

## John 19: 17-42

This is a very powerful passage to be studying together, especially as we are so close to the Easter season. And I am thankful that we have had such good teaching leading into today's study. The depiction of Jesus's physical suffering on the cross has been the subject of many, many artists since the medieval period, some of whom painted or sculpted this subject many times within their own lives. But unlike the artists (and the patrons who paid these artists), the gospel-writers, and especially John, do not linger on the physical sufferings of Jesus on the cross, although John, as an eye-witness, knew that Jesus's suffering was intense and horrific. But more important to John was the meaning of the suffering and the way that Jesus's voluntary surrendering of his life fulfilled Scripture.

We know from contemporary sources that the pagan Romans themselves knew that crucifixion was horrific and inhumane. For instance, a lawyer and politician named Cicero was a prosecutor who brought charges against a Roman governor who illegally crucified a Roman citizen. Only non-citizens, people who didn't count for much, were allowed to be crucified. Cicero calls the punishment "torture", "shameful", incredibly painful, and something that is appropriate for use only for the lowest status of humans, an enslaved person. We do know that the entire Roman world was familiar with this type of punishment, which was used especially after Jesus's death for Jews and Christians, who were crucified for treason for not worshipping the emperor as a god. And we also know that for hundreds of years after Jesus's death, Christians refused to make an image of his death, probably partly because even the memory of the physical act of crucifixion was so painful, but partly because they preferred to focus on his deeds and his Resurrection while he was alive.

Another thing that John focuses on is the role of Pontius Pilate – a fascinating thing, as John was living in a time of persecution by the Romans, including his own persecution and knowing about the deaths of all the disciples, but in writing these things, he shows that he is not afraid to speak the truth to power. I believe John also stresses Pilate's role to show that Jesus was put to death by the entire world – the Jews had handed him over to the secular rulers, the Romans. Pilate had made the decision to impose the death penalty (BTW the medieval story that Pilate repented and became a Christian has no basis in any facts we actually know about Pilate's life. He was called back to Rome by the emperor Tiberius because he was known to be acting so cruelly to the Jews

that even the Roman emperor objected to his behavior. Sent into exile, he vanishes from history). But even most of Jesus's family, friends, and disciples deserted him in his hour of need, at the moment when the Father turned his face away. John's point is that Jesus did truly die on the cross, but also that HE was the one who did the entire work of redeeming us all by himself.

So, let's read about how Pilate once again interacts with the Jewish rulers, grinding into their faces their powerlessness in the grip of Rome: "They took Jesus, therefore, and He went out, carrying His own cross, to the *place* called the Place of a Skull, which in Hebrew is called, Golgotha. There they crucified Him, and with Him two other men, one on either side, and Jesus in between. Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." Therefore many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, Latin, *and* in Greek. So the chief priests of the Jews were saying to Pilate, "Do not write, 'The King of the Jews'; rather, *write* that He said, 'I am King of the Jews.'" Pilate answered, "What I have written, I have written."

Let's first talk about what John is doing here: he is writing for a broad audience of Gentiles, one that knows Greek, and one that is not as familiar with the topography of Jerusalem as he was. He surely is familiar with the streets and buildings of ancient Jerusalem, which he makes clear when he tells us of the place where Jesus was crucified. It may be that even in John's lifetime, people could still point out that exact spot to any visitors. Crucifixions normally took place outside of a city, and also outside of a city were cemeteries, which lined all the major roads into any major ancient city. Thus, as we will see later, Jesus carries his cross to the place where he will also be buried in a few hours. Along the way, he may even have heard the bleating of the sheep being brought to the Temple to be sacrificed for the Passover feast; as well as the songs of the priests sacrificing the lambs; and the songs of the people coming into Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. I can't imagine what Jesus thought as he heard the songs about how God had saved the people of Israel from slavery and death, while He, as the true Passover Lamb, was heading to his own death in order to permanently save all of God's people from the slavery of sin and our justifiable death penalty.

But John focuses on the struggle between Pilate and the chief priests to underscore the point about the kingship of Jesus. Pilate had already had a conversation with Jesus about his kingship,

and now he is throwing the accusation that the chief priests made about Jesus back in their faces, but also as a threat to any Jew who might be thinking about revolting against Rome: “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews”. John makes sure to tell us that “many of the Jews read the inscription”, while subtly letting us know about the universality of Jesus’s kingship by telling us that the sign was written in the three major languages used in this area of the world. The fact that Pilate refuses to change the sign also shows us the fact that the kingship that Jesus is entering into cannot be shouted down, altered, or ignored.

When John continues, he really starts focusing on the fulfillment of Scripture – the way that more than a thousand years ago, the Father and Son already knew exactly how Jesus would die and all of the circumstances surrounding his death: “Then the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took His outer garments and made four parts: a part to each soldier, and the tunic *also*; but the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece. So they said to one another, “Let’s not tear it, but cast lots for it, *to decide* whose it shall be.” *This happened* so that the Scripture would be fulfilled: “THEY DIVIDED MY GARMENTS AMONG THEMSELVES, AND THEY CAST LOTS FOR MY CLOTHING.” Therefore the soldiers did these things.”

John quotes Psalm 22:18 to remind his readers that the Father was in charge of everything – every single detail of that day was already known to him and had been known for centuries. The dividing of the possessions of the crucified was a normal part of the Roman guard’s wages – and look how pitiful are the scraps that the soldiers argue over, with the most expensive piece being the tunic that Jesus wore (we are assuming that the other soldiers had to be content with Jesus’s tah-LEET or prayer shawl (unless the Jewish leaders had removed that from him), his belt and sandals.

We’ve seen “many Jews” who have come to see the dying Jesus; the soldiers who are stationed at the cross and treat Jesus like any other criminal; now let’s look at the four women and the beloved disciple, who are close enough to exchange words with Jesus: “Now beside the cross of Jesus stood His mother, His mother’s sister, Mary the *wife* of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.” Matt. 27:55 names three of the four, but also tells us these were the closest, physically, to the cross, while “many women, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him, were there looking on from a distance”. These women, brave enough to stand in silent witness to the crucifixion, are a beacon of courage in this dark hour, and all could provide a witness to the

suffering and physical death of Jesus to the earliest converts. So John calls out Jesus's mother (he never names her, we don't know why not); Jesus's "[unnamed] mother's sister" (who is NOT Mary the wife of Clopas, as you would not name two girls in the family with the same name; perhaps this is Salome as in Mark 15:40; if so, she helped anoint Jesus's body and was witness to when they placed him in the tomb). It may be that this woman is the mother of the sons of Zebedee (one of those sons is John!), as the mother of the sons of Zebedee is consistently named as being at the foot of the cross (Matt. 27:56). Also present is Mary the wife of Clopas (who may be "the other Mary" mentioned in Matt 27:61 as also being at the tomb); and Mary Magdalene, whom we know was following Jesus while he was in Galilee. John mentions her here for the first time, as she will be an important figure in the next chapter.

Now John turns our gaze to Jesus on the cross to emphasize his compassion, his true humanity, and his true divinity: "So when Jesus saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing nearby, He said to His mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" Then He said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" And from that hour the disciple took her into his own *household*. After this, Jesus, knowing that all things had already been accomplished, in order that the Scripture would be fulfilled, said, "I am thirsty." A jar full of sour wine was standing *there*; so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on *a branch of hyssop* and brought it *up* to His mouth. Therefore when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, "It is finished!" And He bowed His head and gave up His spirit."

It shows the depth of Jesus's compassion for us human beings, for when he looked down from his own suffering to see his mother collapsed in grief at the foot of his cross, he eases her pain by telling his beloved disciple to care for her – she is clearly a widow at this point, and none of his brothers believe in him (although one will later become the head of the church in Jerusalem and according to Acts 1:14, his brothers, in plural, join the disciples in the upper room).

John leaves out many details that the Synoptic gospel writers include to have his readers understand, as he had written in 10:18 "No one has taken [my life] away from Me, but I lay it down on My own. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it back. This commandment I received from My Father." And so, when Jesus is ready to lay his life down, he consciously fulfills one last Scripture by asking for a drink. He knew he would be getting the cheap vinegary wine that was placed there for the soldiers to drink, and he knew this act would

fulfill Psalm 69:21 ““They gave me gall for my food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink”. (And this is a fulfillment of Ps 22, “My tongue cleaves to my jaws”). He also knows that this act points to his humanity, for a spirit could not drink physical liquid – and John thus includes this detail in his gospel as a subtle way of combatting the heresy that the physical Jesus did not die on the cross, but his spirit was on the cross (that was part of Gnosticism). One commentator suggested he drank to make sure everyone could hear what he said next, as the Synoptic Gospels writers tell us he gave up his life with a loud cry – he was not defeated, but this was a cry of victory! Jesus bows his head, trusting in his Father as he hands over his spirit.

“It is finished” can encompass different aspects of Jesus’s ministry: 1. The command of his Father was satisfied; he had fully drunk the cup of the Father’s wrath 2. All Scripture was now fulfilled 3. Ceremonial law was now abolished, as having been fulfilled and no longer needed now that the true sacrifice had taken place 4. Sin was finished, along with Satan’s power over humans 5. His suffering was finished – ended when Jesus decided it was over 6. His work of redemption and salvation was complete. It is astonishing that even with his dying breath, Jesus is still teaching the onlookers, trying to bring to their minds the Scripture about the Suffering Servant. But nothing about his death was normal – the way that John phrases it “he gave up his spirit” is not paralleled in any other literature from the ancient world. Indeed, this was a unique death, which was accompanied, we are told by Matthew, by miraculous signs.

Now the chief priests and scribes return to the stage, for they are concerned about the purity of Israel. A person is not to hang on a tree overnight (Deut. 21:23), especially on a Sabbath day, and most especially on a high Sabbath day around the high holy day of Passover. So they go to Pilate (again probably staying outside of his palace so they would not be polluted and could eat the Passover meal), putting in motion the circumstances that will not only again allow Scripture to be fulfilled but also to have a number of witnesses to the physical death and the place where Jesus was put in a tomb: “Now then, since it was the day of preparation, to prevent the bodies from remaining on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews requested of Pilate that their legs be broken, and *the bodies* be taken away. [This, by the way, is the notice that we have in John that Jesus was crucified along with others – a subtle way of introducing the Scripture in Isaiah 53:12 that he would be numbered with the transgressors.] So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first man, and of the other who was crucified with Him; but after

they came to Jesus, when they saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs. Yet 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 took place so that the Scripture would be fulfilled: “NOT A BONE OF HIM SHALL BE BROKEN.” And again another Scripture says, “THEY WILL LOOK AT HIM WHOM THEY PIERCED.””

We have another source, a Jewish writer, who tells us that the Romans did allow the Jews to hasten the death of people on a cross in order to get them off before the evening fell – secular Romans felt no such compunction. But this is why the chief priests must go to the Romans to ask for permission to do this, and clearly the Roman soldiers know just what to do. Yet Jesus had decided to give up his spirit already, when they come to him, they see he is already dead. Possibly one of the soldiers decided to make sure he wasn’t faking – and again, John is careful to record this eyewitness detail to cement the idea that Jesus died a real, physical death on the cross. Commentators are unsure of what the blood and water coming out of Jesus’s side meant to John – although there are plenty of suggestions – but again, it makes clear that Jesus was dead already when the soldiers came to break the legs to hasten the death of the criminals on the crosses, and that there was an eyewitness to Jesus’s death.

John reiterates that God’s purposes were accomplished, and that his purposes were made known to people long before Jesus came to Earth as a human. John references not only the sacrifice of the Passover Lamb Ex. 12:46 and Num. 9:12 (“you are not to break any bone of the Passover Lamb”) but also the provision of the Lord for those in distress: Ps 34:20 “He keeps all his bones; Not one of them is broken”. John also points to the reason why Jesus’s side needed to be pierced: Zech. 12:10, where God speaks of the impact of sin on his relationship with Israel as being like a sword that pierces him, “They will look on Me whom they have pierced”.

In verse 38, we find a new character entering the story, with the re-emergence of someone we haven’t seen since the beginning chapters of the gospel: “Now after these things Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but a secret *one* for fear of the Jews, requested of 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 litras *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 *was* 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.”

All we know about Joseph of Arimathea is that he is rich, a secret disciple of Jesus, and part of the Sanhedrin (Mark 15:43 and Luke 23:51). But it is important that we know this, as Is 53:9 “he was with a rich man in his death” tells us this part of Scripture was fulfilled by having Joseph intervene. A rock-cut tomb was only available to the richest families. Since Jesus’s family was poor (and did not come from Jerusalem), this is a real gift from Joseph, especially because he had just had the tomb constructed – so new is it that no other body had yet been placed in it. This detail is mentioned in order to assure readers that no-one could say that there was another person in the tomb, and Jesus didn’t resurrect, but the other person did!

Joseph’s gesture is extraordinary, especially as he is providing a burial place for a man who had been condemned by the Sanhedrin for treason and blasphemy, and by Jewish law, once Jesus was buried there, no other person could have been buried in the tomb. The criminals who were crucified with Jesus were likely thrown into a mass burial pit, as should have happened to Jesus’s body. But Joseph not only took his life into his hands by going to Pilate and asking for the body, he gave Jesus his own family tomb, and finally even providing his body with yards of clean linen – this was a princely gift indeed.

Joseph is joined in his gift by Nicodemus, who reappears after a long absence in the gospel. Nicodemus was also a member of the Sanhedrin (which may argue that the legal proceedings against Jesus were not undertaken with the consent of the whole Sanhedrin, again pointing to the illegality of Jesus’s trial). He had visited Jesus secretly in John 3 to discuss his teachings; had reminded the Sanhedrin of the legality of their actions in John 7 and now appears with a huge amount of spices to anoint Jesus’s body for burial, enough actually for a royal burial. What is so striking here is that the women – who are the normal caretakers of dead bodies – stand at a distance and watch, while Nicodemus and Joseph prepare Jesus’s body for burial, and thereby make themselves unable to participate in the Passover seder because they were ceremonially unclean.

As a final eyewitness detail, to assure readers that he saw it all, John tells us that the tomb was very close to where Jesus was crucified. As we know from other first-century tombs, it would have been closed with a rock taller than a man rolled into place over the opening – these rocks look like old-fashioned millstones up on one end, fitted into a slot in the ground. It would take more than one person, and a lever, to roll the stone away when the family needed to reopen the tomb for another family burial. I love that John and the other gospel writers record that the women were witnesses to the anointing and the place of Jesus's burial. There would be no confusion in their minds when they come back to the tomb on the third day. They knew exactly where they would go to find him.

So now we settle down to wait for the true end of the story, the ending which the Jewish people had been told about many years ago by their prophets, the ending that Jesus had told anyone who would listen in the three years that he taught across the length and breadth of ancient Israel. We wait, knowing that on the third day, the tomb was indeed empty. And all of us are faced with the question of how this came about and what this means in my life.

Our Father in Heaven may we still tremble each time we read or hear about this marvelous work that you planned from the beginning of creation, as you longed to bring us all into a close relationship with you. May we be filled with joy as we meditate on the fact that Jesus loved us – each one of us – so much that he came to Earth and died for us, even as we sorrow in the fact that it was our sin that compelled him to come and suffer such pain. My prayer is that each one of us here has faced the fact of the empty tomb, but also that each one, in looking at the death of Jesus on the cross, has begun to understand the height, depth, and breadth of God's love.