

The Grave Diggers Tale John 20:1-18

Of all the jobs in the entire world mine is one of those that no one seems to want.

To be a grave digger, especially a grave digger here in Jerusalem, is not on the top of many people's lists of career opportunities.

I do it because my Father did it and his Father before him. It runs in the family. We have buried almost any body who was anybody in Jerusalem over these past years; me, my dad and my Granddad.

We are used to being regarded as outcasts, living here as we do among the dead. Some say that we are unclean! But we don't actually deal with the bodies themselves, just the graves.

I'm looking to my son to take over soon. It's backbreaking work digging here amongst the hard stony ground. I hear that in some other parts of the Roman Empire they only have to dig through damp soft soil! That would be bliss compared with the heat and hard ground we put up with.

Of course, if you are wealthy you don't have to have a hole dug for you. No you get one of those deluxe tombs cut from a cave in the rock, complete with its own rolling stone across the entrance. Very popular and very expensive they are too.

They are a lot less work for me. Apart from the fact that it is hard to roll that stone across without the help of a few others, they are pretty simple.

After the burial we roll the stone over the entrance and then I just have to keep it well sealed. That is until the next time the family want to use it. Then it's a matter of us all getting our shoulders to the stone and rolling it back so the funeral party can get in.

Joseph of Arimathea has one of these tombs. It has been standing there waiting for someone to use for it quite a while. I suppose he saw it as a bit of an investment, buy now while you can afford it and then when you need it you save quite a bit.

It was one of our better tombs. Good position, easy to see, easy to get to and quite dry.

I didn't think that it would be used for sometime - Joseph is quite well, hail and hearty so it was a bit of a shock when, on Friday afternoon just as we were getting tidied up for the Sabbath, a message came to sweep out Joseph's tomb and get it ready so that a burial can be done before sunset.

Well, I was a bit surprised. I thought perhaps Joseph had an accident or had suddenly taken ill and died. I never realised that he had offered this tomb to someone else.

It was an even bigger surprise when the funeral party arrived. Instead of quite a big group of wealthy business associates of Joseph with all the paraphernalia of wailing mourners that I had expected, there was this sad rag tag jumble of people. Not city types at all but rough types from Galilee, carrying the body up into the cemetery.

I went to meet them to show them the way. There was Joseph of Aramathea in the midst of them, leading them on in through the gates.

It didn't take long for me to realise that this was no ordinary death. The body they were carrying was the broken and battered body of a man who had been crucified. The blood stains on the cloth gave it away. Stains around the ankles and the wrists and what seemed a big stain on the main torso as if he had been poked with a spear.

We don't get many of these, and certainly they don't get brought to the deluxe part of the cemetery overlooking the city. Usually they are just left to rot on the crosses they die on. Most of them are criminals and no one really bothers about them or about giving them a decent burial.

Behind the men carrying the body were some women. They were in a sorry state. They told me that one was the dead man's mother. I really felt for her. To see your own child die in this way, it doesn't bear thinking about.

Time was getting on and it was getting towards dusk and the law says that I must get everything finished by sunset and the start of the Sabbath. I told the women that it would be impossible to carry out the washing and the dressing of the body now. They would never be finished in time.

I promised that if they hurried up and put the body in the tomb and let me and my men close it up I would get it reopened on Sunday after the

Sabbath so they could do what they had to do. Just as I was saying this an armed escort arrived with instructions to keep guard over the tomb.

So after the body had been put in we rolled the stone across and all was shut up. I don't know why they put the guard on - it takes four to move that stone, those women would never have managed it any way. But there was some rumour going around that someone might try to take the body away. So, just as dusk was falling, we left the cemetery.

I asked whose body we had just buried... 'Jesus' they said. 'Jesus of Nazareth' they said. 'Ah!' I said, not really any the wiser, although my son did later tell me that there had been a Jesus in the temple causing mayhem the other day. Some had been saying that he had been claiming to be the son of God. Perhaps that was him! Anyway, he was lucky to have a friend like Joseph to give him a place for a proper burial.

Well, the Sabbath came and went - a Passover Sabbath it was, so we had the whole family round - in-laws and all. I suppose because of all of that I never gave things a second thought.

There was bit of chat around the meal table about something that had happened at the Temple on Friday. Apparently at three O'clock there was some mini earth quake and the curtain in the Holy of Holies was ripped into two. All I remember was the sky going dark and the rain that I had expected not actually coming.

Well, then on the Sunday just as the sun was rising I went to the grave yard to open up. The women were waiting for me, the women who had accompanied the crucified Jesus to the tomb on Friday. They looked terrible. I don't think that they had slept much all week- end. They had brought all the spices and oils they needed to clean the body they had left just before the Sabbath.

They asked me to open up the tomb but I told them that they would have to wait until some help arrived. There was no way that I was even going to attempt to move that stone, not with my bad back.

Well, they said they would go up and wait by the tomb anyway. I said that as soon as the rest of the guys arrived we would come up and open up for them. So off they went while I stayed down by the gate waiting for my mates to turn up for work.

Then suddenly I hear this piercing scream. It was one of the women

I dashed up the path to them, I was wondering what on earth was going on to make her scream in such a way. Then I saw her on her knees crying looking at the entrance to the tomb, weeping uncontrollably.

I was shocked. The stone that I had helped roll to close the tomb had been moved. The Tomb stood gaping open, the stone some feet away. As the early morning sunlight shone on to the doorway of the tomb I could see that the body was no longer there. All that remained were the grave clothes, neatly folded and stacked.

I just froze in my tracks.... Was this an outbreak of grave robbing? Had someone stolen the body of the crucified man? How could this have happened? Who could have moved the stone after all it was so heavy and massive and guarded?

The woman cried out, ‘*They have taken my Lord and we don’t know where they have put him.*’

There was another commotion and I looked behind me. More people were scuttling up the hill. One of them I think was called Peter. I have to admit, I held back, I hid behind the trees watching what was going on. I didn’t want to get the blame for all of this. Who knows what trouble there might be when we lose the corpse of a convicted felon?

The man Peter went into the tomb and I could see him pick up the grave clothes. He held them in his arms and looked up to heaven. The strange thing was that, instead of showing some anger, he just looked puzzled; the others looked sort of half pleased as if there was something they knew that the rest didn’t.

Then the men left, leaving the women beside the empty tomb. I still didn’t want to be seen, I still wanted to have as little as possible to do with this whole thing.

Suddenly, the wailing of the women stopped. Mary was talking to some body. There was a strange white glow coming from within the tomb. It was a brightness that I had never seen before nor seen since.

I looked and a man was standing reaching out to Mary asking why she was crying. ‘*Because someone has taken my Lord Away*’ she said. ‘*Why are you crying? Who are you looking for?*’ He asked.

She went on her knees and pleaded with him. *'PLEASE! If you have carried him away tell me where you have put him'*.

Then Clearly I heard him say her name.....' *Mary.*' *'Rabboni'*, she cried out.

This man speaking to her was Jesus. She recognised him and spoke to him. This was the man that we had buried and who she had come to anoint and now he is living breathing and speaking to her!

She reaches out to grab him.... But he steps back and he tells her to go to his brothers and say, *' I am returning to my father and your father to my God and your God.'*

Without hesitation Mary gathers up her skirts and goes off at a great pace telling everyone *'I have seen the Lord.'*

I collapse and sit, leaning my back against a tree trying to make sense of what I have seen and heard. I am shaking, I can hardly catch my breath, and my heart is pounding. I have witnessed the Resurrection. Of that I have no doubt.

I, of all people, know about tombs and burials. I, of all people, know that the tomb could not have been opened easily. I know that Mary was not talking to herself. I saw and heard the man Jesus speak to her. I saw the look of recognition and of love in her eyes. I heard him say, *'I am returning to my father and your father to my God and your God.'*

Only God can bring the dead to life. Only a miracle could have moved that stone away.

Does this mean that I have witnessed God at work here with my own eyes? Surely there can be no other explanation. Others might come and scoff saying He wasn't dead in the first place, or it was someone else that I saw. But I know and I believe I have seen this with my own eyes.

This Jesus has broken the barrier of death. The thing that we all fear the most, the thing which we all want to avoid...Jesus has shown God's power and willingness to overcome this. Is this so strange? After all God is the very source of life itself! Why shouldn't he bring Jesus back to life?

But it was those words to Mary that kept going through my mind,

'I am returning to my father and your father, to my God and your God'. His father is our father. His God is our God! This is an amazing thing when you stop to think about it.

Jesus who has suffered and died and who has been brought back to life, must be the Son of God. How else could he have done this? And after all didn't the ancient prophets talk about the Son of Man being lifted up, being rejected and bruised and being buried in a rich man's grave?

According to my cousin who had been talking with some of those Galileans that hung about with Jesus, he had told them that he was going to suffer and die for the sake of the world. He had told them that he was the Resurrection and the life and whoever believed in Him would never spiritually die.

It seems that they either hadn't understood what he was saying or had preferred not to take it seriously, but I expect they do now that they have seen him and talked with him.

A lot that had been said about the Messiah seems to be true. Even one of those who had crucified him had recognised him as the Son of God. And yet he says. His Father is our Father! His God is our God! I am overcome by that thought - that we are brothers and sisters with Jesus. We have a relationship with God just like his. We are all at one with God himself!

That was not what I was expecting to discover when I came to work this morning! I am at one with the Father who is God! Creator of all, lover of all! I, an ordinary gravedigger, am up there with the holy ones, the saints, the prophets, the priests! This realisation is making me shake even more! It is making me feel... I can't quite say... In awe, humbled?

So, what does this mean for me then, now that I know this? I can't go on living my life as before with this knowledge and understanding. I can feel confident. I know now that God is not turning his back on me. He wants me to have a father/ child relationship with him. A relationship in which my Father God will love me no matter what - just like my old dad still does even after all these years, and like I love my kids even though they get into terrible scrapes and difficulties. He must continually forgive me and all my short comings – and there are plenty of those.

I can feel safe. I know that if even the grave did not hold Jesus, the dangers and problems that I will face, I will do so knowing God's power

of love and protection is around about me. I can feel secure! I can feel secure about my future. If God is for me who can be against me?

But there must be more than just thinking about what God is giving me. There are things that I must do for Him, after all the Law says love the Lord your God with all your heart. All your soul and all your mind.

There's a challenge that I guess none of us can avoid - for if He is our Father and if He is our God, he deserves nothing less than our love and devotion in all that we do. I suspect that Jesus knew that. His love for our God must have been so strong that he was even prepared to be crucified.

But what can I do? How do I live out my life in response to God? I am just an ordinary guy from an ordinary background doing my job. I'm not a teacher or a Rabbi. I'm not that well read. It takes me most of the time just to do what I need to do to live, to support my family. Perhaps that is my starting point. You always begin a journey from where you are, not where you want to be.

So it is in the ordinariness of my life that I have to let God in. Do my daily tasks, live my daily life knowing that He is my God and that He is with me and loves me? When things go wrong and when I get things wrong - He is with me and will see me through it. Whatever I do I should do it for him, do it to the best of my ability, and do it in his strength.

If Jesus can be brought back to life then surely there is nothing that can happen in my life that God can not help me deal with - if I let him!

There is a psalm that I have often heard read in the synagogue. I think it is Psalm 138. It says,

'I will praise you O Lord with all my heart before the gods I will sing your praises.

I will bow down towards your holy temple and will praise your name for your love and faithfulness

For you have exalted above all things your name and your word.'

I think I can now really join in with that Psalm. Now, I have seen God at work right here in front of me. Now, I have heard the words of the resurrected Jesus that his God is my God, his father is my Father. I can really praise Him and live my life in the shadow of his wings with confidence.

That Psalm finishes off by saying,

*'Though the Lord is on high, he looks upon the lowly, but the proud he knows from afar
Though I walk in the midst of trouble you preserve my life
You stretch out your hand against the anger of my foes, with your right hand you save me
Your Love O Lord Endures forever!!'*

After what I have seen today, that all makes sense in a new and fresh way. I hope that it does for you too.