but it wasn't a topic that was put in the index of those books. So why? Why is it so important and yet it seems for us we sometimes ponder why indeed Jesus' burial should be there.

All the gospels mention it and all of them make a fuss about it. Matthew makes quite a fuss about it in the reading that we've seen. Whose tomb it was, who came and claimed the body, the wrapping in the shroud, the guards at the tomb and so on.

[7 : 40] So why does it matter that Jesus was buried? His body was claimed not by a family member but by a rich man, Joseph of Arimathea.

We know not very much about him. He was wealthy. His tomb was cut into rock which meant it was an expensive tomb. It was also very close to Jerusalem which would have been the prime position and therefore a relatively expensive tomb as well.

It was a new tomb, unused that means. Nobody else had been buried there. Remember that tombs could be reused apart from the fact that it's a criminal and if a criminal is placed in a tomb, Jewish law forbade the use of that tomb for any other family member.

Joseph of Arimathea, we're told, was a secret believer of Jesus in John's Gospel. That is, it wasn't public knowledge that he was a follower of Jesus. He wasn't one of the 12 disciples but nonetheless he was somebody who'd become a follower of Jesus.

We're also told in Mark and Luke that he was a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling Jewish council of the day, 71 members of the Sanhedrin and Joseph of Arimathea was one of them.

[8 : 58] But he's not mentioned at Jesus' trial. We don't even know whether he was there. Perhaps because Jesus' trial was so hastily convened he wasn't even part of it. But maybe he did speak up and his voice was not heard.

But maybe for fear because he was a secret disciple maybe he said nothing and let the trial continue. He was certainly an important figure.

Later in this passage in the one that we've heard read from Matthew's Gospel, Joseph of Arimathea, goes straight to Pilate. He doesn't go to a subordinate or someone caught up in the bureaucracy.

He goes to the top and he's seen by the governor, Pilate. So he seems to have been a significant person. And his offer of a tomb as I've said is a very generous one.

It would mean that he wouldn't be able to use it for his own family or himself because Jesus was regarded as a criminal and it was an expensive rock cut tomb. John's Gospel tells us that Joseph of Arimathea was helped by a man called Nicodemus but probably there were other servants or friends who helped as well because to take a body down from the cross to carry it to the tomb to carry all the spices we're told that he had would have taken some effort and there wasn't much time.

[10 : 17] Jesus died about 3pm. The Sabbath day began about 6pm at that time of year and the body had to be buried before then according to Jewish law.

Somehow it doesn't feel right that Jesus is buried in a rich man's tomb. The man who'd associated with the poor and the outcasts and the sinners is buried in a rich man's tomb.

There's something a little bit incongruous about it and yet of course it's saying something of great importance. For those who've been here the last few Sunday nights as we've looked through the preceding passages in Matthew's Gospel will have picked up the fact that at every point all these somewhat insignificant details are fulfilling statements of Old Testament prophecy.

Time and again what happens for Jesus in his trial in the negotiations that are carried out in the death of Judas the betrayer in the crucifixion itself in the words that Jesus cried from the cross time and again at every point it is fulfilling Old Testament prophecy.

The things that God had predicted through his prophets seven or eight hundred years before are coming true in the events of Jesus' death and this is no exception for again in Old Testament prophecy Isaiah predicted that the suffering servant of God whom Jesus clearly is would have his tomb among the rich.

[11 : 49] So maybe that's what it's saying in part God is keeping the promises that he's made God is bringing about the fulfilment of what was prophesied hundreds of years before and yes even to the detail that the tomb of this suffering servant Jesus is that of a rich man.

When it was evening there came a rich man from Arimathea named Joseph who was also a disciple of Jesus.

He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his own new tomb which he had hewn in the rock.

He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away. Dead people are buried and Jesus is dead and his burial is to remind us of that fact in part.

He was really dead not swooned not unconscious not fainted not in a coma but dead. John's Gospel tells us that Pilate made sure of it.

[13 : 08] The soldiers pierced his side. The blood and water came out was that of a dead person not a living person. The ancient people weren't fools. They were so concerned to see Jesus crucified, both Romans and Jews, that they weren't going to make a mistake.

death. We know that they guarded Jesus on the cross as they guarded any criminal on the cross in order to make sure the body wasn't taken down before it had died. They wouldn't make a mistake with someone as notorious as Jesus for whom the crowds had bathed for his blood.

Everyone, friend or foe, is clearly convinced in every gospel account and in all the historians of the ancient world that Jesus had died and his burial demonstrates the fact it's a real death that we're dealing with.

Good Friday is an odd day in a way. It's a solemn, sombre day and yet easily that solemnity can carry over into a sense of defeat, that somehow it's the failure, the defeat and we look forward with eager anticipation for Sunday for the victory.

But it's easy to forget that at the point of Jesus' death as the preceding paragraph tells us there was an earthquake, the curtain in the temple was torn in two, the tombs were open and the dead were raised, extraordinary events associated with the death of Jesus.

[14 : 33] But the resurrection passes unnoticed. There's no trumpet fanfare when Jesus rises from the dead. There's no people standing or falling down in a ghastr and here comes Jesus from the tomb because there were no witnesses to it.

It was a silent event. The victory really occurred at the beginning in the death and the earthquake, the tombs being opened, the curtain being torn demonstrate that fact.

That now there is access between people and God. Now there is a sign of new life from the death for it's Jesus' death that conquers death. And the resurrection in a sense is the stamp of what has already happened, that Jesus' death has conquered death and paved the way for people, us, to have access to God.

On the cross Jesus' last words were, it is finished. not that this is the end of my life, but rather that my work is finished.

It's done. His death pays the price for sin. His death is what does it, not the resurrection, but it's his death that deals with our sins once and for all.

[15 : 49] And his burial underlines and that underscores the fact that real death means real atonement, real forgiveness, real putting away of our sins and failures before God.

If he didn't die, we wouldn't be forgiven. But he really died, he was really buried and so we can be confident that we are really forgiven.

The end of the tale of two cities, there's that famous exchange. Sidney Carton, I think his name is, goes into the man's tomb in the Bastille and he exchanges places.

The man who leaves is wearing his clothes and so on and gets out free. It's the death of Sidney Carton that brings freedom for his friend. And it's the same with Jesus.

It's his death that deals with our sin. It's his death that conquers death. It's his death that brings us real forgiveness.

[16 : 51] forgiveness. And his burial is a public demonstration. Not only that he really died, but that our sins are really forgiven as well.

Perhaps that first good Friday night, the Jewish leaders were unsettled. Maybe earthquakes do that for them. But certainly they were full of unrest and trouble.

The next morning, the Sabbath day even, they come to Pilate. Debate about whether that's illegal activity for them to do on a Sabbath day. Maybe it was.

Maybe it wasn't. But certainly the fact that they came on the Sabbath morning to Pilate and asked for a guard to guard the tomb of a dead man suggests that they are somewhat desperate.

Something significant has happened in the death of Jesus and they know it. Pilate gives them the guard, it seems, a Roman guard, to guard the tomb. And they seal the tomb. All these precautions which are rather elaborate for a dead man, it's understandable to guard a living man as he dies on a cross, but really should they be worried about a cold corpse in a tomb?

[18 : 04] And yet they're trouble. There's unrest there. They've seen the things about his death and there's something significant about them. And they know Jesus' own predictions that he on the third day would rise from the dead.

dead. And so they are doing everything they can to stop the resurrection and the rumours that would be associated with it. So they guard the tomb. And yet ironically all their precautions actually achieve what they're aiming to prevent.

They demonstrate in the end the truth of the resurrection. The disciples didn't steal the body, it was guarded by the Jews, by the Romans. they were that concerned about it.

Jesus' burial means real death. That points to the fact that it's real forgiveness. And as we look forward to Sunday, it shows that it's real resurrection as well.

But there's a sense in which the burial of Jesus, most importantly in the Bible, is for us, we are identified with it.

[19 : 17] Paul writes that we are buried with him in baptism, by baptism into death. The Christians are identified not only in Jesus' death and resurrection, but Christians are identified in the burial of Jesus symbolically through baptism.

And that then brings two things to bear. One is a challenge. As we consider today the fact that Jesus was buried and we acknowledge the fact that we are identified as Christian people in that burial through our baptism, then there is a challenge to us to change our lives.

There is a call to us to die to the old way of living and live rather for God. Paul's encouragement when he deals with this issue of being identified in the burial of Jesus is to issue a clarion call to the Roman Christians that they are to die to sin and live for Christ.

They are to stop sin reigning in their bodies but rather to live lives for Christ. And so for us the challenge is there as well, that the death of Jesus is a call to us to live lives for Christ and to bury the old way of living, to bury all that is selfish, all that is ungodly, all that is failing to love God and failing to love our neighbours as ourselves, to bury it, to put it away once and for all because Jesus died and was buried once for all.

But there is also a call of encouragement here as well. For Jesus' burial means real forgiveness by God.

[21 : 04] And when we identify in Jesus' burial through symbolically through baptism, effectively through faith in Christ, then we acknowledge the fact that for us we are forgiven, that death has no fear for Jesus has been there before and that one day when we die we're not going into dangerous uncharted territory but we're going where our Lord God has been.

And we do so in confidence because we know that when He went there He took our sins and therefore death has lost its sting for us.

Access to God is a reality, something that we can be assured about because of Jesus' powerful death. Truly this is a good Friday. day, it's not a day of defeat and failure, a sombre, solemn day yes, but a day of victory in fact.

Because in Jesus' death and burial we acknowledge the fact that we are truly forgiven, His death has conquered death, His death has dealt with our sins once and for all and therefore with confidence we can stand before God and know that we are forgiven and accepted by Him because Jesus really died and He was really buried.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.