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John 19:31-42

Fifty-fifth Message

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THE BURIAL OF THE KING

Songs can strike a deep chord in our hearts. These lines are from a number by Crosby and Nash:

Lay me down in the river
And wash this place some way
Break me down like sand from a stone
Maybe I'll be whole again one day

Life has a way of chipping away at us and we yearn to be whole again. What will make us whole? The short answer is, the cross of Christ.

Today we begin Holy Week, eight days in the spring when we contemplate our salvation in Christ more than any other time in the year. It starts with Palm Sunday and moves through Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and finally Resurrection Sunday. As it happens, just as we approach Easter our studies in the gospel of John focus on the cross.

In chapter 19, John is very deliberate in the details of what he shares of the crucifixion. We have already looked at a number of things: the inscription that Pilate placed on the cross: "Jesus the Nazarene, the King of the Jews"; Jesus' garments divided among the soldiers; the women in contrast to the soldiers, standing by the cross in quiet devotion; the cheap, sour wine offered to Jesus in response to his words, "I thirst." What a contrast this wine is to the Cana wedding wine, the wine of the new covenant, which Jesus offers.

Then, with his last breath, Jesus cried out, "It is finished." The time for explanation and discussion was over. Jesus had accomplished what he had come to do: He had died a criminal's death. The Word had become flesh; now it was time for the Word to return to God so that human beings could be united with God.

Today we come to the final two scenes in John's passion narrative.

Then the Jews, because it was the day of preparation, so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), asked Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away. So the soldiers came, and broke the legs of the first man and of the other who was crucified with Him; but coming to Jesus, when they saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs. (John 19:31-33)

It is the day of preparation for the Sabbath. John is deliberate about this detail, referring to it three times in this chapter. Sabbath begins on Friday evening. This was a special Sabbath because it fell during the Passover feast. John places the crucifixion at the time the lambs were being slaughtered for the Passover meal to be eaten later that evening.

The Passover was celebrated at the full moon of the first month of a vernal new year. On the tenth day, each family chose a year-old lamb. At twilight on the fourteenth day they killed this unblemished animal and spread its blood on the lintel and doorposts. The meat was roasted and eaten on the same night. Any remains were burnt; the bones were to remain unbroken.

Along with the meat, the family ate unleavened bread and bitter herbs, all the while dressed for a hasty departure in commemoration of the Exodus from Egypt. (The Festival of Unleavened Bread began the next day and continued for seven days. From the fifteenth to the twenty-first, no leaven was consumed. The first and last days of Unleavened Bread were days of rest and worship.)

John has already identified Jesus as being the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Jesus now becomes the new Passover meal. He delivers the people of God not from Egypt but from the death, darkness, and despair that are rooted in the sinful state of humanity.

The Roman custom was to leave the crucified one on the cross until he died, leaving the rotting body there for the vultures. This process could take days. If there was a reason to hasten death, the legs were broken so the condemned couldn't raise himself up to breathe.

According to Mosaic Law, anyone who was put to death by hanging on a tree should not remain there overnight (Dt 21:22-23). Such a person was under God's curse and to leave him exposed would cause the land to be desecrated. Therefore the Jews asked Pilate to have Jesus' legs broken. Maybe they wanted the Lord to be further humiliated. The soldiers broke the legs of the criminals, but when they came to Jesus he was already dead.

But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out. And he who has seen has testified, and his testimony is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you also may believe. For these things came to pass to fulfill the Scripture, "NOT A BONE OF HIM SHALL BE BROKEN." And again another Scripture says, "THEY SHALL LOOK ON HIM WHOM THEY PIERCED." (19:34-37)

One soldier pierced Jesus' side with a spear and out flowed a mixture of blood and water. The fact that blood and water issued forth means that there had been significant penetration. Medical experts disagree on what exactly was pierced. Some suggest the heart, others the bottom of the chest cavity.

This scene is so important that John includes the fact that there was an eyewitness whose testimony is reliable. The words "seen"

and “testify” are the language of John the Baptist in 1:34: “I myself have seen, and have testified that this is the Son of God.”

We naturally ask, who is the eyewitness? Perhaps it was the soldier. And who is the person who knows that the witness is telling the truth? Perhaps it is God. But it is best to identify both as John the Evangelist. The phrasing here is similar to 21:24: “This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and wrote these things, and we know that his testimony is true.” Also, the purpose given for people to believe is the same as 20:31: “these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.”

It makes a huge difference when someone says he directly saw or heard something. When it is one person’s word against another’s, it’s a no-win situation. Things get muddy and murky and it’s almost impossible to make a fair judgment. But when you have an objective, impartial witness you can address even delicate situations. This is John’s point.

An eyewitness testimony is important to verify that what happened really did occur, that it is the truth, so that the testimony might give rise to faith. Pilate asked, “What is truth?” This is the truth: Jesus was a man, he was flesh and blood, and he died. Already at the time of John’s writing the docetists denied that the Christ, Jesus, was truly a man. Rather he only seemed (the Greek word *dokeō*) to take on human form. And by the same token, he never really died; it only appeared so.

The symbolism behind the blood and water is extremely significant. The common suggestion is that water represents baptism and blood communion. But nowhere does blood alone represent communion. Some see an allusion to the Exodus (Ex 17:6), when the striking of the rock resulted in a flow of water. But if we examine how blood and water are used in John, this is a symbol of the life and cleansing that flows from Jesus’ death is and released to the world.

John references two Scriptures that were fulfilled in the actions of the soldiers. First, he refers to the promise that no bone would be broken. There is no clear text for this promise. However, both Exodus 12:46 and Numbers 9:12 specify that no bone of the Passover lamb would be broken. Also, Psalm 34:20 describes God’s care for the righteous man: “he protects all his bones, not one of them will be broken.”

The second Scripture which John refers to, “they will look upon him whom they pierced,” is a clear reference to Zech 12:10:

“And in that day I will set about to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem. I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him like the bitter weeping over a firstborn. In that day there will be great mourning in Jerusalem ...” (Zech 12:9-11)

“In that day a fountain will be opened for the house of David and for the inhabitants of Jerusalem, for sin and for impurity.” (Zech 13:1)

One cannot help but associate this fountain with the flow of water and blood from the side of Jesus, a fountain of cleansing and life.

The context for Zech 12 is judgment, i.e., the defeat of the Gentile nations who will lay siege to Jerusalem in the last days. (This text is also quoted in Matt 24:30 and Rev 1:7).

When they look upon him whom they pierced there will be great mourning. For those being judged, this mourning will be despair. For those who belong to the people of God, mourning will be an act of contrition for past sins. What it means is that everyone must come to the foot of the cross and look at Jesus. Some reject him and are judged. Others are attracted and are saved. One day every person will look on the wounded side of Jesus. As the words to our offertory song this morning said, “We have no shelter from our sin, but in Thy wounded side.”

After these things Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but a secret one for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate granted permission. So he came and took away His body. Nicodemus, who had first come to Him by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds weight. So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen wrappings with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. Now in the place where He was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid. Therefore because of the Jewish day of preparation, since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there. (19:38-42)

Joseph of Arimathea is mentioned in all four gospels. The Synoptics identify him as a member of the Sanhedrin, that he was rich, and that he was looking for the kingdom of God. John says that he was a disciple of Jesus, but he didn’t advertise that fact because he was afraid. At least he is courageous enough to ask Pilate for the body. The fact that Pilate agreed is further evidence of his belief in the innocence of Jesus. It also offered the occasion for a final snub against the Jewish authorities.

According to Roman custom, the body of the deceased was given to the next of kin, unless the crime was sedition. In that case the body was given over to the vultures. The Jews buried criminals but did not put them in a family tomb where they would desecrate those already buried there. Rather, they were buried at a site outside the city. The Jews probably assumed that Jesus would be buried in that common grave when they asked for him to be taken down. Joseph was able to use his rank to gain access to Pilate.

Only John notes that Joseph is aided by Nicodemus. In chapter 3, Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. He was also a secret disciple, but now he is stepping out of the darkness into the light.

Nicodemus and Joseph were not brave enough to acknowledge Jesus openly when he was alive, but they come to honor him in death. These two cautious men offer a contrast to the women who stood openly at the cross. “It is dangerous to follow a living prophet, but safe and pious to honor a dead one.”¹

While Joseph secured the body, Nicodemus got the spices, a mixture of myrrh and aloes. Myrrh was a fragrant resin which was turned to powder and mixed with aloes. The result provided

a pleasant fragrance that stifled the smell of decay. We are told that the spices weighed 100 litrai, or roughly 75 pounds. This was a hundred times what Mary used to anoint Jesus. This amount is not an exaggeration. Five hundred servants carried spices in the funeral procession of Herod the Great. The amount means that the quantity was sufficient for the burial of a king. The spices were apparently laid on strips of linen, which were then wound around Jesus' body. Jesus' naked body is now covered.

Near the place of crucifixion was a garden which had a new tomb, probably an artificial cave. The word for "garden" suggests something substantial like an orchard. Only John records that it was near the place of crucifixion. This was helpful, since sundown was probably fast approaching. The tomb was empty, so when the body of Jesus disappeared, it could only have been one body. There would be no mistaking that the grave was the one in which Jesus had been laid. There is a lovely garden tomb in Jerusalem where people visit but it is almost certainly not the correct site. Likely the site is at the church of Holy Sepulchre, where tombs have been discovered.

For a third time in this chapter we learn that it was the day of preparation. Again, John draws attention to Jesus being the Passover lamb. He is also saying that this is the last Sabbath of the old creation.

When the gospel story is read or presented to people who have never heard it, at this point an amazing thing has been known to happen: people break out in tears; they get angry and upset, experiencing an outpouring of grief.

The last tomb that we encountered in John was that of Lazarus. Standing in front of that tomb Jesus wept and then commanded his friend to come out. The first-time reader wonders what will happen when Jesus is laid into a tomb. We celebrate the rest of the story in one week's time.

Let us reflect on the symbol of water and blood flowing from the side of Jesus, one of the most powerful images in the gospel. In paintings depicting the cross, the wounded side is usually represented. The old hymns of the church speak of this water and blood.

The blood of Christ deals with our sin and death. John points to the blood as the basis of cleansing and eternal life:

So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day." (John 6:53-54)

In his first epistle, John writes:

but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. (John 1:7)

Water in John is a symbol for the Holy Spirit, the means and resource for life. Jesus told Nicodemus in chapter 3:

Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." (John 3:5)

In chapter 4, Jesus spoke to a woman at a well about the water that quenches thirst:

Jesus answered and said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again; but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life." (John 4:13-14)

In chapter 7 Jesus talks about living water:

"He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.'" But this He spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive; for the Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified. (John 7:38-39)

John baptized with water, but he told his disciples that one was coming who would baptize in the Spirit. When Jesus said, "It is finished," he gave over his spirit. The word for "gave up" is the word for betray or deliver up - the word which describes the actions of Judas and the chief priests in delivering Jesus over to be killed. But at his death, Jesus delivers his spirit. Very soon he will tell his disciples to "receive the Spirit."

The thoughtless action of a Roman soldier becomes an occasion for pointing to the deepest truth. The lance thrust was to verify death, but in reality it affirmed the beginning of life. At the cross, the place of death becomes a place of life, failure becomes hope, and hate becomes love. The cross whispers to us of God's healing and transforming love.

Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee;
Let the water and the blood,
From Thy riven side which flowed,
Be of sin the double cure,
Cleanse me from its guilt and power.

When we believe in Jesus we are crucified with Christ and raised with him. We are baptized into his death, burial, and resurrection. We are baptized in his blood that cleanses us from death. We are baptized in the Spirit that is the source of walking in newness of life. The fountain of Zech 13 becomes a reality at the cross.

For twenty years I have been taking groups of young people to the Yucatan peninsula to work in Mayan villages. We are returning again this year. Conditions there are uncomfortable. It's hot, we have trouble sleeping, and we can't stay clean. Sounds like our lives. No matter how hard we try we just get dirty. Every once in a while we come across a cenote, an underground pool carved out of limestone. When we discover a great cenote, people go crazy. They act like 10-year-olds - laughing, splashing and jumping off rocks. The water is cool, clean, and refreshing - a fountain of life. That is what the wounded side of Jesus is: a fountain of life.

The Heidelberg Catechism asks: "What does it mean to be washed with Christ's blood and Spirit?" The answer is: "To be washed with Christ's blood means that God, by grace, has forgiven my sins because of Christ's blood poured out for me in his sacrifice on the cross." To be washed with Christ's Spirit means that the Holy Spirit has renewed me and set me apart to be a

member of Christ so that more and more I become dead to sin and increasingly live a holy and blameless life.

One might venture to find a chiasmic structure in John's narrative of the cross:

- A Title on the cross – King of the Jews
- B Clothes removed and divided
- C Women openly stand at the cross
- D "I thirst"
- E "It is finished"
- D' Spear thrust - flow of blood and water
- C' Men secretly take body
- B' Jesus clothed with linen wrappings
- A' No title at the tomb

The center of the chiasm is the final words of Jesus. The title on the cross is matched with no title on the tomb. The unclothed body is clothed in burial. The actions of the women are contrasted with the actions of the men. If this is a valid literary structure, then the flow of blood and water is linked to Jesus' words, "I thirst." Jesus exposed a woman's thirst at a well in Sychar. He himself thirsted on the cross, but his thirst was to drink the cup of God's wrath. John is exposing our thirst for the cup of God's love. The fountain that flows from the cross quenches our thirst. The thirst of our humanity is for forgiveness, the removal of dirt, shame, guilt, and failure. We also thirst for life, eternal life. Money, power, or success do not grant us life. A big house, a fancy car or an exotic vacation don't do that either. Our deepest desire is for true life – to be whole again. Jesus satisfies this thirst. Only he can do it through his finished work of redemption. He is the cenote of life.

I grew up going to church every Sunday sporting a coat and tie, but I never understood the message of the cross until later in life. Maybe you have never understood this truth either. Maybe you thought that church was all about rules or that it was just a place for needy people. Maybe you thought that the politics of the church have caused more trouble than it's worth. Sometimes it's hard to get past all the external stuff. But here it is: the cross of Christ. Perhaps the Spirit of God is working right now for you to appropriate the cross personally in your life. If you have never drunk from this fountain and believed in Christ, I invite you to do so today. There is no more important decision in life. And for all of us, the encouragement is to live in the power and glory of the cross continually – cleansed, forgiven, and empowered for life.

Jesus, keep me near the cross
 There a precious fountain,
 Free to all, a healing stream,
 Flows from Calvary's mountain.

¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Light Has Come* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 260.

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