

October 2, 2005 by Steve Brandon



The Burial of Christ

Matthew 27:55-66

- 1. His grave was easily identified (verses 55-61).**
- 2. His grave was previously prophesied (verses 57-60).**
- 3. His grave was deliberately supervised (verses 62-66).**

Suppose that several months ago, you received an invitation from a family friend that their daughter is getting married in October. You have known this girl for a long time. You have seen her grow up. She babysat for your own children. You are looking forward to attending her wedding as it promises to be a great day of celebration. Suppose also that several days ago, you heard about an awful car accident that took place just outside of town. A drunk driver slammed into a car driven by a young man of the age of 20, killing him instantly. This young man was a close family friend. He had grown up in the neighborhood. You had attended several of his ball games. When he came home from college, he always made a point to come by your house to say hello and tell you about his college experience. You find out that the funeral of this young man is scheduled at the exact same time as the wedding of your other family friend. You have a choice to make. Do you attend the wedding? Or, do you attend the funeral? The events are a three-hour drive from each other, and so, you cannot attend both of these events. Which do you choose?

Certainly, there would be many factors that would go into your decision. Do you know one of these families more closely than another? How strong are your relationships with these families? Are one of your own children going to be in the wedding? Have you spent many hours with this young man's parents, seeking to minister to them in their grief? Will there be a reception for the bride later this month? Did this young man attend your church? But, suppose for the sake of argument, that you considered all things to be equal. Which would you choose to attend? The wedding or the funeral? Which would you want to attend?

I know that in my flesh, I would want to attend the wedding. I prefer to see smiles and to hear laughs and to think of a man and woman spending the rest of their lives together in marital bliss. And yet, listen to Ecclesiastes 7:2, It says, "It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, because that is the end of every man, and the living takes it to heart." In other words, the funeral is better for our souls than is the wedding. Because the funeral makes us think about the brevity of life. The funeral makes us deal with the eternal realities beyond the grave.

This morning, we will be going to a funeral. Particularly, we will be going to the funeral of Jesus. We will be looking at what took place between His death and the placing of His body in the tomb. In recent weeks, we have looked at the trial, the sufferings, the crucifixion, and the death of Christ. We not turn our attention this morning upon His burial. My message is entitled, "The Burial of Christ."

At first thought, it might not seem to be a bit trivial. Once Jesus had died, His life was over. There was nothing left for Him to do. He Himself declared just before He yielded up His Spirit, "It is finished" (John 19:30). What more was to be done? The events surrounding His burial, at first, appears to be a bit inconsequential. And yet, we need to understand that the Biblical writers didn't waste words. If Matthew records for us the details surrounding His burial, then, the event must have been important.

Paul thought that the burial of Christ was important. When summing up the message of the gospel, he said, "I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, ... to the twelve, ... to more than five hundred brethren at one time, ... to James, ... to all the apostles, and last of all, He appeared to me also" (1 Cor. 15:3-8). Paul mentions four events of particular importance in the gospel: (1) The death of Christ; (2) The burial of Christ; (3) The resurrection of Christ; and (4) The appearances of Christ. Each of these events have their importance.

Of course, we know that the death of Christ is important. His death was the means of our salvation. His death was the sacrifice that paid for our sins. We also realize the importance of the resurrection of Christ. His raising from the dead demonstrated that He had conquered death -- "having been raised from the dead, [Christ] is never to die again; death no longer is master over Him" (Rom. 6:9). His raising from the dead demonstrated that He was who He claimed to be! (Acts 17:31). Furthermore, we understand that the appearances of Christ are important. They furnish proof that Jesus did indeed rise from the dead. It isn't some fairy tale that we believe. No, our faith is based upon space-time history of what actually took place.

But, why is the burial of Christ important? Perhaps the greatest reason for this is that it demonstrates the Jesus really died. There are some who seek to deny the resurrection of Christ on the grounds that Jesus never really died. This theory is called "The Swoon Theory." Those who believe this say that Jesus "swooned." In other words, He lost consciousness and appeared to be dead, but He never really died. Therefore, they say, as Jesus raised from the tomb, it wasn't from a state of death, but from a state of unconsciousness. But, as all of the gospel writers show, Jesus was taken down from the cross, prepared for burial, and laid in a tomb. This process may have taken upwards of an hour. It would have been clearly evident to those placing His body in the tomb whether or not Jesus was dead.

Another reason why the burial is that the details surrounding His burial give further proof that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. The

circumstances surrounding His burial were prophesied to take place. Once again, we see a declaration by Pilate of the innocence of Jesus. The manner of His burial help to prove that He really raised from the dead.

But, there is yet another reason why this passage is of importance to us. On two other occasions, Paul mentions how in our baptism, we have been buried with Christ (Rom. 6:4; Col. 2:12). In other words, in our dying to sin through our faith in Christ, expressed in our baptism, we have participated, in some mysterious way, with the burial of Christ. At the end of my message, we will visit these verses in greater detail. I will do this, because, they are the New Testament's interpretation of the death of Christ for us.

To be honest, I'd rather not be preaching from this text today. I'd rather be preaching about the resurrection, which will come in our next time together. I would rather speak about the hope that we have in the resurrection. I would rather speak about the joys that come into the soul when you realize that Jesus has conquered death. I would rather speak about the emotions welling up in their hearts when they realize that the body of the one they were seeking to anoint was no longer in the tomb! I would rather attempt to get you to feel the joy, rather than to feel the sorrow, as will be the case today. And yet, the grave is necessary to the resurrection. If Jesus is to be raised from the dead, He must first be dead! If Jesus was dead, He must be buried. And so, we proceed

Our text is indeed a somber and sober one. It is a text that causes us to think about the body of Jesus in the tomb. Though our text is in a minor key this morning, let us not forget that the house of mourning is better than the house of feasting (Ecc. 7:2). Consider our text.

Matthew 27:55-66

And many women were there looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to Him, among whom was Mary Magdalene, along with Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee. And when it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who himself had also become a disciple of Jesus. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given over to him. And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out in the rock; and he rolled a large stone against the entrance of the tomb and went away. And Mary Magdalene was there, and the other Mary, sitting opposite the grave. Now on the next day, which is the one after the preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered together with Pilate, and said, "Sir, we remember that when He was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I am to rise again.'" "Therefore, give orders for the grave to be made secure until the third day, lest the disciples come and steal Him away and say to the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last deception will be worse than the first." Pilate said to them, "You have a guard; go, make it as secure as you know how." And they went and made the grave secure, and along with the guard they set a seal on the stone.

1. His grave was easily identified (verses 55-61).

I believe that this is the point made in verses 55-61 as we follow the women who were mentioned. We first encounter the women in verse 55, "And many women were there looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to Him, among whom was Mary Magdalene, along with Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee."

But, let us not forget that women played an integral role in the life and ministry of Jesus. Here we see that there were "many women ... who had followed Jesus from Galilee" to Jerusalem (verse 55). This is no small task. This was a three or four day journey. We don't know if they came with (or without) their husbands. Perhaps these women came in a large caravan to worship in Jerusalem.

We read here in verse 55 that they were "ministering to Him." This simply means that they were "serving" Him and helping Him. During the ministry of Jesus, there were many ways in which this was done. This could have been with words of encouragement. This could have been with helping Him physically, providing Him with clean clothes or with food. In Luke 8, we read of "many" women who supported Jesus financially. Think about the ministry of Jesus. During the days of His ministry, we read nothing of Him working to support Himself. As a boy, He certainly learned the trade of His father, who was a "carpenter" (Matt. 13:55) ... a builder. But, throughout His ministry, there is no mention of Jesus taking time to build a house or some furniture or anything else. He devoted Himself completely to the ministry. How was He funded? In a major way, He was funded through these wealthy women, who "ministered" to Him.

This faithful "ministry" of these women to Jesus continued right up until the end of His life of the cross. When Jesus died, these women were "looking on from a distance" (Matt. 27:55). Why they were kept away from Jesus at this time isn't quite known. In John's gospel, these same women were "standing by the cross" (John 19:25), listening to Jesus. Perhaps they were distanced from Jesus at this moment, because it had become the moment of death. The legs of the two criminals were broken. Soon, the bodies would be taken down from the cross. Perhaps the soldiers wanted some room to work, and so, they cleared everyone away from the cross. Perhaps the women were ushered away to protect them from the horror of the final moments of death. We don't know exactly why they were "at a distance" at this moment.

But even from a "distance," they were ministering to Him. If Jesus could hear them, He may well have heard shouts of affirmation: "Jesus, we love You;" "Jesus, we will be faithful to You;" "Jesus, we know that you are innocent." If they were too far away to be heard, I believe that their visible presence in the "distance" was an encouragement to Jesus to persevere in His sufferings. It's like the parents who come to watch their children compete in a ballgame or play in an orchestra. As the child looks to the crowd and sees mom and dad in the stands, they are encouraged to perform a bit better.

Matthew singles out three of these women by name: Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee. Mary Magdalene had been demon possessed by seven demons, until Jesus cast them from her (Mark 16:9). Certainly, it was this act of kindness to her that compelled her to love and to follow Jesus. His kindness to her was something that she would never forget. Mary, the mother of James and Joseph, was the mother of Jesus. She had given birth to Jesus. She had seen Him grow into a young man. Her motherly instincts could never have deserted Jesus on this day. The mother of the sons of Zebedee (James and John). Her sons were prominent among the disciples. She had known Jesus for quite some time, and even felt the comfort with Him to ask for a special place in the

kingdom for her boys. Though she was denied her request, she remained faithful to Jesus.

These women are all so different from each other, and yet, so much alike. Mary Magdalene had a storied past, with much sin. Mary, the mother of Jesus, raised a perfect son, who obeyed her in everything. Mary, the mother of the sons of Zebedee, raised two impetuous sons, who were known as "sons of thunder" (Mark 3:17). Though different in experiences, they all remained faithful to Jesus until the end.

This ought to be the thing that unites us as a church. It's not that we should all be from the same social status. It's not that we should all be interested in the same things. It's not that we should all be of the same station in life. What unites us as a church ought to be our love to Christ and our undying devotion to Him. It's what united these women.

But, why does Matthew even mention these women here? I believe that the reason why these women are listed for us here is that they were the primary witnesses to the resurrection. We see two of them in Matthew 28:1, coming to the tomb of Jesus with the intention of anointing the body of Jesus with spices, "after the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the grave." One of the things of which we can be sure is that they went to the right grave. Notice back in verse 61, "And Mary Magdalene was there, and the other Mary, sitting opposite the grave."

These women were in eyeshot of the body of Jesus from the cross to the grave. There were no switching bodies. There were no mistaking the grave. There was no mistaking where Jesus was buried. These women saw the body of Jesus taken down from the cross. These women saw the body of Jesus carried to the graveyard. These women saw the body of Jesus placed in the tomb. These women saw the large stone rolled in front of the tomb and sealed shut. When the women returned to anoint the body of Jesus, they went to the right tomb.

This is my point: His grave was easily identified. Those who attempt to deny the resurrection of Christ will sometimes use the theory that the women went to the wrong tomb. They will claim that in their grief, they didn't quite remember where it was that the body of Jesus was laid to rest. When they came to a tomb that was empty, they were so longing to believe in the resurrection that it didn't matter to them that they were at the wrong tomb. But, this is quite impossible. These women had followed the procession that carried the body of Jesus to the tomb. These women had sat down opposite the grave. Surely they knew which grave it was.

Furthermore, it was a rolling stone tomb. Once the body of Jesus was placed into the tomb, Joseph of Arimathea "rolled a large stone against the entrance of the tomb and went away" (Matt. 27:60). This tomb may well have been the only rolling stone tomb in the entire cemetery. There have only been a handful of rolling stone tombs discovered in all of Israel. Graves and tombs have been found all over Israel. In fact, much of what we know about the culture of those days is because of the graves that have been dug up. But, there have only been a few graves discovered that have been rolling stone tombs.

In my study this past week, I found three such tombs, but I remember hearing of a fourth somewhere discovered. Each of them date to within 100 years of the life of Christ. Each of them have a round stone, from 4-6 feet in height, 1-2 feet thick, which rolls along a track. When it reaches the bottom of the track, the stone would completely cover the entrance to the tomb. Considering the size of these stones, it might take several people to roll it open and shut.

Of the handful of tombs that have been discovered in Israel, none of them could be the tomb in which the body of Jesus was placed. Some of them are miles away from Jerusalem. The one discovered near Jerusalem has been identified as that used by the family of Herod. So, we don't know where the tomb of Jesus was. But, being a rare type of tomb, it would have been obvious to the women returning to the grave which one it was.

2. His grave was previously prophesied (verses 57-60).

More than 700 years before the burial of Christ, the prophet Isaiah prophesied of the burial of the Messiah. He said that "His grave was assigned with wicked men, yet He was with a rich man in His death, because He had done no violence, nor was there any deceit in His mouth" (Isaiah 53:9). I find it amazing that this verse was fulfilled exactly in the burial of Christ.

"His grave was assigned with wicked men"

We don't know exactly what happened to the bodies of these other men. Roman custom would often leave the bodies upon the cross, to decay before all and to be eaten by the vultures. Had they actually been taken down from their crosses and buried, it is a pretty safe bet that it wouldn't have been an honorable place. You don't bury convicted killers in honorable locations.

As Jesus died the death of a criminal, His body was headed for the consequences of a criminal, either left upon the cross to decay and to be eaten, or to be buried in dishonor among criminals. And yet, a rich man stepped in to save the body of Jesus from this injustice, just as Isaiah had prophesied, ...

"He was with a rich man in His death"

This man's name was Joseph. We know little about this man. We know that he was from Arimathea, but we aren't even sure where that is. Our best guess is that it was about 20 miles northwest of Jerusalem.

We know that Joseph was "a rich man" (verse 57). This might best explain why it was that he built a rolling-stone tomb for himself. He had the means to fund such an elaborate grave.

Joseph was an influential man. I don't believe that there are any in this room today who have as much political influence as this man. He was able to get an appointment with the governor of the land in the evening he requested to see him. Could any of you call up the office of governor Blagojevich and obtain a meeting with Him this evening? Furthermore, when Joseph made this request, it was granted to him!

Luke also tells us that he was "a good and righteous man" (Luke 23:50). He followed the letter and the spirit of the law. He was a good husband, who loved his wife. He was a good father, who shepherded his children well. He had a good reputation in the community as one who did right.

We know that he was a member of the Sanhedrin (Luke 23:51). He was one of the panel of 70 men who had sentenced Jesus to death on that fateful night when they held a quick and unjust trial. Although Luke tells us that he "had not consented to the plan and action" of the Sanhedrin to put Jesus to death (Luke 23:51). He either cast a dissenting vote, or remained silent during the time. This is understandable, for John tells us that he "had ... become a disciple of Jesus." He was a follower of Christ. Sadly, he wasn't doing so out in the open. John called him "a secret" follower (John 19:38), who feared the Jews. They were throwing people out of the synagogue for claiming to be a follower of Jesus (see John 9:22). Should he have openly confessed that he was a follower of Jesus, he would have been shamed and stripped of his honor and authority. And so, ... he kept silent.

and yet, His silence ended this day, as all secret disciples will do at some point in their lives. He came to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus (verse 58). Mark tells us that "Pilate wondered if [Jesus] was dead by this time" (Mark 15:44). It came as a surprise that Jesus had died so quickly. You remember that Jesus was on the cross for only six hours. Once determining that Jesus was dead, Pilate granted Joseph's request.

"He had done no violence, nor was there any deceit in His mouth"

It is unusual that Pilate would have granted such a request to hand over the body of Jesus. D. A. Carson pointed out in his commentary that permission to take a body down from the cross was "usually granted to friends and relatives of the deceased who made application, but never in the case of high treason," which was the case with Jesus. [1] Why did Pilate make such an exception? I believe that he did because he knew of the innocence of Christ. During the trial of Jesus, there were several occasions in which Pilate came back to the crowds telling them "I find no guilt in Him" (John 18:38; 19:4). On one occasion, he asked the crowds, "what evil has He done?" (Matt. 27:23). Pilate knew that Jesus was a righteous man (Matt. 27:19). Though Jesus was accused of high treason, Pilate knew that it wasn't the case. He didn't deserve to have His body dishonored with the other two criminals.

And thus, granting the body to Joseph of Arimathea was a pronouncement to this fact. Once more, he was telling the world that Jesus was an innocent man. And this is exactly what Isaiah prophesied.... "His grave was assigned with wicked men, yet He was with a rich man in His death, [why??] because He had done no violence, nor was there any deceit in His mouth" (Isaiah 53:9). It was the righteousness of Christ that allowed Him to be with this rich man in His death -- no violence, no deceit.

In verses 59-60 we read that Joseph, "took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out in the rock; and he rolled a large stone against the entrance of the tomb and went away." Joseph was under a bit of time constraint. He had to get the body of Jesus down from the cross, cleaned up and into the tomb before the sun went down, which was an hour or two away. For once the sun was down, Sabbath celebration began (see John 19:31). No work was permitted on the Sabbath.

Given the amount of work to be done and the time needed to accomplish it, there is no way that he could have done this by himself. He would have needed help. The gospel of John records that Nicodemus has come to help him (John 19:39). Nicodemus was also a counsel member, who had first come to Jesus by night. Perhaps he too was a "secret" disciple of Jesus, who came out of his silence at this time as well. We can only assume that Nicodemus and Joseph were allies in the Sanhedrin who saw through the political façade of the Sanhedrin, but were too few in number to do anything about it.

When Nicodemus came to help, he brought about 75 pounds of myrrh and aloes to help initially anoint the body of Jesus for burial (John 19:39). Think about the sheer weight that needed to be carried to the tomb. Jesus probably weighed 150-200 pounds. Add to this the weight of the spices, and you quickly surmise that it wouldn't have been surprising to have others join in helping these two men with the body of Jesus. I would guess that the women who were watching the crucifixion from a distance came to help anoint the body with these spices. After all, they were the ones coming to further prepare the body on Sunday morning (Luke 24:1). It would only make sense that they would help at this moment.

After the preparations, the body of Jesus was set in the tomb. Joseph had originally intended for this tomb for himself. It was "his own ... tomb" (verse 59). Perhaps Joseph was advanced in years and had recently been thinking about his own upcoming death. But, his own love to Jesus compelled him to allow its first use to be for Jesus. We read that this was a "new tomb" (verse 59), which had been freshly carved into the rock. Being a rich man, this tomb was probably fairly sizable. It probably consisted of an initial room, called an antechamber, where there would be a place to set a body or two for them to decay. It probably had numerous other shelves dug into the walls, which would have been prepared for numerous ossuaries (or bone boxes) to be placed in them. I suspect that it was sizable enough for his entire extended family to be buried there.

The marvelous fact upon which we are considering with this point is that before all this happened, the Lord knew exactly what would take place. I have worded it this way, " His grave was previously prophesied" (verses 57-60).

3. His grave was deliberately supervised (verses 62-66).

We read this in the following account:

Matthew 27:62-66

Now on the next day, which is the one after the preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered together with Pilate, and said, "Sir, we remember that when He was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I am to rise again.'

"Therefore, give orders for the grave to be made secure until the third day, lest the disciples come and steal Him away and

say to the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last deception will be worse than the first." Pilate said to them, "You have a guard; go, make it as secure as you know how." And they went and made the grave secure, and along with the guard they set a seal on the stone.

In these verses, the Jewish leaders demonstrate their fickleness. Less than 24 hours before, they had ridiculed Jesus for saying, "I am able to destroy the temple of God and to rebuild it in three days" (Matt. 26:61). But now, they take these very same words and correctly interpret them to imply that Jesus taught that He would rise again from the dead "after three days" (verse 63).

Though they didn't believe Jesus, they feared the possibility of some great deception taking place. They conceived of the possibility of the disciples of Jesus coming to steal the body of Jesus during the night, and thus, making this prediction of Jesus come true (verse 64). They thought that such an event would cause great tumult within the Jewish community, as the name of Jesus wouldn't ever die down. If they had any idea how weak, feeble, and scared the disciples were at this moment, they would have known that the disciples would never have tried to do such a thing. They locked themselves in a secret room "for fear of the Jews" (John 20:19).

These religious leaders wanted to make sure that they did everything possible to snuff out the name of Jesus from the pages of history. They wanted to make the name of Jesus to be like the name of Theudas, who "rose up, claiming to be somebody" and obtained a following of 400 men. But, once he was killed "all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing" (Acts 5:36). Or, like the name of Judas of Galilee, who "drew away some people after him." But, when he "perished, ... all those who followed him were scattered" (Acts 5:37). Or, like the name of Bar-Kochba, who claimed to be the messiah, calling himself "The Star of Jacob." These names are only recorded for us in the annals of history. For the most part, their names have been long forgotten. And only those who know history know their names.

These religious leaders wanted to do the same for Jesus. Their plan was to give physical evidence to all who lived in Jerusalem that the body of Jesus didn't raise from the dead after three days. In so doing, they would have proven Jesus to be a liar and a false prophet. Hopefully (they believed) the people would refocus their attention upon the established religious leaders of the day.

It was their plan to station a few guard at the tomb for a few days. To do so, they wanted Pilate to place some Roman soldiers at the tomb. And so, that's why they came explained their entire situation to him (which is explained for us in verses 63 and 64). I'm sure that Pilate chuckled a bit when he heard their request. Hours earlier, they had stood before him, demanding that Jesus was this evil man. Yet, they couldn't give him any evidence that would convince Pilate of this. Until the end, Pilate was convinced that Jesus was innocent. Pilate only gave Him over to be crucified because of the riot that was developing (Matt. 27:24). And now, they are frightened of Him, even when He was dead!

Pilate gave them permission to make the grave secure, but he refused to allocate any of his own Roman resources to do it. Perhaps Pilate understood the absurdity of guarding a dead man. He said, "You have a guard; go, make it as secure as you know how" (verse 65). Remember, the Jews had a measure of self-rule. This means that they had their own policemen and military personnel, who operated underneath the Romans. They assigned a few guards to the tomb and set a "seal on the stone" (verse 66). The seal would have been an official, Roman pronouncement that the tomb was not to be opened by anyone, apart from governmental permission.

But, their plans were thwarted. Rather than seeing the name of Jesus die away into obscurity, He has probably become the most famous historical figure that ever lived. The majority of those who are alive today have heard the name of Jesus and can tell you a little bit about Him. To be sure, there are some who know practically nothing about Jesus, knowing only His name. For others, they have an entirely wrong notion about Jesus. And yet, His name has been heard.

There is huge irony here with their actions. In trying to prevent the resurrection, they actually give greater proof to the resurrection, because the guard made it impossible for the disciples to come away and steal the body! Jesus must have raised from the dead on His own strength. His body wasn't stolen. There were guards posted by the tomb protecting it from any intruders.

Though out history, God has often worked this way. Do you remember the story of Esther? Haman had a gallows made that was 75 feet high in which to kill Mordecai (Esther 5:14). But, the Lord saw fit to see Haman hanged on those very same gallows on which he had prepared to hang Mordecai (Est. 7:10).

I'm reminded of the story of Celsus, who was a great enemy of the cause of Christ. He lived around 150 A. D. and hated Christianity with a passion. He wrote a lengthy diatribe against Christianity entitled, "A True Discourse," in which he attempted to disprove Christianity. But here is the ironic thing. Because he wrote so early in time, his writings have become one of the best sources to demonstrate the antiquity and authenticity of the apostolic writings. ^[2] Thereby, Celsus actually provided strong evidence for the validity of our faith.

I'm reminded of the story of Voltaire, the 18th century French atheist. He thought that his pen would be able to destroy Christianity. On one occasion, he held up a copy of the Bible, proclaiming that the book would soon be "forgotten and eliminated." He died in utter agony. He, himself, testified that he was "abandoned by God and man." Twenty years after his death, the Geneva Bible Society purchased his house and turned it into a major distribution hub for the very Bible that he tried to press into extinction. ^[3]

This still happens. In recent days, we have been involved in helping a church in Nepal purchase some land. They recently purchased a parcel. The previous owner had desired to build a Hindu temple on it. But soon, there will be a church on the property.

This is how God works. The wicked may attempt to thwart and deny God, but it simply won't happen. By seeking to prevent a "false resurrection" from taking place through the theft of the body, they actually helped to prove the resurrection. In fact, that is what this text is all about this morning.

(1) His grave was easily identified (verses 55-61). The women went to the right tomb. (2) His grave was previously prophesied (verses 57-60). The death and burial of Jesus was exactly according to plan. (3) His grave was deliberately supervised (verses 62-66). The fact that the tomb was made secure is an indirect proof that none of the disciples of Jesus came to take away His body! And so, God accomplished His purposes, despite the plans of man. That's the message of His burial.

At the beginning of my message, I promised you that we would return to some verses that speak about our part in the burial of Christ. So, let's spend a few moments thinking about Paul's words in Romans 6:1-4. At the outset, we must say that these words are very mysterious for us. They are hard for us to understand (as you shall soon see).

Paul wrote these words in light of those who would object to the doctrines of God's abounding grace by saying that they might as well live in sin, since they are saved and secure.. Paul writes on the contrary that grace is what teaches you to obey (cf. Titus 2:11-13). Paul begins, "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace might increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?" (Romans 6:1-2). Paul is here addressing each and every Christian. All who believe in Christ have died to sin. How? In the death of Christ. This is clear in verse 3, "Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death."

There is lots of debate about whether this baptism is water baptism or spirit baptism. I would contend that the two would come together in that the New Testament practice so united a profession of faith with an immediate baptism, that the two were difficult to distinguish. And so, as the Romans heard Paul's comments, they certainly understood Paul to be speaking about their conversion to Christ. "You who have been converted into Christ have been converted into His death. You have been baptized, immersed, into His death." In other words, believers in Christ share in His death. There is a sharing that takes place. How exactly does this happen? I don't know. But, you might well ask also, "How is it that God punished Christ in your place? How is it now that God looks upon you as if you were Jesus?" This is similar to what is taking place here in Romans 6. Somehow, by faith in Christ we experience His death with Him.

Verse 4 begins to get to His burial, "Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death." We have been buried with Him. Everything that I mentioned in my message about Jesus being taken down from the cross, carried by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, anointed with spices, and being placed into the tomb in some way happened to us who believe in Christ. Is this hard to understand? Yes. But, this is clearly what Paul says. There is a connection between our life and our faith and the death and burial of Christ Jesus, 2000 years ago.

But, the purpose is that "as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life." Just as Christ was raised from the dead, so also, we who were buried with Him were raised up with Him as well, that we might walk in righteousness and holiness. This doesn't mean that we are flippant about sin. Rather, it means that we take great close attention to our sin.

James Montgomery Boice writes about this in His commentary, ...

I suggest that the reason burial is an important step even beyond death is that burial puts the deceased person out of this world permanently. A corpse is dead to life, but in a sense, it is still in life, as long as it is around. When it is buried, when it is placed in the ground and covered with earth, it is removed from the sphere of this life permanently. It is gone. That is why Paul, who wanted to emphasize the finality of being removed from the rule of sin and death, emphasizes it. He is repeating but also intensifying what he said about our death to sin earlier. "You have not only died to it," he says. "You have been buried to it." To go back to sin once you have been joined to Christ is like digging up a dead body. [4]

That's the significance of the burial of Christ in our lives. It represents our attitude toward sin. It is buried and gone!

The burial of Christ is mentioned only one other time in the Bible (other than the gospel accounts, 1 Corinthians 15, and Romans 6). This comes in Colossians 2:11-12, where the point is much the same. "In Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead."

Paul begins these verses by speaking about a metaphorical circumcision, which must represent cleanliness and purity, for it is the circumcision "made without hands." The removal of the flesh is like the removal of sin in your life. Then, Paul speaks about how we have been "buried with Him in baptism." There is a sense where we, as believers in Christ, join in the burial of Christ and in the resurrection of Christ. And it always ought to spur us on to love and obedience in righteous living. That is Paul's point, which can be seen in verse 13, "when you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us and which was hostile to us, and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross" (Col. 2:13-14).

As believers, we are dead to sin and alive to Christ! And so, as we reflect upon what happened to Jesus some 2,000 years ago, we need to realize that there is a sense where we were there! Certainly, the mystery is great. But, as believers in Christ, we have been joined with Him in His burial.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on October 2, 2005 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] D. A. Carson, The Expositors Bible Commentary, Volume 8, p. 584.

[2] Philip Schaff, History of the Christian Church, Volume 2, pp. 89-92.

[3] Voltaire's story is documented all over the internet.

[4] James Montgomery Boice, The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 2, p. 631.