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Easter Sunday: Your Next Step
Doug Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

John 20.1-18, John 19.38-42

John 20:1-18 “Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’ ” Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.”

If you use an app like Google Maps on your phone for directions, you know that from your location it gives you two things you can click at the bottom of the screen. The one on the right highlighted in blue says “Start;” encouraging you to press it and get going. On the left, there’s another icon that says “Steps.” If you click it, you can read step by step what you’re supposed to do and even see pictures of what lies ahead. I wonder if different types of people push one or the other more frequently? Are you a “Start” person, or a “Steps” person? Or does it vary for you depending on how much of a hurry you’re in? Or how sure or unsure you are of where you’re going and what your next step is to get where you want to go? One aspect of the story of Easter is that we see several people trying to figure out what the next step is at a crucial moment in their lives when someone they knew, respected, or loved has died. Often when we’re grieving, figuring out the next step can be challenging.

I've already shared with you the traditional Easter reading of the resurrection of Jesus and Mary's encounter with the risen Christ. But I want to back up and share another scene with you that some of us are probably not as familiar with or perhaps don't know. It's the last verses of *John 19* that describe a brief yet important moment after the death of Jesus on the cross on Friday and before his resurrection on Sunday. Before I read it, I need to explain part of what is shared in these verses. Even though Jesus and his first followers were all Jewish, by the time John's Gospel was written decades later, the followers of Christ or The Way as it was first known, were a distinct movement and no longer part of Judaism. So, in John's Gospel there are several references to "the Jews," even though Jesus and his followers were also Jews. In John's Gospel, when you read or hear the phrase, "the Jews," it's referring to members of that tradition who didn't follow Jesus or believe that he was God's anointed one as people like Peter, John, and Mary Magdalene did. John records some sharp disagreements between Jewish people who followed Jesus and those who didn't and that's reflected in this passage that picks up after Jesus has died on the cross.

Listen to *John 19:38-42*, "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. **Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came**, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, **weighing about a hundred pounds**. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. 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. And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there."

As I was reflecting on the events of the last week of Jesus life, one of the things that struck me is how everyone connected to the death and resurrection of Christ had to figure what his or her next step would be. We're going to look at what that next step was for Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus, and Mary Magdalene and what we learn from their steps that can help us on our own journey.

Joseph of Arimathea is mentioned in all four gospels after Jesus died. *Mark (15:34)* tells us he was **honorable**. *Matthew (27:57)* says he was **rich**. *Luke (23:50-51)*, describes him as a **high-ranking member of the ruling Jewish council in Jerusalem**. "Now there was a **good and righteous man named Joseph**, who, though **a member of the council**, had not agreed to their plan and action. He came from the Jewish town of Arimathea, and he was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God." John shares that **Joseph of Arimathea, was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear** of the Jews. **Matthew and John assert that Joseph was a disciple of Jesus (*Matthew 27:57; John 19:38*), Mark and Luke don't mention that**. Joseph asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave Joseph permission, so he came and removed the body from the cross, wrapped the body in a linen shroud and buried him in a tomb newly cut from rock (*Luke 23:53*), perhaps the tomb he had had prepared for himself (*Matthew 27:60*).

We learn two things about Joseph from his appearance in Jesus' story. **The first is that it doesn't do much good to be a secret disciple of Christ.** Whether Joseph is a secret disciple, or no disciple at all – the fact that it's not clear even among the four Gospel writers tells us Joseph could have been clearer about his allegiance. Perhaps he wasn't sure about Jesus for sincere reasons. Maybe as someone who was rich and on the ruling council, he couldn't bring himself to risk financial consequences and the loss of his high-status position by declaring he was a follower of Jesus. But Joseph is the kind of person who hid his true feelings because of his fear which is always sad. He let his fear shape his life, his choices, and his decision making. He could've spoken up in the council on Jesus' behalf, to make it clear he sided with the man from Galilee, but his fear of the consequences silenced him.

If Jesus looked at your life or mine, I wonder if he'd say we were more like Joseph than we might want to admit or accept. Are we more of a secret disciple because we're afraid or what people might say or think? Do people know we're striving to be a follower of Christ and his way of love, compassion, goodness, humility, and service to the poorest and most vulnerable among us? Some people are more secret about their discipleship because they don't want to be associated with people who claim to be Christians but whose behavior is judgmental, prideful, arrogant, rude, or simply mean. However, we don't want to let our fear of what others might think prevent us from following Christ because of a second thing we learn from Joseph of Arimathea and that is **it's a tragedy when kindness is delayed.**

Joseph was the kind of person who never told Jesus his true feelings. He kept his feelings and thoughts locked inside and Jesus died without hearing a kind word from Joseph, never heard him speak up on his behalf or defend him in the council. Then, as some people do, after Jesus is dead, Joseph spends lavishly on the burial. He's the kind of person who buys the most expensive casket and the largest possible gravestone to show how much he loved someone once he's dead it's too late to say, "I love you, I support you, you mean the world to me, thank you for loving me."

Don't make Joseph's mistakes, don't be a secret disciple out of fear of what others may think or because of what following Jesus will mean for your life, your priorities, and your choices. It's a tragedy when kindness is delayed until it is too late – don't wait to tell someone you love them, don't wait to make a call, write a letter, give a gift, take a trip, or do something special. If you ever find yourself wondering whether you should go and see someone when they're living or wait and go to their funeral, go see them while they're still alive. They'll appreciate it more. **Don't delay kindness when it's in your power to do it.** Joseph of Arimathea finally takes the step out of the shadows from being a secret disciple, but only after Jesus is dead, and it's too late and that's a shame.

The second person we meet at the burial of Jesus is Nicodemus and he has a lot in common with Joseph of Arimathea. Unlike Joseph who's mentioned in all four Gospels, Nicodemus only appears in John's Gospel and he exemplifies the kind of person that seemed to view Jesus positively

but didn't understand him (*John 3*) and had not reached the point of committing himself to him as the Christ. **Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea represent the kind of timid, fence sitting potential disciple the author of John wished to persuade to come out openly for Jesus.** Unlike Joseph of Arimathea who only appears in one scene, we meet Nicodemus in *John 3* when he comes to Jesus at night, presumably so no one else will know, and asks Jesus some questions. Nicodemus is described as a Pharisee, a teacher of Israel, and a leader of the Jews. Yet regardless of his credentials he's confused in his conversation with Jesus in *John 3:1-10*, and couldn't understand what Jesus meant about being born anew or from *above* (*3:4, 9*). You can check out their conversation yourself; but suffice to say that Jesus was trying to speak about spiritual matters to someone who held the position of a spiritual teacher, but Nicodemus was thinking physically or literally and couldn't get what Jesus was telling him. Jesus concludes their meeting asking with a note of disbelief or perhaps even exasperation (*John 3:10*), "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

The second time Nicodemus appears he deserves credit for speaking up once to defend Jesus in *John 7:50-51*, "Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus before, and who was one of them, asked, "Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?" He is rebuked and that's all the courage Nicodemus is able to muster. **The third time he appears with Joseph of Arimathea** to prepare Jesus' body for burial (*19:39*), "Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds." The weight of the myrrh and aloes indicates a significant cost. While Joseph is called a secret disciple, Nicodemus doesn't appear to have been able to get off the fence and to stand with Jesus and to follow him even secretly. Perhaps he did after the resurrection, but we don't know, he's never mentioned again in the New Testament. Again, it's a case of too little too late. His next step, with Joseph is to bury the body of one they knew and respected, but that was all. Maybe they were trying to soothe their burdened consciences.

The third person to consider this Easter morning is Mary Magdalene who is the model disciple. She is the one who knows where she is going and needs no help from Google Maps or anyone else. She makes it abundantly clear that she is a disciple and follower of Christ. Jesus knows how much she loves him because she makes that obvious by her words and deeds. **Mary Magdalene is mentioned first in every listing of Jesus' female disciples** (*Mark 15:40-41, 47; 16:1; Matthew 27:55-56, 61; 28:1; Luke 8:2-3; 24:10*). She seems to have been the leader of a group of women who 'followed' and 'served' Jesus constantly from the outset of his ministry in Galilee to his death in Jerusalem and beyond. All four Gospels state that she was a witness **to Jesus' death on the cross** (*Mark 15:40-41, 47; Matthew 27:55-56, 61; Luke 23:49, 55-56; John 19:25*), she is first **at the empty tomb** (*Mark 16:1-6; Matthew 28:1, 6; Luke 24:1-3, 10; John 20:1-2*), **she receives the news or is present for the appearance of the risen Christ and is told to tell to the disciples the good news** (*Mark 16:6-7; Matthew 28:5-9; Luke 24:4-10*).

When the male disciples were hiding in fear of their own lives, she was there at the crucifixion, steadfast until the end. She was the one who went to the tomb as soon the Sabbath was over, and it was getting light and it was safe to do so. She is the one who runs and gets Peter and John. She is the one who stays and lingers long enough to have an encounter with the risen Christ. She is the one who is not afraid to be associated with Christ and is still trying to serve him even saying, supposing him to be the gardener, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” Mary is the one who preaches the first Easter sermon, who shares the first resurrection message, announcing to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.” If there is anyone’s steps we want to emulate in following Jesus it’s Mary Magdalene.

All of us can do a self-assessment and ask which of these three people am I most like– am I kind of a secret disciple like Joseph of Arimathea, am I still on the fence about who Jesus is and committing to follow him like Nicodemus, or am I like Mary - faithful, devoted, loving, generous, brave, and looking to serve. **More importantly, who do you want to be like? How do you want to be known?** Because we all get to choose. You can choose today. Part of the story of Easter for each of us is figuring out what our next step of faith will be. Joseph and Nicodemus served Jesus too late. Not too late to fulfill prophecy, not too late to be of tender service to Jesus’ dead body. But too late to satisfy their own timid hearts; too late to escape the painful regret of who they might have been and what they might have done for Jesus. Thankfully it is not too late for us to decide how we will respond to the good news that Christ is Risen.

If you’ve been like Nicodemus, I encourage you to get off the fence and make it clear that you want Christ in your life. If you’ve been a secret disciple like Joseph, stop keeping the secret. **What is your next step?** Commit to following Christ in the way he lived, how he regarded and treated people, let him lead and guide you every step of the way, every day of your life. Ask him to forgive your sins and recognize there is no one better to follow, no better example, no greater friend. Follow Christ, and love one another, that’s what it’s all about. You don’t need to look at Google Maps to know what you need to do. You know the next step so hit “Start.” **Don’t wait until it’s too late to give yourself fully to Jesus.**

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

What do we learn about Joseph of Arimathea in *John 19:38-42*? What is his connection with Jesus?

What do we learn about Nicodemus in John’s Gospel (see *John 3:1-10; John 7:50-52, & John 19:38-42*)? How would you describe his relationship with Jesus?

What is the next step of obedience for Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus after Jesus’ crucifixion? How do they serve Jesus? Is this a case of “too little, too late?” Why or why not?

What step does Mary take on the first Easter morning (*John 20:1-18*)? How is Mary's relationship with Jesus different from Joseph's and Nicodemus's?

All these different characters we meet around Easter have a next step of obedience to take; what might be the next step God wants you to take? What difference can it make to live and walk with Christ every day of our life?

Like Mary, how can you share the good news about Christ with someone who could benefit from hearing it?