

Isaiah 52:13-53:12 & Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9 – March 29, 2024 (Good Friday)

Rich people get rich graves. You've all see them. Walk into any cemetery and you can immediately identify which people were rich and which people were poor based entirely on their graves.

The rich people have massive mausoleums, constructed of marble or granite. They have a sarcophagus, with lists of their deeds in life etched on the sides. They have ornate statues of angels or of themselves, or huge stone obelisks reaching into the sky. You can tell at a glance which people in a cemetery had money to spend.

You can also tell which ones were poor. They don't have mausoleums or statues. They have the simplest grave stones, with just a name and a couple of dates. Or maybe no stone at all. Just a marker with a number of it.

The graves of the rich get noticed. Admired. Preserved. The graves of the poor are ignored. Walked over, as if they weren't even there.

And it's been like that for just about the entire history of mankind. All the way back to the pyramids of Egypt and the great monuments of Stonehenge and the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus. Rich people like having impressive graves. And the bigger, the better.

Our Old Testament lesson this evening makes an interesting statement: *“And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.”* The verse is prophetic, like the rest of this passage from Isaiah. It is a prophecy of Jesus' death and burial.

This particular prophecy concerns the tomb of Jesus. We'll read in a few minutes about how Joseph of Arimathea will take possession of Jesus' dead body after he's crucified. But in Matthew's gospel we also learn that Joseph of Arimathea was quite wealthy. Wealthy enough to own his own garden just outside the city. Wealthy enough that he has had a brand new tomb carved into the rock of that garden. Where he presumably planned to have himself and probably his family members buried when they died.

It was a rich grave for a rich man. The most expensive kind of tomb that money could buy in those days. The kind of grave that you would walk by and say, “Ha! A rich man must be buried there.”

And yet, despite the fact that Joseph is, according to John, a disciple of Jesus, this prophecy that Jesus would be buried in a rich man's grave isn't portrayed as a good thing. As a way of honoring Jesus. No, it's actually quite the opposite. Because Isaiah parallels the idea of being buried with a rich man with being buried with the wicked.

Now, I don't think this is trying to imply that Joseph of Arimathea was himself necessarily all that wicked. Although until Jesus' crucifixion, John says that he had been afraid to reveal that he was a disciple of Jesus, which isn't exactly something to be proud of. But, no, this isn't about Joseph specifically. It's a general statement about humanity. Every grave is the grave of a wicked man.

We are all wicked. Every one of us. We are all sinners. And we all pay the penalty for that sin when we die. Every cemetery is a cemetery full of the corpses of wicked, sinful people. You know how I know that? Because they're dead. They wouldn't be buried in that cemetery at all if they were truly good and sinless people. They'd be alive right now. But they're not.

And so, now, you might see the absurdity of rich people having rich graves. Because 9 times out of 10, they have that rich grave – that mausoleum or that ornate statute – because they want to look good. They want to look impressive and important and powerful. They want to look rich. But they're dead. And the fact that they're dead means that they were not nearly as good or powerful or rich as they thought they were.

There was only one man who was good. And I think you know who he was. And because he was good, he didn't just deserve a rich man's grave. No, he deserved to have no grave at all. Jesus deserved to be a alive. To avoid all the pain and suffering of dead altogether.

He had done no violence. There was no deceit in his mouth. He shouldn't have been buried with the wicked. He shouldn't have been buried in a rich man's grave. He shouldn't have been buried at all.

As Pilate will say to the Jews calling for Jesus' crucifixion, there was no guilt in him. As the thief hanging next to Jesus will say to his fellow criminal, this man did nothing wrong. As the centurion at the foot of the cross will testify, this man truly was the Son of God.

But, it was the will of the Lord to crush him. To put him to grief. To make his soul an offering for sin. To look at the anguish of his soul and be satisfied that our debt had been paid. That we had been accounted righteous. That he had carried our iniquity.

Jesus was the sinless lamb of God who took away the sins of the world. Jesus died for people who are so convinced in our self-righteousness that we're proud of our gravesites. We're proud that, in life, we were sinners and so are paying the just penalty of our sin.

They made his grave with the wicked. They made his grave with us. He was buried in the earth like a common criminal. Like a sinful man. Like all of us will be buried one day.

He was rich. Richer than any man who lived. Because he was the creator of all that had been made. He sat in the glory of heaven, high above all the sinfulness of this earth. But he became poor for our sakes. He emptied himself and took the form of servant.

As our Epistle says, he sympathizes with our every weakness, for he experienced every weakness of man. Every temptation the devil could throw at him. And he overcame them all. He defeated the devil at every turn. He didn't need to die.

But he did. He did it out of obedience to his Father. He did it to crush the devil once and for all under his feet. He did it to be exalted above every power and authority in heaven and on earth. He did it to forgive our transgressions and cleanse us of all iniquity.

He did it because he loves us. Because he wanted to save his beloved creatures. Because he wanted to become the source of our salvation.

Our passage from Hebrews makes what looks like an odd statement in that regard: "*And being made perfect, he became the source of salvation to all who obey him.*" Being made perfect? Wasn't Jesus already perfect?

Well, yes, in the sense that he did no sin. But, in the ancient world and in the Greek language, the idea of perfection is directly tied to the idea of completion. Something is perfect if it's complete. If nothing more that can be added to it. If it can in no way can be improved upon.

After the sixth day in Genesis, creation was perfect. It was perfect because it was complete. There was nothing more that could be added to it. There was no way that it could be improved upon. And so God marked the seventh day – the Sabbath – as a memorial of its perfect completion.

In the crucifixion, Jesus' life became perfect, because it became complete. There was nothing more that could be added to it. Nothing left to be improved upon. He was nailed to a cross and he declared, "*It is finished.*" And he gave up his spirit. And in that moment, everything was perfect. There was nothing left to do.

He had saved you. He had saved you from an eternity in hell. He had saved you from remaining in that grave forever. He had saved you from being numbered with transgressors. Upon him was the chastisement that brings us peace. By his stripes, we are healed. His soul was poured out to death, that you might live again.

That you might draw near to his throne of grace and receive mercy. That you might find grace to help in time of need. Which is what we do this evening and every time we gather for worship. We come to the throne of grace, where the lamb who was slain still sits. And we find his mercy and his grace waiting for us. We need help and he is there to help us. We need life and he is there to give us his own.

We are poor, miserable sinners destined for poor graves, no matter how ornate our tombstones. But by his grace, we are rich in the mercy of God and the treasures of heaven. For we may not have gold or silver, but we have something far more precious: the blood of Jesus shed on the cross, washing away all our sins. We have a grave that will one day be completely empty because of what Jesus did for us. And that is the richest grave a man can have. Amen.