

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Nicodemus: Earlier Me

Rev. Ben Garris

John 19:38-42

September 29, 2024

Good morning, today we're "wrapping up" the life of this sermon series on Nicodemus. We've been examining faith as a work in progress by taking a good look at the person of Nicodemus, largely because, if we're honest, for much of humanity, faith is indeed a work in progress, so we wanted to acknowledge this truth... that most people have question after question. That most don't fully understand. That most are hesitant to believe in this Jesus for fear of being made a fool. We acknowledge the complexity of faith, and we encourage you in your own faith progression. Now, for context, today's text immediately follows the death of Jesus on the cross at the end of John 19 and immediately precedes the discovery of the empty tomb in John 20. Let's hear Jesus' burial account according to John's gospel **in John 19:38-42**.

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.

I'll give you a riddle to think about, what do Francis Collins, John Warwick Montgomery, Rosalind Picard, and Nicodemus have in common? Today's text places us at the burial of Jesus' body. We must acknowledge this reality. For so much of the church calendar year, we focus on Jesus' life, his words, his healing actions, or even on his resurrection, but today is different. Today the focus is on the truth that the historical Jesus of Nazareth was crucified by the Romans, and he **died** there, meaning that something had to happen to his body.

Most of us are grateful, I'm sure, that today we have funeral directors, and people within our community who are trained on what to do following a death. But what do you know about ancient Jewish burial customs? Did you know that bodies were buried usually within 24 hours of death? That's not a lot of time to decide what is going to happen! By this time in history, the Egyptians were practicing embalming, and you can read about Joseph being embalmed towards the end of Genesis for example, but mostly Jews were quickly buried according to their socio-economic means. For example, those with wealth were buried in newly cut tombs often in gardens or with prominent statues, while the poorest or unknown persons may have just been buried in a hole on the side of the road a couple feet deep. Therefore, because Jesus' family were poor, there was no estate with which to bury his body, thus Jesus was to receive a criminal's burial. Do you know what a criminal burial consisted of? To die a criminal's death meant that the numerous bodies of those crucified would have been thrown into a pit together. Zero honor and zero dignity. That's what awaited Jesus' body, except that Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, **the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night**, showed up in a great act of courage, and gave Jesus

a burial worthy of the highest honor, preparing his body with an extravagant amount of precious imported spices and wrapping Jesus' body in clean linens, after which they carefully laid his body in a brand-new tomb in a beautiful garden setting. Pop quiz on Jewish law: according to the law given in **Numbers 19**, to touch a dead body would make a person ritually what? Unclean. While this was not a permanent state, being unclean prohibited you from taking part in any religious activities causing a sense of spiritual isolation. Furthermore, being unclean meant often receiving social shunning whereby one would have to distance themselves from all other people and receive negative judgements about you while folks muttered to one another and cast looks of disdain toward you. You become the topic of town gossip. Raise your hand if you enjoy everyone talking about you behind your back?

Keep in mind Jesus died on the "day of preparation", that is the Friday just before Shabbat, their Sabbath, which was observed beginning Friday at sun-down through Saturday at sun-down. Every Jew, and **especially** a high-ranking Pharisee and member of the Jewish ruling council, **like Nicodemus**, would be spending their time getting all their shopping done, preparing food and cleaning, and setting a table to be ready to observe their holy day of rest, their Shabbat. So, it begs the question then, **WHY** would Nicodemus choose to spend his time, his energy, his wealth, looking after the dead body of a crucified criminal thereby making himself ritually unclean and unable to partake in the Shabbat to come? Why welcome gossip, sideways glances, and judgment upon your character when you are so highly esteemed? Why is it that this man, **who earlier came to Jesus at night**, is now giving himself to the burial process of Jesus in the day? Why this change in behavior in Nicodemus?

Could it be that Nicodemus, and Joseph of Arimathea for that matter, have decidedly placed their trust, not in their wealth or religious status, but in the **one who just gave up his life in love**? Could it be that they gained something of **greater value** by trusting Jesus over anything else they could ever possess?

If I may share a quote from the historical drama, *The Chosen*, Mary Magdalene having been healed by Jesus from her demon possession admits that she does not understand what happened, so she says, **"but here is what I can tell you, I was one way, and now I am completely different. And the thing that happened in-between, was him."**

I share that account **because I think it gets to the heart of our question and to the heart of Nicodemus** as he is here in John 19, as he buries the criminal body of Jesus forgoing his prominence and importance and choosing to be labeled unclean. **He was one-way, that is, an earlier Nicodemus believed and behaved one way, but now he is different.** So why would he involve himself in touching and preparing a dead body, making himself unclean? Why would he be lavishing Jesus' body with dignity fit for a king? **Because what happened in-between the earlier Nicodemus and now, was Jesus.**

Francis Collins, a physician geneticist, was the head of the human genome project and is one of the most respected geneticists in the world. Francis was an atheist until he encountered patients with such strong faith despite their illness. After reading C.S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity* he found answers to his questions about the existence of God and became a devout Christian. **John Warwick Montgomery** is an internationally renowned lawyer who was raised in a secular home, but converted to Christianity in his early adult years, and went on to defend the rationality of the Christian faith through legal and historical analysis having earned 10 degrees including a Ph.D. as a Master of Philosophy in Law. A modern Nicodemus perhaps? **Rosiland Picard** is a professor at MIT and a pioneer in a branch of artificial intelligence. Raised an atheist, she believed that science had all the answers to life's big questions, but as her career progressed, she began to consider the spiritual dimension of life. She read the Bible and converted to Christianity and now speaks openly about her faith and

how it compliments her work in science and technology. What do Francis Collins, John Warwick Montgomery, Rosalind Picard, and Nicodemus have in common? They were one way, there was an earlier version of themselves, and now they're different, and what happened in-between was Jesus. They each with prominence in their fields, courageously align themselves with Jesus even if that meant that others might consider them unclean, socially unacceptable, or a subject of gossip.

Friends, John, the writer of this gospel account, does not hide his intentions for writing, as he states in the very next chapter in **John 20:31-32**, *Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book.* ³¹ *But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.* I'm going to ask you a question: In the same way that Nicodemus is referenced as "*the man who earlier came to Jesus at night*", is there an "earlier" version of you? Are you able to say, "**I was one way, and now I am completely different. And the thing that happened in-between, was him.**" If you're not able to say that, let me ask the harder question: do you want to, and if so, will you make room for the **possibility** that Jesus is trustworthy?

The gospel accounts have many other testimonies of people willing to forsake all their comforts, values, or societal norms because of the **surpassing value of Jesus**. The 12 disciples left their families and sources of income to follow Jesus. Matthew the tax collector left his life of luxury to follow Jesus. The overzealous Saul who previously persecuted Christians, left his own place of prominence to become a fervent follower of Jesus with the new name Paul and the list goes on and on. Finally, here, even Nicodemus (and Joseph) were willing to openly handle the dead body of Jesus, not looking for anything in return from Jesus at this point, for what should they expect in return from a dead body. No, they were willing to do this because they had already received grace upon grace through faith, and this **was their response to that love and grace**. A response of courage. What will your response be? This is why every day, all over the world, people from every nationality, every language, every race and culture are devoting themselves to Jesus for the very first time. Many courageously forsaking their family culture or values or receiving ostracizing and estrangement because of the surpassing value of Jesus. We can't explain it fully, and we don't know exactly what happened, but we do know that something has changed in us and **for us**. As a result, the church has littered human history with every attempt to tell others about this good news. We write songs saying, I once was lost, but now I'm found, I once was blind but now I see, because **we are searching for words to describe this mystery** of God's grace imparted to us. A mystery that Jesus will grant to everyone who calls on his name, if you are open to **the possibility**, as Nicodemus was, that maybe Jesus is trustworthy after all.

Church, may we give thanks and praise to Jesus for giving up his life. May we thank our local morticians for their silent service because something must be done with the body. May we continue to boast of the goodness of an infinitely loving and giving God. May we continue to tell others of this mystery that has happened to us (we have work to do in this regard, and our upcoming series "Clay Jars" will help encourage us in this work), and may we invite others to be open to the **possibility of faith in God and in His son Jesus** who gave up his life and died, that those who are living one way now, may soon be able to say, "I am completely different because of Him."

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.