

WD: March 4, 2024

“Finished and Secure”

The world we live in offers no real security. We lock our cars, our houses, our church, we set our alarms turn on our cameras, we keep our guard up for bullies at school, shield our finances from taxes, get yearly doctor exams to stay healthy and buy insurance just in case something fails, all to help build some security in our lives. The latest kind of security under assault is identity Theft, the fastest growing security problem in our time.

The trouble with such security is that protection only lasts as long as you can afford it. The threat remains looming over us with or without identity theft insurance. Trouble always waits just outside the walls of our temporal efforts for security; prowling about eager to pounce on us. In reality insurance doesn't stop the accidents that sometimes altar human lives, alarms and cameras only alert us to a crime but rarely stop the thief in time, and yearly exams at the doctor's office don't guarantee that our health won't fade. Life is never a lock and protecting ourselves is never finished. That is until we meet Jesus, who declared, “It is finished” putting an end forever the power of sin, guaranteeing a lock on eternal life.

In John 19 we get to know two men, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, who found real security and discovered eternal life. We will do well to value their courage and follow their example; two men that gave up their reputation, their identity, and risked everything to follow Jesus.

Good Friday. Jesus has been betrayed, denied, arrested, tried, beaten, mocked, struck, flogged, crucified, and died. The High Priest, Caiaphas and his cohorts in the Sanhedrin (The highest religious authority of Israel, like a congress and supreme court all in one) hated Jesus and couldn't wait to put an end to him. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were members of the Sanhedrin. It is reasonable to think that Nicodemus and Joseph had friends within the Sanhedrin, and perhaps had worked for many years with other members; 70 in all, very exclusive. For Joseph to use his own tomb with the help of Nicodemus to bury Jesus may have meant severing long friendships and perhaps their careers as leaders in the Sanhedrin.

It was on Good Friday that Joseph of Arimathea is introduced to us. Luke 23 tells us that Joseph was a good and upright man who had not consented to the decision to condemn Jesus. Mark 15 tells us that Joseph was a prominent member of the Sanhedrin and John 19:38 tells us that he was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared his Colleagues. He was joined by Nicodemus who met with Jesus secretly at night in John 3. Two men caught in a world of insecurity; feeling at the same time a faith and desire to follow Jesus while hiding in a terrible fear of their closest friends. But something about Good Friday, in all of its horror, in full view for all to see something inspired these men to find the courage to be counted with Jesus.

Together these men go to Pilate to ask for Jesus' body. The late Dr. Eric Kiehl, professor of Concordia Sem says that must have seemed like a strange request coming from two men who were part of the very group who condemned Jesus. Secondly, Roman Law prevented anyone executed for high treason to be given to friends or relatives so that their tomb did not become a shrine for any followers. Normally, Pilate would have followed this Law. Maybe because Pilate still believed Jesus to be innocent, or because Pilate didn't mind sticking it to Caiaphas for blackmailing Pilate into crucifying an innocent man, Pilate granted the request.

With only hours before the Sabbath Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus reverently but quickly take Jesus' body down. By handling Jesus' dead body, they two men would become ceremonially unclean for seven days and therefore unable to celebrate all remaining activities related to the festival of Unleavened Bread—perhaps for the first time in their lives they would miss it.

According to the Mishnah, Joseph with the help of Nicodemus probably washed Jesus' body before wrapping the body. They anointed Jesus with 75 pounds of spices and gave Jesus the funeral that the disciples could not. Perhaps more importantly Luke 23 tells us that Jesus was laid in a new tomb, cut into the rock like a cave. It was for Joseph's family, but Jesus would be the first to use it. By putting Jesus in his family tomb Joseph was proclaiming Jesus to be family. Thankfully, on Sunday Joseph discovered his tomb empty; death itself was finished, death was swallowed up in victory. The cruelty and sadness of Good Friday gave way to the victory and joy of Easter. And the best part for Joseph was that he was a part of Jesus' family but not because they shared a tomb, but because faith meant they would share eternal life.

Joseph was a believer for a long time but lived in fear because of his colleagues who hated Jesus. The disciples did not attend the funeral because they too were hiding in fear over the same people—feeling a long way from Palm Sunday. Suddenly, because of the crucifixion one can imagine that things seemed very unfinished; Peter wishing he didn't deny Jesus after sounding so tough at Passover meal; Like any mother, Mary wished she could take her son's place; Thomas wondered what it was all for; A room full of disciples hiding in fear of the unresolved guilt that now hung over them like the darkness over the cross. Feeling unsettled with how things seemed to have ended, running away from Jesus' captors in the garden. Wondering how in the world they didn't see Judas' betrayal. Somehow, I'll bet that it all felt incomplete for Jesus' followers, wishing they could go back and do it all differently; thoughts racing through their heads plotting a rescue that could never happen. Perhaps even Joseph felt the pangs of guilt for not stepping out sooner to defend Jesus. Jesus said it is finished but it certainly doesn't feel that way—perhaps even for many of us.

Too many things in life leave us feeling unfinished, like a hamster in a wheel caught in a perpetual tide of repetition, things left incomplete. What might be unfinished in your life? I don't ask this assuming that everything can be complete or whole in a fallen existence. I know that some of us will never reach some of our life goals. Some of our regrets will spoil our attitudes, perhaps our ability to forgive ourselves. I am aware that prodigals in our circle of family and friends may remain prodigals. It has been shared with me by some how some of us hold long conversations within ourselves about the guilt or shame some of us wear which never goes out of fashion. We have plenty unfinished and more than just a few pictures incomplete.

My wife and I like to do puzzles. We like the 1000-piece puzzles that take a while. Somehow the last puzzle we bought (brand new) ended up missing 18 pieces. The last four puzzles have had many pieces missing. We never find them. Our great suspicion is that the dog must be nibbling on them. When the pieces are missing the puzzle isn't quite as satisfying, even disappointing. Chances are, a normal life has at least one puzzle like this. Something is missing that makes a part of our life incomplete and unsatisfied. This is where I would argue Nicodemus and Joseph spent much their lives and careers, eventually disillusioned by their office and then by the hypocrisy, and the manufactured outcome of the cross.

Luke 23:51 says that Joseph longed for the coming of the kingdom of God. But everything even in Joseph's world was so routine and felt stuck cloud of repetition. Everything seemed routine until Jesus came, but his colleagues instead of embracing Jesus' teaching decided to protect their power and influence. Those colleagues decided that there was more security, more of a comfort zone in maintaining status quo. Joseph and Nick found something greater than a status quo religion in Jesus. They found truth.

All changed with Jesus, so much so, that like Paul they Joe and Nick were ready risk everything, perhaps leave it all behind for Jesus. Good Friday is anything but status quo. Good Friday meant that sin was finished. God's forgiveness had taken hold. Good Friday is good because it goes hand in hand with Easter Sunday—Good Friday cannot be separated from Easter Sunday. Good Friday offers us something we can't obtain through routine and repetition; it offers us security, real security because eternal life is promised to all like Joseph and Nicodemus. Eternal life, means eternal love, never ending joy, and never have to say good-bye to anyone ever again. Good Friday makes this all possible. Jesus Christ made it possible for two men to show courage and for a group of disciples to come out of hiding—men who went from ordinary to extraordinary and would all give their life for the sake of the Gospel.

We started off talking about identity security and ways that we try to achieve security. What we find in a life filled with insecurities, and temporary fixes is Jesus, who is the only lock on life that we can count on. May God bless us with the same courage as Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus who in the end found the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ.

Pastor Matt Woods
John 3:30