

Good Friday Meditation Pastor Rich deLange April 19, 2019
Matthew 27:57-60

I cannot recall the number of times I have been at a graveside service. But the final words of this short Bible reading are very simple and so painfully true. It happens every single time at the graveside without exception. It happens sooner or later. It happens sometimes amid heavy sobbing and almost always with heavy hearts. If someone were reporting on the events at the graveside, each one would end the same as the burial of Jesus: and they *went away*.

Those are such difficult words. We leave the body of our loved one in the grave and we go away! Everything in us wants to stay longer. Everything in us wants to have that dear person come home with us again. But we must walk away from the body. The body of our loved one that once filled our lives with such joy and laughter. That person is dead. Lifeless. Cold. Yes, we believe in the resurrection. But when you're at the graveside... When you walk away from that place... there's a finality that hits you. There's a finality that we hate because there's absolutely nothing we can do to change it. So we go away with heavy hearts.

Joseph of Arimathea took Jesus' body down from the cross and laid it in the tomb. As Christians we know the end is not the end but it is still painful to say good bye even if it's temporary. We know heaven is good. We believe that. And it's true. But we're not there yet. We're still here and death feels very permanent. It feels very final. And that is undoubtedly how it felt for dear Joseph. Not to mention for all the others who saw Jesus die. And especially for his mother.

I presided at the funeral of a full-term stillborn baby boy. His mother held his cold body in her arms, wrapped in a swaddling blanket. With tears and cries, she walked around the room as if she were trying to stir the little boy to awaken. It took a long time for us to convince her to put the little body in the tiny coffin. It was possibly the most heart wrenching funeral I've ever done. And most of us have been at that place to some degree. It's so hard to walk away.

But it's not only the physical death of loved ones that is hard to walk away from. All of us have had dreams that died. Maybe you broke an ankle and your dream of becoming an NHL star died. Or your dream of running the Boston Marathon. You lost your job and your dream of owning your own house is dead, for now at least. Through no fault of your own, you face losing everything you worked so hard for. Sometimes we have to leave a dream of marriage behind us. Sometimes the dream of having a child. Sometimes divorce comes and our "perfect family" dream dies. Sometimes we are so plagued by guilt from our own dumb choices that we feel unworthy and ashamed so we walk away from many good things we believe we don't deserve. We walk away from social events because we struggle with mental health. We are anxious or weary or afraid or we have constant pain which makes it hard to go out in the first place so we just stay away and leave healthy relationships behind.

As we've been looking at Job through the weeks of Lent, some things that cause you pain have come to the forefront. We asked you to write down some of those painful events or current struggles on these red strips of paper and we've made them into a chain. Here on the cross hangs your dead dream, your pain and struggles. They are part of the journey of your life. They need Christ's redemption and they are being redeemed by him, just as certainly as we all are. The road of suffering for us is not yet complete.

But now think about the body that Joseph took down from the cross and laid in the tomb. The body of Jesus. Joseph had no idea what would happen in three days. No one did. Death seemed to have the final word. And so he walked away.

That body of our Lord Jesus being taken from the cross, laid in the tomb and left behind represents all that sin destroys in our lives. It represents physical death. But also the death of dreams or hopes that you wrote down on these red chain links. The death of relationships and opportunities. It represents how pain kills your dreams. How physical or emotional distance from loved ones feels like death. How your broken family will never be restored. How you've lost much more than your job. How your addiction is slowly eating away your peaceful life and filling your heart with deathly guilt and damaging—even killing—good relationships with people you love. It represents the spiritual death of your loved one who doesn't walk with Jesus.

It represents all that sin has robbed from us.

It all hangs on the cross. It's death. So it's okay to cry. What you love is dead. Who you love is dead! You have to take that lifelessness, lay it in the tomb and walk away for now.

But don't forget that it is valuable and loved. Joseph didn't just toss the body of our Lord in the tomb. He wrapped it a clean linen cloth. He acknowledged that Jesus was near and dear to him. He buried him with dignity and respect. When others had run off, Joseph came and requested the body of our Lord from the Romans so that he might honour the one he believed to be the Messiah. Our sorrows are not over the death of Jesus in the same way that it was for Joseph. But it is the death of Jesus that covers our losses and deaths. His entombment, burial with dignity, reminds us that our losses too are a result of sin in this broken world, the sin for which Jesus died and was buried. Now, it was no coincidence that Jesus was buried in a brand new tomb. Our Lord died as a pauper. He had nothing to his name. He was a poor man, in that sense. This is just one more sense in which our Lord Jesus can relate to us in our brokenness in this world. He identifies with us in our weaknesses and losses. He knows our sorrows and struggles. He knows our poverty.

But part of the reason for this new tomb is to remind us that we need the riches of another One to supply our every need, right to the end.

The body of Jesus was laid in the tomb of a rich man, Joseph of Arimathea. Similarly, Jacob the patriarch years before was honorably buried by his son Joseph who was rich in that he was the second in command over all of Egypt. And now Jesus, who is sometimes called Israel, is buried by another rich Joseph, in fulfillment of the prophecy in Isaiah 53:9.

*Is 53:9 He was assigned a grave with the wicked,
and with the rich in his death,
though he had done no violence,
nor was any deceit in his mouth.*

Jesus died, the righteous for the unrighteous. He was assigned a grave like all sinners because the wages of sin is death. He was so humbled, so humiliated, so poor that he needed to be placed in the tomb of someone else. All signs of the poverty that sin brings us into. We are desperately in need of the Saviour who lies in the tomb for us.

What we really need to remember, dear children of God, is that Jesus died in our place. He did not die for his own sins, but for the sins of others. And he was not buried for his own sake, but for others, that we and our sins might be buried with him! All of our sin and all of the misery and brokenness that comes from sin in this world is laid in the grave with our Lord Jesus.

He redeems it all! One day these chains of death and sorrow will be broken as Christ returns and makes all things new, just as surely as he rose from the dead victoriously for us.

But don't rush to the resurrection. Three days in the tomb is a sign to us that he really was dead. For starters, the Roman soldiers would never have released Jesus' body to Joseph if Jesus wasn't really dead. They would not take the risk of being accused of not completing their job. And because the tomb was cut out of the rock, as Matthew says in v.60, and sealed with a big stone, it would have been impossible from someone to tunnel in from the back to steal his body. And no one could get in through the front because the stone was heavy and the grave was guarded by Roman soldiers.

And three days in the tomb by Jewish tradition was also the time appointed as a guarantee that someone was really and indisputably dead! Normally, tombs were usually used many times. A body was laid inside after being embalmed in spices and wrapped. When the flesh was all rotted away, the bones were gathered up and put in a box inside the tomb. Then another body could be laid in that place. Some of the reasons it is good that Jesus was put into a new tomb is that no one could later say that his body rose from the dead because it touched the bones of another man, as was true for Elisha's bones (2 Kings 13:20). Jesus would rise from the dead in his own power.

I would like you to consider that Jesus' time in the tomb is a reminder to us that whatever death we are grieving, it is painful and we can't rush through it. Every death we endure is a reminder to us that sin has robbed us of someone or something important. Some of those things are represented in the red chain on the cross.

Friends, remember that Jesus died so that he could be one with us in our death. Remember that without death, there is no resurrection. But also that without honestly dealing with our sorrow, without lament and struggle, our Easter praise can easily become almost empty or just a ritual without the deep meaning it should have for us. As someone wrote, "When we honestly acknowledge pain, suffering, and death in the world (and in our own lives), then our wonder at the victory of the resurrection is that much greater. The best way to prepare for unbounded praise on Easter is to enter fully into the pathos (the suffering) of Good Friday."

Our Lord Jesus suffered, was crucified, died and was buried for us—to identify with us, to die in our place, even to ensure that our suffering has redemptive value as we put our faith in him. He died to remind us that none of our deaths in this life have the final word. Yes, we will have to walk away from many graves in our life—real and figurative ones. But Jesus has the final word on death. And it does not have the final word on him! And because of our unity with him, it does not have the final word on us!

It's Good Friday. Death is real. The death of our Lord Jesus was real. But today we remember and believe that he walked intentionally toward death. And died for us so that death does not have the final word. Therefore we can walk away from the deaths we experience in this life with hope—all because of Jesus.