

Counting Sheep and Burying Bodies: A Field Guide for Sleepless Nights

Sunday, April 5, 2026 | Easter Sunday | John 19:38-42

What a wonderful resurrection celebration this has turned into. I am so glad you have joined us as we continue the story of Jesus.

Perhaps you have heard this saying: A lot can happen in 7 days.

Rewind: Last Sunday, we gathered for Palm Sunday, remembering Jesus' entrance into the holy city of Jerusalem for the Passover celebration. In remembering the Passover, Jesus and his disciples were remembering the Exodus story—another instance of God's great faithfulness to his people in which he rescued the Israelites from slavery in Egypt.

As Jesus entered into Jerusalem, the crowds welcomed him, shouts of hosanna rang, and there was palpable excitement.... It seemed as though this was the moment the people of Israel had grown up hoping for, dreaming of, longing for. Was Jesus going to rescue the Jewish people from the thumb of the Roman empire? Was this the time God had chosen to save his people?

Well, in short, yes... but not at all as anyone had expected--as they say in the reality TV show Big Brother, and I suppose as we have come to see in scripture: Expect the Unexpected.

Jesus came to save his people, but it was not in the way the people expected. Jesus was not the Messiah the people wanted, he was not the savior they expected. But... Jesus is the Messiah we need.

Yes, the hour had come, and the drama of the gospel story comes to a head. In just a handful of days, Jesus has gone from being hailed as King of the Jews to being mocked hanging on a cross. **How on earth did we end up here?**

This is a question I have found myself asking a lot recently.

You see... last year, my world changed upside down. I am not sure my life will ever be the same. It has changed everything... I became a Father.

I will be the first to say, being a dad is the best gift in the entire world. I love my daughter SO much. She is practically perfect in every way.

There is... one teensy tiny problem with Edith.

She doesn't sleep.

It didn't start out that way, but somewhere after our move from Georgia to Indiana, and perhaps God knew we had it too good... somewhere along the way Edith, who is an angel all day long, stopped sleeping at night.

And as any parent knows, because Edith doesn't sleep, neither do I anymore. The absolute worst is when she is finally down and then I can't get myself back to sleep.

When that happens, you start counting sheep, reading, and any other trick to get yourself down as quickly as you can because you never know when she is going to wake up again.

This brings me to our Scripture reading from this morning. I want to introduce you to another person that seems to struggle with sleepless nights. He's a character in the Bible that actually is quite prevalent in the story of Jesus told in the gospels but often overlooked. You may not have even noticed he appears to help bury the body of Jesus

This man is a religious ruler known as a Pharisee, named, Nicodemus:

We meet Nicodemus 3 separate times in John's gospel account—I want to briefly summarize these scenes because they tell a story of who Nicodemus is and what he is about. He is truly a fascinating character in the story of Jesus, and I believe he is included in John's retelling of the gospel for a very important reason, but more on that in a moment. First, we need to go back and visit each of the interactions Jesus has with this religious leader:

There are many unknowns about Nicodemus, but one thing is clear: Nicodemus must also struggle to sleep—we are almost always meeting him at night.

In John chapter 3, we read that Nicodemus has heard about Jesus and has come to visit him under the cover of night. You see, Nicodemus is one of the Pharisees, the religious rulers responsible for helping the Jewish people remain faithful to the law.

Throughout the gospels, Jesus and the pharisees are at odds with each other. Jesus claims they have missed the mark of what true worship is supposed to be about. In other words, the pharisees have been so concerned about protecting Jewish identity and culture, they have lost their relationship with God.

Not wanting others to know about this visit, Nicodemus goes to see Jesus in the dark of night. There is something bothering him about this person named Jesus. Something is stirring in his soul. Nicodemus' heart aches for something concrete and real. While Jesus' public ministry has just begun, he has heard the teachings of Jesus, and has seen the signs Jesus is performing. Nicodemus is one of the many and certainly one of the first to wonder, **Could Jesus be the savior God had promised long ago?**

It's a preposterous question if you put yourself in Nicodemus' shoes... to allow yourself to cultivate that type of hope... why would God choose this moment and this person to bring about the salvation of his people? I wonder how crazy Nicodemus thought he was for wondering... but one thing is clear... Nicodemus wonders. Nicodemus has a hunch, and it is keeping him up at night.

The interaction Nicodemus has with Jesus is an interesting one. The two discuss how one must be "born again" in order to enter the kingdom of God. It seems when you read John's retelling of the interaction as if Nicodemus walks away with more questions than when he started, but as we see, Nicodemus is not an idle participant in the story of Jesus... his story line is far from over. He is always there on the sidelines, watching and wondering what to make of this Jesus.

We later meet Nicodemus again in John chapter 7. At this point, the Jesus movement is growing across the land and there is much division about who Jesus is. The problem the people are having is a problem we too often have with Jesus: Jesus is not the messiah the people had come to expect.

Jesus wasn't mounting a religious crusade against the Roman empire. In fact, he was speaking up against the religious leaders themselves! Jesus was teaching as one with authority, and he was healing the sick. Many people were beginning to ask the same questions Nicodemus had when he first went to Jesus. **Who is this man?**

The chief priests and the Pharisees are desperately trying to put an end to this movement, what they have dubbed a mob. At one point, they despondently cry, "Have any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed in him? No! But this mob that knows nothing of the law—there is a curse on them."

In direct response, it is our good friend Nicodemus who interjects to come to Jesus' aid:

Nicodemus claims to the ruling council that they cannot condemn Jesus without first hearing what he has to say. The rulers don't love what Nicodemus has to say—they've already made up their mind to have Jesus killed. Nicodemus has just introduced another hoop they need to jump through in order to do so. Their eyes have been blinded to seeing Jesus for who he truly is: The Son of God, sent to rescue his people.

This interaction shows us that Nicodemus is still thinking about Jesus. He hasn't become a follower of Jesus, but Nicodemus also hasn't become an adversary of Jesus either. He didn't have to speak up, and yet he did. He came to Jesus' aid and in a backhanded way defended him. But notice: Nicodemus didn't correct the rulers either by saying, "Actually, I believe in Jesus."

The third and final time we meet Nicodemus takes place after the death of Jesus. The religious rulers got what they wanted: an end to the Jesus movement. An end to the era of so-called "mob rule." In a matter of days, the people who were following Jesus, hailing him as king, were demanding his death and execution. For those who had come to believe in Jesus as the messiah, the son of God, we meet them in this state of utter confusion and loss. It is hard to continue a movement after death, but death on a cross: it seems impossible.

In this moment of terror and confusion, as everyone is looking around going, what just happened? We are introduced to two men who take charge to properly bury Jesus' body. They want to make sure that even though Jesus' life ended in brutal death, his body was honored according to Jewish burial customs. These men are introduced as such:

Joseph of Arimathea: Labeled by John as a disciple of Jesus, but a secret disciple. Joseph was afraid of the Jewish leaders coming after him, so he decided to give his life to follow Jesus in secret.

Nicodemus: Our friend who came to Jesus in the middle of the night and later defended him to the religious rulers is back on the scene.

These two men honor Jesus' body, prepare it according to Jewish burial customs, and lay him in the tomb. It is an odd way for the depiction of Jesus' death to end. It's also an odd passage for me to select for my Easter sermon.

I want to briefly explain why I chose this passage:

Liminal space: The scene of Joseph and Nicodemus preparing the body of Jesus is set within what we call "liminal space." A liminal space is a space in between two realities. Here, Nicodemus and Joseph prepare Jesus' body in between the reality of his death and the promised reality of the resurrection.

The bible is full of liminal moments—take for example the Israelites who journeyed through the wilderness in between the reality of slavery in Egypt and the promised reality of the land of milk and honey. These moments in time capture the heart of the human experience. Liminal spaces are the exact places God uses to form us and teach us lessons. When we live between the already and not yet, we are forced to rely on God—it is an exercise of trust. **Knowing we are not home in either reality**, the goal of a liminal space is to draw us closer to God as we await the promised reality ahead of us.

Just like the Egyptians in the wilderness, just like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, we too find ourselves living in a liminal space today: the already, not yet of the Kingdom of God.

We live in between the two resurrections. Today we celebrate and remember the first resurrection in which Jesus conquered the grave, defeating the powers of Sin and death. The cross was not the end. Jesus was raised to life and because He lives, the kingdom of heaven is here for us all to participate and live into.

And yet, as joyful as that is, the story of God's faithfulness to his people is far from over! While in Jesus, the powers of sin and death have been defeated, sin and death still exist all around us.

It doesn't take long when you look at your own life and look at the world around you to realize that this world does not fully reflect God's goodness and his design for human flourishing. War, famine, poverty, division, destruction all plague our world and our lives.

But as I said, the story of God's faithfulness is far from over. You see, Jesus has promised he will return, and when he does, he will come to make not just some, but ALL things new.

We live in the liminal space of the already not yet. Before Jesus' death, he was clear to his followers: I will return in three days. He said it, and said it again, and said it more. And yet, when he gave up his spirit and died on that cursed tree, the disciples and followers of Jesus fled and hid. All hope they had that Jesus was the messiah was crucified with Christ.

In the liminal space between the cross and the resurrection, what the disciples needed most was a reminder of hope.

I chose this passage today as we live amidst this liminal space between the two resurrections. Especially today, we all need a message of hope. We need to be reminded that God has not abandoned his people. God has not abandoned you! God is faithful in ALL he has promised, and he has promised to return and redeem all things as heaven and earth join to become one. The vision of hope that we long for is the day in which God and his people will dwell together forever. **That day is coming. Hold onto this hope!**

Nicodemus: The other reason I selected this passage is because I am convinced there is an important lesson for us to learn by remembering Nicodemus as told in

Scripture. I can't help but wonder why Nicodemus is never labeled a disciple of Jesus. After all, Joseph of Arimathea is! The truth is, John's gospel leaves us all wondering: Did Nicodemus ever give his life to follow Christ?

And I think that is the point. In the murky waters wondering about Nicodemus, the gospels tell the story of Jesus for a reason: that we may believe that Jesus is in fact the Messiah, the son of God, and by believing in him we would have new life in his name.

The gospels are recorded for us so we may come to know who Jesus is, begin to do what Jesus did, and ultimately, in the way we lead our lives, become like Jesus.

To do those things, there is a choice that has to be made. To be a disciple of Jesus requires you to give up everything to follow and become like him. Discipleship under Jesus requires us to renounce our lives of sin and seek to live according to the way of Christ. **To become a citizen of Christ's kingdom that is available here and now because of the resurrection, we must pledge allegiance to Jesus, and Jesus only as Lord and king.**

I think about Nicodemus often--- I wonder, if, at the end of the day, giving up his life to follow Jesus was simply too much for him.

Remember, Nicodemus was a pharisee, a religious ruler. He had given his life to become a teacher of the law. Not just anybody can become a pharisee, but anyone can, and everyone is invited to become a disciple of Jesus...

For Nicodemus, to become a disciple of Jesus would mean renouncing the comfortable life he had worked hard to secure. Nicodemus was living what the people of the day would have defined as "the good life."

The risk involved to give up the good life for the unproven potential of an even better life with Jesus is insurmountable.

I think for many people today, they experience the same issue. They have heard the message of Jesus, they like Nicodemus, have a deep respect for Jesus, but there is something getting in the way of truly becoming a disciple.

Maybe you, yourself find yourself in this position. And I want you to seriously consider. What is holding you back?

Maybe it's because you wonder: Is God really good? Does he really care about me? Maybe you wonder, could God really forgive me?

Because of the cross and the resurrection, the answer is a resounding yes. God so loved the world, God so loved you, that he gave his only son so that whoever believes in him might have eternal life. The resurrection is not a fictitious story. Jesus is a real person, and his story told in the gospels is credible. Because Jesus lives, because we have a savior who paid the price for our sins, we can look to the cross and not just guess, but know, without a shadow of a doubt that God is for us. God loves us. God has come to rescue and save you!

Maybe it is hard to truly live as a disciple of Jesus because you, like Nicodemus, are living the good life.

In response, I want to challenge you today. It is not good enough to continue to live your life as it is and also happen to like and respect Jesus.

There were a lot of people who happened to simply like Jesus.

They were the ones shouting Hosanna as he entered into Jerusalem

They were also the ones shouting, "Crucify him!" Just a number of days later.

It's easy to like Jesus. It costs nothing to hold him in high regard. What will cost you-what will cost you everything, is giving up your life to follow him, to become like him.

This is what Jesus asks of us. To pick up our cross, to die to ourselves daily and follow him and his way.

The world today has plenty of Jesus fans. What the world needs more of and what God is calling you to is life-changing apprenticeship under the name, character, and power of Jesus.

As we live in between the two resurrections, as we cultivate our hope that Jesus will return and make all things new, as we learn how to be more like Jesus in

everything we say and do, I want to leave you with an important reminder and challenge:

The life God is calling you to lead, the call to die to yourself and follow Christ is a weighty task. It will in fact cost you everything.

But hear me when I say, It is worth it.

The kingdom of heaven, the reality of a relationship with God, the promise of our inheritance from the God of the universe. It is not just about believing in Jesus so you can go to heaven when you die.

Jesus calls us to join him in the ministry of reconciliation. We join with God in this liminal space of the already, not yet and participate in the work of making all things new, displaying the kingdom of God to a broken world, and growing hope.

We as a church exist for this very reason, to grow as disciples of Christ together. To live into the promised blessings and the even better life that comes from knowing and following Jesus.

Unlike Nicodemus, we don't have to wonder if becoming a disciple of Jesus is worth it. Because we live on this side of the resurrection, we don't just trust or hope, we know definitively that Jesus is worth it.

And so I invite you to consider, Jesus is calling, how are you going to answer?

Amen.

John 19:38-42

³⁸ Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away. ³⁹ He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds.^[a] ⁴⁰ Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. ⁴¹ At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid. ⁴² Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.