

April 23, 2017    The Funeral    Luke 24:50-56

Holy Week even when joined to the balance of the season of Lent gives us little time to spend on the material in the Gospels that are related to the crucifixion of Jesus, HIS burial, and the resurrection. Because of the statistic that half or close to half of the material in each of the Gospel accounts is focused on 8 days and some time after that even a cursory glance should tell us this is important stuff...this last half of each account. The church is a resurrection, focused on the real presence of God, community. It is easy to make the case that without the resurrection of Jesus occurring in real time, the fellowship of the disciples would have dissipated like water running down the drain. With Jesus dead, the fracture lines of their fellowship are quickly apparent.

The resurrection changes all of that. They cling together, not because they know what they are to do, but because they want to see and hear what will happen next. They know they are in the hands of the living God. They know that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, but they have yet to discover what that really means for them. They are told to wait for power from above. And they are obedient. Obedience and discipleship go together. That they understand. So they wait. At times they show impatience. They even verbalize that they are uncertain about what it all means. Step by step they are led toward Pentecost, and in the light of Pentecost once again things change.

So over the next while I am going to focus on the recurring resurrection appearances of Jesus and how each one of them leads the fellowship of the 120 (in some cases by ones and twos) toward the exciting adventure we characterize as the earliest part of the history of Christianity. Each step along the way is a

2.

further discovery that God is real, that God is in charge, and that Jesus is the revelation of the living God (which means the real God) in flesh and blood. But before we turn to any of that...we really do need to attend a funeral.

I am going to begin this journey through the last chapters of Luke, Matthew and John with this brief reading from Luke 23:47-50. Jesus has just taken his final breath. “The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, “Surely this was a righteous man.” When all the people who had gathered to witness this sight saw what took place, they beat their breasts and went away. But all those who knew HIM (that is knew Jesus), including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance watching these things.”

I draw your attention to these words for a number of reasons. The Roman centurion had seen many people die. He was accustomed to participating in death at extremely close range, where he could look the dying in the eyes. Where he could hear their strangled cries. Where he could hear the nature of their struggle to take one more breath. He was used to seeing fear in the victim's last moments. He was used to seeing rage. People will curse God and die. What seems to have moved him most about the death of Jesus, was the peace that was part of HIS passing. Jesus called God HIS Father. He committed HIS Spirit into the Father's treasured and praised hands,...holy hands. And HE breathed HIS last. That is what Luke tells us.

Several things here. It is a liberal pipe dream that Jesus did not die on the cross, that HE somehow survived the whipping which was brutal and bloody, rending and tearing HIS flesh. That

3.

HE somehow survived crucifixion whose sole purpose was to kill and leave those who watched with one trailing thought. I do not want to ever die this way. It is a pipe dream that Jesus could have survived the spear thrust of the Roman soldier from the waist up under the rib cage through the vital organs of the chest. It is nothing short of a liberal pipe dream that this crucifixion detail was led by an officer who would not recognize the last breath of the victim on the cross. The centurion was a veteran. And he knew his business. That the crowd that had wanted to see Jesus die, beat their breasts and went away means what Luke tells us it means. They saw it. They heard it. They took their leave like the audience at the hockey game who has witnessed their teams loss. They knew the score. They had seen and heard it all. And it was plain that it was over. Jesus died.

A man stepped forward who was not expected to do so. His name was Joseph. He was from Arimathea. He was a Pharisee. More than that he had a seat on the Council, (the Sanhedrin...the Rabbinical Council of Jerusalem). Luke says he was a good man. Fair minded. Morally upright. A man who took the commandments of God seriously. He was upright. You would have been pleased to have him live next door or just down the street. He had not voted with the majority that condemned Jesus, that said HE must die. Now that does not mean he registered a protest. He probably abstained from the vote...just quietly sat on his hands. Sized up the Council. Saw how the wind was blowing and just did not participate.

Luke does not tell us how he had access to Pilate, the fact is he did. As a member of the Council he hastened to Pilate's residence and he made a request. It is almost Sabbath. It will be at sundown. He asked for the body of Jesus. He wanted to dispose of the remains quickly, in keeping with Jewish custom. He probably

4.

needed a note to involve the military detail that had crucified Jesus to turn over the body, to release it for burial. At this point it has all the earmarks of a smart move. Remove the public evidence of this disgusting process. Let people begin to forget what happened on Friday.

The body of Jesus is taken down. It is not as hard as it sounds. Remember the body is just a foot off the ground. Just far enough to hasten death through asphyxiation with no possibility of relief for the muscles involved. The body is wrapped in white linen. The whole time the work was being done Joseph was being watched. Watched and even followed. Here is how the women knew where the tomb was and how to locate it. It was really easy. They followed at a discreet distance. I am speculating but I imagine the soldiers carried the body. As a priest of Israel Joseph would not have wanted to touch it..it is a dead and lifeless thing...unclean. And Sabbath with its rituals, its meals, its services on Saturday are all ahead of him. At very least he would want to attend and participate.

You see Joseph owned a tomb. No one had ever been laid in it. It was not just a simple cave, although that would have been part of its genesis. But this cave has been worked. The inside has been cut to make a room of some size with benches cut into the rock. This was where Joseph would have anticipated being buried at the end of his life. The circular stone door had been prepared. The track in which it ran so that when it was closed it was very difficult to reopen. It was a rich man's tomb. Joseph had prepared for his life's end. He knew what would happen to his remains when it was time.

And why would he do this? Provide the tomb. Run the risk of being identified as one helping the Nazarene in this fashion? Luke

has already told us there were priests like Joseph...numbers of them who admired Jesus. Agreed with HIS doctrine. Were impressed by HIS grasp of the Scriptures, the Torah, the Prophets, the Psalms and the rest of the Wisdom literature. He had probably been one of those who would never have agreed with the Council...except he was unwilling to risk expulsion from the synagogue. And now? Maybe it was anger. Maybe he just no longer cared. Or maybe he thought he could make a case...someone had to do it. Out of sight, out of mind. He may even have been brilliant enough to conclude if God was really involved in all of this...let God do what HE wills. Joseph of Arimathea did it.

The body was laid in the tomb even with a modicum of respect. If prayers were said, Joseph said them. Not in Latin. Not in Greek. In the language of Judea. There was no time for a great deal of ceremony. The sun was on the horizon. Shortly it would be Sabbath. Joseph saw the soldiers affix the seal of the Procurator, Pontius Pilate. He left. The watchers at a distance also left. There was the emptiness of sorrow in the air. The women would prepare spices and ointments to anoint the body of their loved one.

It is important to attend to these details as Luke does for one reason. The body has been handled for a time. It has been transported a distance. It has been entombed. The soldiers know dead bodies. The priest has seen too many. The door of the tomb closes with no hope of its being reopened, unless it is to admit another dead body. The funeral is important because Jesus really died. And no one, absolutely no one expected what happened on Sunday morning.

Those who believe recognize this truth. When man is sure

6.

he has taken charge and is certain he has guaranteed the outcome because he does not believe there is a God who could overthrow man's decisions and plans...well...miracles are liable to happen. Because God is real. And HE tends to prove it. That is what happened after the funeral...three days later.

Let us pray:

Up from the grave he arose  
With a mighty triumph o'er His foes  
He arose a victor from the dark domain  
And HE lives forever with HIS saints to reign  
He arose! He arose! Hallelujah! Christ arose.

Dear God in heaven we give thanks for the victory of Jesus on the 3<sup>rd</sup> day and we mark that day, each time we meet to worship. As sure and certain as we should be about the death of Jesus, dead and buried. Give us even greater confidence through faith in His resurrection. We praise your name O God.

Amen