

“Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus”

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Online Worship Service

Recorded at King City United Church

New Hope UC, King City UC, & York Pines UC.

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Prayer of Illumination

God of life, your Spirit raised Jesus from dead. Your Spirit inspired the prophets and writers of Scripture. Your Spirit draws us to Christ, and helps us to acknowledge him as Lord. We ask that you will send your Spirit now to give us deeper insight, encouragement, faith, and hope through the proclamation of the Easter gospel. Amen.

Isaiah 53:4-9

⁴ Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted.

⁵ But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.

⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way,
and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

⁷ He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

⁸ By a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future?
For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people.

⁹ They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb^[a] with the rich, although he had
done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.

John 19:38-42 The Burial of Jesus

³⁸ After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. ³⁹ Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. ⁴⁰ They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. ⁴¹ Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. ⁴² And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

Good morning! Today is the second Sunday of Easter, and I brought a passage of the scene of Jesus' burial from Gospel John. Jesus was crucified and died, and on the third day he rose again. And today's Bible passage takes place in between the death and the resurrection. After the crucifixion, he died around 3 p.m. According to Matthew chapter 27 which describes the same scene of the crucifixion, the last moments of death on the cross were witnessed from a distance by Mary of Magdalene, James, Mother Mary, and Salome, who is the mother of James and John. Their names frequently appear in the Gospel, which means, they were core members in Jesus' public life. It was 3 p.m. when they were looking from a distance at the cross, and it became evening. That is, they had been watching for more than 3 hours.

According to Deuteronomy 21:22-23, hanging an executed on a tree over night, it would be a violation of Jewish Law. It says, “²² When someone is convicted of a crime punishable by death and is executed, and you hang him on a tree,²³ his corpse must not remain all night upon the tree; you shall bury him that same day.” Jews in Jesus’ time know this very well. Jews were more than familiar with it; however, the core disciples of Jesus’ ministry were just watching Jesus on the cross because they were full of fear of the power of the Roman Empire because even their leader wasn’t able to escape the authoritative power. While they were scared and were just watching Jesus dead on the cross, according to Gospel John, two disciples other than Jesus’ twelve disciples revealed their discipleship.

The first one is Joseph of Arimathea. He boastfully approached Pontius Pilates and publicly requested Jesus’ body in order to bury him.

Who is Joseph of Arimathea, and why is this request important? Gospel John that we've read describes him as a secret disciple of Jesus because of his fear of Jews. Other descriptions from the Gospel inform that he was a rich man¹ and a member of the Sanhedrin² who was deeply pious and who did not agree to crucify Jesus.

When we look into the Sanhedrin, a council, his hierarchical governing position is quite high. The total number of Sanhedrin members is only 23 in Israel. One might say it is somewhat similar to being mayor in a modern society, but the position is more than that: the position has the authorization of legislation, jurisdiction, and administration of the nation. Everyone knew Joseph of Arimathea. Therefore, at first, he hid his status of discipleship as Gospel John describes. He might have been fearful of the devaluation of his reputation. His respectful social position could have been the barrier to disclosing his discipleship. However, on the day of the crucifixion, he decided to reveal his discipleship publicly.

As I mentioned, Jesus died Friday afternoon at 3 p.m. and now the Sabbath was about to begin because, for Jews, the Sabbath starts on Friday evening. Once the Sabbath starts, Jews do not "work." They do not open their business and do not do any type of work, even at home. Then, let's think about it. Would taking down a corpse from the cross count as work? Yes, that is work. No Jews work on the Sabbath, so if Jesus' body

¹ Matthew 27:57

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

² Luke 23:50–51

⁵⁰ Now there was a good and righteous man named Joseph, who, though a member of the council,⁵¹ had not agreed to their plan and action. He came from the Jewish town of Arimathea, and he was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God.

hadn't been taken down, his body would have hung on the cross for at least 24 hours more. Birds and animals would have dishonored his body. So this pious respectful man deemed that as unacceptable and decided to request Jesus body, costing his reputation as a member of the Sanhedrin and his future. We have to evaluate his courage and decision because no one, not even the core members and nor the 12 disciples, was able to request this. When he removed Jesus' body from the cross, Joseph of Arimathea laid Jesus according to the burial custom of the Jews. I imagine that even if one of the twelve disciples had approached with this request to Pontius Pilates, he wouldn't have listened to the disciple. Considering their social status, they wouldn't have met Pilate. Then, wouldn't God prepare Joseph's wealth and high position to do this courageous act as a disciple?

Another hidden agent whom I'd like to introduce is Nicodemus, who is also one of the 23 Sanhedrin members. He appears more than several times in Gospel. In John chapter 3, he was described as an anxious inquirer who was ashamed to confess his discipleship openly. He secretly visited Jesus at night. His question was "how can anyone be born after having grown old?"³ After Jesus replied to his question, Jesus added: "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."⁴ It sounds somewhat irrelevant for Nicodemus. But this addition applies and works for him later in his dedication. When he had Q&A time with Jesus, Jesus said the famous notion of himself: "For God so loved the world that

³ John 3:4b

⁴ John 3:14

he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”⁵ After the first encounter, he may have been Jesus’ disciple, but he did so secretly.

The second description about Nicodemus appears in John chapter 7. The Sanhedrin council ordered temple policemen to arrest Jesus, but they went back to the council with empty hands. When most of the Sanhedrin members scolded the policemen for not arresting Jesus, Nicodemus advocated for Jesus by saying that “Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing.”⁶ Can you sense he is somewhat changing from a night visitor to a more active advocate?

After this, we can find him in John chapter 19 as we read. When Joseph of Arimathea removed Jesus’ body from the cross, according to verse 39³⁹ Nicodemus came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. You might imagine how big and heavy 100 lbs is because most of us do not handle things that heavy in our ordinary life. It is easy to understand if I introduce the baggage policy of Air Canada. The maximum weight per bag is 50 lbs, therefore, 100lbs means two full bags without rollers. We can exercise to lift 100 lbs several times, but Nicodemus, in the Bible passage, is carrying the 100 lbs of myrrh and aloes mixtures. Was Nicodemus hidden from and hard to be seen by the crowd who had clamored for the crucifixion? No, not at all! Everyone was watching what the two famous Sanhedrin members of Joseph and Nicodemus were doing. Remember that even the core members of Jesus’

⁵ John 3:16

⁶ John 7:51

disciples didn't appear in fear of the possible danger from the crowd. Nicodemus in particular now understood when Jesus said "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." After his enlightenment of Jesus' crucifixion, he started to have the faith of eternal life and decided to reveal himself with tremendous courage, arousing the faith of others.

Later, these two friends of the Sanhedrin Council experienced divine grace in their own ways. Nicodemus wrote the entire experience of the resurrection in "Gospel of Nicodemus." Of course the canon Bible that we have doesn't include the Gospel of Nicodemus, but it is worth read, and I'll introduce it someday. But today I'd like to mention an interesting thing in the Gospel of Nicodemus. Nicodemus wrote the story of his friend Joseph of Arimathea. According to the Gospel of Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea was arrested, beaten, and put into a cell by the Pharisees, but the resurrected Jesus took him out from the cell in an inexplicable way, and was able to save his life.

These two shy disciples are not the twelve disciples, but they did a great thing that the twelve hadn't done. And we can track their growth of faith till their deciding moments of dedication that cost their wealth, reputation, and life. From their life story, we can learn that their faith stories are not a one-time occurrence but an on-going gradual development. They once hid their discipleship but later they outstandingly revealed their faith.

What if the two Sanhedrin members kept hiding their discipleship? They could have escaped their persecution at that moment, but would not be true disciples and would not experience miraculous divine grace; however, in the moments of decision, they chose to be Jesus' disciple, facing against the hard situations and, therefore, they didn't lose these heavenly blessings.

Sisters and brothers, sometimes we need to declare our sonship of God in our lives. At school, at our workplace, at home, and even in the time of quarantine due to COVID-19, Disciples are the people who intentionally reveal the discipleship as a Christian. Our revelation may cost something, sometimes disadvantages or hardships. And yet, when we face the hardships because of the faith, we won't lose the heavenly blessings. May the Godly blessing be with you, the disciples of Jesus.

Let us pray silently.