

Good Friday Tenebrae: "We Sing Our Alleluia's Even at the Grave"

John 19:38-42

April 7, 2023

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

A dear friend died recently. She taught me much in life and continued to do so in death. Barbara was Jewish. I had never attended a Jewish funeral or graveside service. The experience in the cemetery was both jarring and beautiful, and transported me to Good Friday 2 weeks early.

There were many people in the Congregation B'nai Israel cemetery on March 24th, many more than those present at Jesus' entombment. Immediate and extended family and friends buried Barbara. A couple secret disciples, well outside Jesus' "inner circle," buried Him. Matthew, Mark and Luke describe Joseph of Arimathea singlehandedly lowering, "deposing" Jesus' body from the cross. Because the dead weight of a grown man is considerable, I sure hope that St. John was right when he said Nicodemus gave a hand to Joseph of Arimathea. They would have treated the Master's battered, bloodied body with great respect, even reverence, but they didn't have the intimate knowledge that comes with traveling together for months over many miles, sleeping under the stars, going hungry together, gathering around a campfire to warm hands and chase away the evening chill. Yet Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus were the ideal people to perform this last kindness to the man who called Himself the Good Shepherd, the Light of the World, the Bread of Life, the Resurrection & the Life. They were ideal simply because they were **willing**.

It's a paradox, a curious, unexpected thing. The two followers of Jesus who hung in the shadows during His public ministry for fear of judgment and condemnation by their **peers**, the **other** religious leaders, amazingly chose to go public themselves when there

was a much greater danger: that the Roman authorities might judge them guilty-by-association with the supposed revolutionary, Jesus, who had just been executed. The other men who had boldly stated they would die alongside their Rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth, had scattered to the 4 winds. Peter said he would **die** rather than **deny**.... And he believed that with all his heart -- until the cock crowed.

Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus did what they could to erase the blood and terror of Jesus' crucifixion, worked to restore a little dignity to this Rabbi, wrapping Him in linen cloths in which they layered spices and laying him in a **new** tomb, instead of a reused one that smelled of death and decomposition. (St. Matthew says Joseph of Arimathea had done some pre-planning and laid Jesus' body in a tomb he had prepared for himself. Maybe the thought comforted him, that he would eventually be laid to rest beside the One he **so** admired and on whom he had pinned his messianic hopes.) There was zero pomp and circumstance as Jesus' body was placed in that mini-cave carved out of rock.

As we arrived at Congregation B'nai Israel's cemetery, Pastor Mark pointed out the huge pile of dirt next to what we assumed was the grave. I offered that a mound of soil is always present at an interment, but usually covered with a tarp to camouflage it. Then I noticed 3 or 4 shovels standing upright in the dirt, on-call, waiting to be used – by the cemetery workers after the family left, like we're accustomed? Or for another reason?

The answer came soon: after a few brief prayers, including the praying of the Kaddish in Hebrew by the Jewish mourners, cemetery workers lowered Barbara's plain pine casket, decorated only with a star of David. They disengaged the straps that had cradled it, removed the boards laid on each side of the grave and the bricks on which the boards had balanced. When they were done and receded into the background, one of

Barbara's children picked up a shovelful of dirt and dropped it into the hole onto the wooden box. The thud was chilling, that much dirt falling that far. Wow, I thought, this is a lot more visceral, earthy, real than what we're accustomed to. A shovelful of dirt landing on a casket containing a loved one's remains really drives home the reality of death, the pain of separation, the huge distance yet fine line between life and death.

We honor Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, we "keep" these holy days, lest we leapfrog from the triumphal entry on Palm Sunday to the resurrection celebration on Easter, forgetting we "have been bought with a price," including human suffering and actual death. That's all part of the scenario that compelled St. Paul to **insist** that our lives are not our own but belong to Him who died that we might live. From the early days of Christianity there was a heresy, a false belief, that Jesus only **appeared** to die on the cross. The Docetists said that God would never allow God's Son to suffer and be killed, so there must have been someone who **looked** like Jesus but **wasn't**, who died on Calvary. They didn't check in with Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus who would have confirmed the Man they lowered from the cross **was** the Rabbi they had come to follow and love, even from afar, and that His cold flesh, lifeless limbs, and dead weight confirmed His death.

I was invited to approach Barbara's grave and drop a shovelful of dirt onto the casket. I felt honored and yet had to counter the part of me that didn't want to cover her up in a hole. After I took my turn I saw others come and turn the blade of the shovel upside down before scooping the dirt. I hoped I wasn't guilty of some faux pas, and asked a man standing nearby what that custom meant. He didn't know either, so he asked the rabbi, who explained that the overturned shovel is a sign of the **reticence** with which we bury our dead, a holy necessity yet a painful one because of our love of them. He also shared

that in Judaism the burial of the dead is considered the greatest of all kindnesses we can perform, because it is truly selfless; the dead surely will not be able to repay the favor. We do it purely out of love and without hope of reward.

Let us commend to the Lord once again all the loved ones whom **we** have buried, remembering that our crucified Lord Jesus rose again and is now the Living One! What does St. Paul say?

*¹⁹ If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.
²⁰ But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. (1 Corinthians 15)*

The Kaddish spoken at the Jewish graveside is a prayer of praise, not of mourning. In the wake of death, there is deep thanksgiving for the gift of life. As we recall our Lord's death, **we** are filled with thanksgiving for the gift of everlasting life which comes to us through Him. "Even at the grave we sing our alleluia's." Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham