

Joseph of Arimathea

April 2, 2010

(Good Friday – Year C)

John 18:1-19:42

St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas

(Preached at St. Paul's)

My grandfather on my mother's side was named Knox.

But I called him: Granddad.

And during his long life, my Granddad had several different careers.

In the 1940s and 50s, my Granddad was a funeral director.

Granddad was the President of Settegast-Kopf funeral home in Houston, a funeral home that was founded by my great-great-great uncle, Ed Settegast.

Granddad became very involved in the funeral business and was active in the National Morticians Society,

So much so that Granddad was elected as the International President of the National Selected Morticians Society in 1952.

However, in the late 1950s, Granddad left the funeral business and he got into the banking business.

Yet, the funeral business never did get out of his blood.

Even after he had retired from Settegast-Kopf funeral home, Granddad was always the first person to call on a family after the death of a loved one.

Granddad knew how to listen, not just talk, in times of bereavement.

And now, when I am officiating at a burial service, I must admit that I can feel my Granddad's spirit, because the funeral business is in our blood.

But one of the things that I remember most about my Granddad is what he insisted upon doing at the graveside of every single family member or friend.

After the minister had completed the liturgy beside the grave,

After the pallbearers had removed their carnations from their lapels and put them on the casket,

After the family had walked back to the waiting limousine to take them to the green bean casseroles that awaited in the parish hall,
After all of that, my Granddad insisted upon staying with the body.

Granddad would sit on a bench beside the grave, even in the hundred-degree Texas heat, mopping his brow with his handkerchief, until the bitter end.

He would stay behind as the gravediggers completed their work.
He would stay and watch as the casket was lowered into the ground.
He would stay until he saw the vault descend over the top of the casket and make that distinctive “click” as it latches shut.

As a boy growing up, I knew that my Granddad had a distinct and private ministry to the dead.

With the dead, Granddad went the distance.

With the dead, Joseph of Arimathea also went the distance.

Joseph of Arimathea was a secret disciple of Jesus.

After Jesus had bowed his head on the Cross and given up his spirit,
Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate if he could take the body of Jesus.

So Joseph and his friend, Nicodemus, another stealth disciple, had a distinct and private ministry to the crucified Jesus.

They took the body of Jesus and wrapped the body in spices and linen cloths.

They laid the body of Jesus in Joseph’s brand new tomb, the tomb that he had been saving for his family.

Watching the sun set on this horrific Friday, Joseph and Nicodemus sat on the bench in the graveyard, wiping the sweat off their foreheads with a handkerchief.

With the dead body of Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea went the distance.

In the grand story of the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ, we don’t focus very much on Joseph and his unique ministry.

Rather than focusing on Jesus’ body going into the tomb, we focus more on how Jesus’ body got out of the tomb.

This coming Sunday morning at both St. Alban's and at St. Paul's, we will hear the story of what happened on the first day of the week when the women discovered the empty tomb.

If we read from John's Gospel, we will hear that it was Mary Magdalene who discovered the empty tomb.

If we read from Luke's Gospel, we will hear that it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James and some other women who discovered the empty tomb.

And the Gospels of Matthew and Mark report that a collection of all sorts of Marys discovered the empty tomb.

You'd have think that the four Gospel writers would have gotten it together on something as important as the names of the women who discovered Jesus' resurrection.

But the Four Gospels are all in agreement on this one name.

All four Gospels agree that it was Joseph of Arimathea who laid the body of Jesus in the tomb and who stayed with the body until the bitter end.

The Christian communities of Matthew and Mark and Luke and John all agree on this:

It was Joseph who went the distance with Jesus.

It was Joseph who went all the way past the cross, taking the body of Jesus and offering his family's very own new tomb.

It was Joseph who sat beside the grave on a bench, waiting until the stone rolled over the entrance of the tomb with that distinctive 'click.'

On this Good Friday, we all have an opportunity for a significant and unique and distinct ministry to the dead.

On this Good Friday, we, too can go the distance.

When an uncle dies, you can drop off a bucket of fried chicken at the front door.

Or, like Joseph, you can go the distance with the dead,

Inviting his widow out for dinner long after the freezer full of spaghetti casseroles has been depleted.

When a buddy loses his job, you can listen over coffee at Starbucks as he tells his woes of unemployment.

Or, like Joseph, you can go the distance with the dead,
Sending out our friend's resume and using our network of connections to help him get another job.

When a sister tells you that she is getting a divorce, you can send her an email telling her how sorry you are.

Or, like Joseph, you can go the distance with the dead,
Talking and laughing for hours and hours in an informal therapy session over a gallon of Blue Bell ice cream.

On the Cross, Jesus says:
"It is finished."

Yet for Joseph of Arimathea, his ministry is not finished.
His ministry is just beginning.

And our ministry with all of us who are dying is not finished.
Our ministry among the dead and the dying is just beginning.

So insist upon staying with the body.
Offer your family's very own tomb to the dying.
Go the distance with the dead, until the stone shuts with a --- 'click.'

AMEN.

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