

FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

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SERMON: *Nic & Joseph of Arimathea*
SERIES: *Easter – Once and For All*
SCRIPTURES: John 19:38-42
SPEAKER: *Shaun Kipe*
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**Credit to John Ortberg;*

Well good morning, it's great to worship with you today.

We're in the midst of our Easter Sermon series, (**SERIES TITLE SLIDE**). Looking at the story of Easter from the perspective of some of the characters that were impacted by Jesus around the time of his death and resurrection. Our series title is "Once and for all". The story of Jesus resurrection happened once (once in a lifetime event), but it was for all people, impacts all people. Last week "the all" included the criminal Barabbas.

This morning, I want us to consider two other characters who were impacted by Jesus around Easter.

I. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea.

These two men show up together in John 19. Jesus has just been crucified and is dead, hanging on a Roman cross.

John 19:38-42 - ³⁸ After all this, Joseph of Arimathea (he was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly, because he was intimidated by the Jews) petitioned Pilate to take the body of Jesus. Pilate gave permission. So Joseph came and took the body.

39-42 Nicodemus, who had first come to Jesus at night, came now in broad daylight carrying a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. They took Jesus' body and, following the Jewish burial custom, wrapped it in linen with the spices. There was a garden near the place he was crucified, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been placed. So, because it was Sabbath preparation for the Jews and the tomb was convenient, they placed Jesus in it.

Now to set us up to understand these two guys, you need to know that at this time, one of the big questions surrounding Jesus was: **Is Jesus really the Messiah?**

There were many Jews who followed Jesus and believed he was the Messiah and there were many who didn't.

And last week, we talked a little bit about this one group of religious leaders called **Pharisees**. If you remember, we said, that the Pharisees, religious leaders, they were mostly part of the group that didn't believe Jesus was the Messiah. They spent significant amounts of time, studying, waiting, looking for the Messiah, but they didn't believe Jesus was him. In fact, they didn't really like Jesus at all.

He didn't follow their rules. He was regularly breaking Jewish laws. He said some things about them, they didn't like.

The Pharisees were the ones always trying to catch Jesus in a mistake, always asking him hard questions. They were the ones who stirred up the crowds, and convinced Pilate Jesus should be executed.

Nicodemus and Joseph were both Pharisees. That's why this brief little story is rather intriguing. These two Pharisees go to Pilate, asking for permission to give him a proper Jewish burial.

What we see in these two men is something that I suspect every single one of us experiences in our own lives, maybe most keenly around Easter. The tension between **faith and doubt**.

This morning we're going to explore this tension in a little more detail.

So a little more about this guy, Nicodemus.

Nicodemus, who had first come to Jesus at night...

If you're familiar with your Bible, you know there's a story in **John 3**. A man comes to Jesus, because he is intrigued by Jesus. He has some questions for Jesus. He wants to know a little bit more about Jesus. He even says this... **"Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."**

And then there is this really well-known conversation that takes place. Jesus says, **"No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."** And the man is really confused by Jesus answer and he starts asking questions like, *"How am I supposed to enter my mothers womb a second time?"* It's actually in this very conversation that Jesus shares these most familiar words that you probably have memorized. **"For God so loved the world, He sent his Only son..."**

That man who comes to Jesus, that conversation, is with this Pharisee named Nicodemus. Though he was a Pharisee, Nicodemus started to look at Jesus life, his teachings, his miracles...and he is intrigued. He begins to wonder. "Is it possible, Jesus could actually be the Messiah?"

So he comes to Jesus to investigate, to find out. He even says, we you are a teacher who has come from God. We might say, Nicodemus has got a little bit of **faith!**

In fact there's another story, involving Nicodemus in **John 7**, which even further highlights his faith. A group of Pharisees have gathered together and they get into an argument about Jesus and there are some ready to arrest him. *"Can't have a guy running around, gaining followers, breaking Jewish Law, claiming to be the Messiah. Let's arrest him."* And in the midst of this argument, one Pharisee in the group steps forward and says, Yeah, but... ⁵¹ **"Does our law condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he has been doing?"**

In other words, we can't honestly, rightfully arrest Jesus. That Pharisee, who stands up for Jesus in the midst of his peers, was Nicodemus. He's got a little faith!

But did you notice this also? There's this little phrase attached to the Nicodemus stories.

John 19 – Nicodemus, who came to Jesus at night...

John 3:1-2 - There was a man of the Pharisee sect, Nicodemus, a prominent leader among the Jews. Late one night he visited Jesus...

Why is Nicodemus coming to Jesus **"at night"**? The answer is...he's trying to hide. (Illustration of "what we do at night" so that we aren't seen?)

At night is symbolic of the **doubt** and uncertainty that still lingers inside of Nicodemus.

What if Jesus is not the Messiah? Nicodemus is a Pharisee. That would look bad. He would be humiliated. If Jesus is the Messiah, he's willing to go all in. But if he's not, it could cost him his career, his home, his life.

He's intrigued but not completely convinced. He's believes but not fully. He is experiencing...the tension between faith and doubt...belief and uncertainty. Can you relate?

And the exact same thing is true of our other character in this story...**Joseph of Arimathea**

I had told you last week that the story of Barabbas was one of the few stories that is found in all 4 Gospels. Joseph of Arimathea, also happens to be one of those stories that is found in all 4 Gospels.

Matthew describes Joseph as a “*rich man...*”

Mark says he is a “*respected member of the religious council and one who was looking for the Kingdom of God.*”

And in our passage this morning we read...

³⁸ After all this, Joseph of Arimathea (he was a disciple of Jesus...) petitioned Pilate to take the body of Jesus. Pilate gave permission. So Joseph came and took the body.

So, right off the bat it's fascinating that Joseph is described as a disciple of Jesus. There are not many Pharisees described that way. Just like Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, is a man of **faith**.

But there's more. You see it's important to understand. In many cases rebellious criminals were not take down off of crosses, most remained hanging on Roman crosses, their bodies left to rot or be eaten by scavengers. Kind of like a symbol to remind people not to mess with the Romans. Every once in a while, someone (a highly respected person), may get up the courage to ask for permission to take the body down and bury the body of their loved. But not often.

And that's why this story of Joseph of Arimathea is so intriguing. Here we have a Pharisee, a wealthy, highly respected individual, coming to ask for permission to take to take Jesus body down and anoint it.

Why? Joseph of Arimathea wants to give Jesus a proper Jewish burial.

This is in many ways an act of **faith**. Others will find out that he is a follower of Jesus. In fact, notice he and Nicodemus come in **"broad daylight"** to take the body down. He will no longer be a conspicuous, hidden disciple. He will be known, found out. You have to admire Joseph of Arimathea for his faith.

But did you catch this also, about Joseph?

After all this, Joseph of Arimathea (he was a disciple of Jesus, (wow, that's great faith) **but secretly, because he was intimidated by the Jews** (wow, that's not so great faith...doubt/uncertainty.)

Two men, religious leaders. Wealthy. Intellectual...coming to Jesus, following Jesus, disciples of Jesus and yet...coming at night and secretly following him.

And I guess the more I read the stories of Nicodemus and Joseph the more I realized that I share much in common with them.

I grew up in the church. I grew up a missionary kid in Zambia, Africa. I grew up a pastors kid. My dad is a pastor. Both of my grandfathers were pastors. One of them a bishop in the BIC church.

I was a good kid mostly. Honestly, never "strayed" that far from "Christian upbringing." Faith in Jesus almost seemed like a natural part of life to me. And yet, if I'm really being honest doubt has been a real part of my faith journey.

Shaun, do you really believe all of this church stuff? Do you really believe all of this Jesus stuff? Is Jesus really the Messiah? In fact maybe the only reason you follow Jesus, is because it's a family tradition? Or you were born in a Christian home?

I'll just tell you I believe these two men give us a picture of this very real tension that is part of our faith journey. The tension that exists between faith and doubt. Belief and uncertainty. You see I bet, every one of us, when we truly allow ourselves to be honest, has a little bit of Nicodemus and Joseph inside of us.

There are many people today who wonder about God, faith, Jesus, miracles, and around this time of year...the resurrection.

So I want to give us just a few thoughts on what we do with this tension that exists on our faith journey. Because even in the midst of the tension I feel between faith and doubt, I have given my life for the faith that I have. I am betting the farm on it.

A. Doubt is a universal human experience.

Doesn't matter how rich you are. In our world, money talks. Money gives us a sense of security and comfort. Joseph of Arimathea, we are told was wealthy and we can assume that Nicodemus was probably doing pretty well himself, because of his position in society.

Sometimes, maybe you think, money gives me confidence, the upper hand. If I had more money I would no longer doubt.

But money will never answer your questions about faith, miracles, the meaning of life. People who are wealthy and respectable, doubt.

Or knowledge.

It's easy to think that if we were just a little smarter or had more information, then we wouldn't doubt any more. Both Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, would have been some of the more educated people in their world. But even the most intelligent people you know experience doubt.

I was reading a story about three men in a plane: **a pilot, a Boy Scout and the world's smartest man.** The engine fails, the plane is going down (it's probably a Boeing 737MAX). There are only two parachutes. The world's smartest man grabs one. "I'm sorry about this," he says, "but I'm the smartest man in the world; I have a responsibility to the planet," and he jumps out of the plane.

The pilot turns to the Boy Scout and speaks of how he has lived a long, full life and how the Boy Scout has his whole life in front of him. He tells the Boy Scout to take the last parachute and live.

"Relax captain," the Boy Scout says. "The world's smartest man just jumped out of the plane with my backpack."

You see there are some really intelligent people in our world today and there have been the whole way down through the history of humanity. Plato, Albert Einstein, Stephen Hawking, Francis Collins and list goes on. But, even the smartest people in the world, disagree on some of these ultimate questions regarding God, faith, meaning etc. And so knowledge alone will not be able to eliminate all of our doubts.

The world is full of smart people jumping out of planes with backpacks.

"Making the right choices about faith – like making good choices for life in general – does not seem to rest primarily on IQ. Smart people mess up as easily as the rest of us."

One of the paradoxes of faith and doubt is that it is the ultimate intellectual challenge, yet simple and uneducated people may live with great wisdom and PhD's may choose folly.

(Ortberg 24)

Billy Graham (**PIC OF BILLY GRAHAM**) an old man near ninety, when asked if he believes that after he dies he will hear God say to him, "Well done, good and faithful servant," pauses and says after a surprising inner struggle, "I hope so."

Martin Luther (**PIC OF LUTHER**), the champion of justification by faith, was approached for help by an elderly woman troubled by doubt. "Tell me, he asked her, "when you recite the creeds – do you believe them?"

"Yes, most certainly." "Then go in peace," the reformer said. "You believe more and better than I do."

(Ortberg 23)

Doubt is a universal human experience, you will have doubts.

"The death of a single infant calls into question the existence of God."

Dostoyevsky

When you pray for healing that does not come. It may cause you at times to doubt.

When a tropical storm obliterates people's homes and lives. Don't you have moments were that makes you wonder where God is?

When an innocent child is abused, physically, sexually, emotionally. Doubt.

When you receive some new information about faith, or your understanding of God or the Bible. I may remember going to Messiah College and meeting students and professors, from different denominational backgrounds It challenged the way I thought about my faith. And when that happens, it may cause times/moments of doubt.

And this leads to the second thing you need to understand...

B. Doubt & Faith Co-exist

So often we kind of picture it like doubt and faith are on opposite ends of the spectrum (**PIC OF SPECTRUM with doubt and faith on opposite sides**). The more faith you have, the less doubt. The more doubt the less faith.

And this is why for so many in our world, doubt causes so much shame. Doubt is so often seen as a sign of weakness or lack of faith. This is why, Nicodemus comes at night to meet with Jesus. This is why Joseph of Arimathea is a secret follower of Jesus.

I don't want to admit I have questions. So many people of faith today, hiding, ashamed of their uncertainty.

On this journey of life, there is room for both. Faith & doubt. It's not that you have one or the other. Most people are a mix of both. That's the story of Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. A little of both.

Coming at night and secretly following. And at the very same time...stepping out from their peers to investigate, to stand up for Jesus. They're going in broad daylight to retrieve Jesus body and give him a proper Jewish burial.

I sometimes wonder if that's why Jesus compares our faith to a mustard seed. "If you have faith the size of a mustard seed...he says, you can move mountains."

And I'll just tell you, you will find this faith and doubt tension all over the stories of the Bible.

Peter has always been one of my favorite disciples. “Jesus even if everyone else betrays you, I never will”. Days later, denies he even knows Jesus. (That’s faith and doubt.)

Or how about that time when Peter walks on water. He’s the only one with enough faith to get out of the boat and walk on water. And yet right in the midst of that incredible act of faith, when he’s standing face to face with Jesus, he starts to sink because doubt came creeping back into his life again. Faith & Doubt.

The Great Commission, one of those most significant passages in the Bible. Matthew 28. **16 Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. 17 When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.** And then he invites these conflicted believing, yet uncertain followers to, “Go and make disciples of all nations.” (Faith and Doubt). Hand in hand.

It’s Peter, it’s Nicodemus, its Joseph of Arimathea, it’s me and it’s probably you too.

You don’t need to be afraid of it, you don’t need to be ashamed of it. You don’t need to try and hide it. God already knows. And as a church we must do better at allowing our young people the room to wrestle with and experience this tension. If you are a person of faith and doubt, you are in good company.

And I’ll just tell you why, I think we need both.

1. Faith without doubt

One of the dangers of faith without doubt is that we can easily become unthoughtful and careless with our faith. Doubt, motivates us to ask hard questions. If we avoid doubt, then rather than thinking through difficult questions, we end up spouting off unhelpful/cliché answers to difficult questions. “Well, just believe it.”

For example, sometimes we make it sound like it's easy to believe a man died and came back to life 2,000 years ago and everyone should find it just as easy to believe. And our answer is, "well the Bible says so, so you just believe it." Answers like that don't convince others, they usually just make others realize we haven't thought that long or hard about our faith.

Frederick Buechner once said, **"Doubts are ants in the pants of faith; they keep it awake and moving."**

Doubt is what led Nicodemus' to Jesus, late one night. To investigate. To ask questions. And those initial questions, led to more questions. Doubt is the thing that often drives us to seek, to know, to learn, to explore. Doubt is often at the heart of knowledge and growth.

Doubt asks why is the sky blue?

Doubt asks can humans fly to the moon?

My mom tells the story of when she was younger. Their family had a pet turtle. Turtles are wondrous, fascinating creatures, especially to little kids. My mom, as a little girl, though always wondered. Where do the head, arms and legs go when they disappear? Sure she could have believed her mom's explanation or the things she was learning in science class. But, what if they were wrong? How could she really know for sure? It was her doubts that led her to explore the inside of the turtle shell. Today, she knows more about the inside of turtles than most people.

When it comes to our Christian faith, it is doubt that often drives us to learn, to explore.

Doubt asks are miracles possible?

Doubt asks how do I know Jesus is the Messiah?

Doubt asks can a dead man really come back to life?

I've shared in here before, we live in the most educated generation of human existence. Almost limitless information at the tips of your fingers. Simplistic and unthoughtful answers are not good enough. We need Nicodemus and Joseph followers of Jesus, willing to doubt and ask the hard questions of our faith.

That's why we've said this year at Five Forks we are a church "knowing, loving, following Jesus" (**PIC OF GRAPHIC**)... knowing...ing implies we are in process. We have never fully arrived. As we know more, some questions get answered and are then replaced with new questions!

I just want to remind you...we have an email **QA@FFBIC.ORG**, you have questions about sermons or faith or putting faith into practice life, whatever...ask...it's how we learn.

Faith without doubt can be dangerous.

But doubt without faith is equally as dangerous.

2. Doubt without faith:

So put on your thinking cap for just a minute and stay with me.

Doubt without faith ultimately leads to "meaninglessness". If nothing can ever be trusted. If I doubt everything, I am eventually left with nothing to hold onto or believe in. And that includes my own existence. See if you doubt God exists, it becomes very hard to believe in things like good and evil (except for that which is a human construct). You doubt anything divine or supernatural. Nature becomes all that there is. But you doubt that also. Maybe even nature does not exist. You doubt your own existence. You can't prove you actually exist.

There's a classic philosophical conundrum, "the mad scientist". That asks, "how do you know you actually exist and that you are not simply a brain in a vat. And everything you think is real about your life is only an illusion. A mad scientist sending impulses to that brain. You think you exist, but you really don't. Your life is just one big superficial dream."

For meaning and value to exist, you eventually have to put faith in something. Everybody who has ever found any purpose or meaning in life, has eventually been forced to put their faith in something...Whether it's knowledge, whether its your senses, whether it's God or combination...meaning, hope, value start with faith.

I remember sitting in one of my classes at Messiah College. I had a professor named Dr. Crane. He was from Alabama. He had a thick southern accent. When he got excited about something, he was very loud and boistrous. He had a brilliant mind. He was a philosophy and theology professor.

I remember sitting in class one day, we started talking about meaning and purpose and value and where it comes from. And he started talking about "child abuse". He started sharing some of his personal testimony. And he said *"I have to believe that this is wrong. Child abuse is wrong. Not just that I think it wrong or that it's a personal preference or social construct. But that it is actually wrong. And that one day there will be justice for innocently abused children. I don't know what that means, I'm not the one to dole out that justice. But I have to believe that this is not meaningless."*

That's faith. Nope that doesn't solve the issue. But what he's saying is that doubt, on it's own, isn't sufficient for explaining purpose and meaning in life as we know it and experience it...we'll need faith to help us do that.

The reason cancer and pollution and slums and starvation are wrong...the reason Nazi Germany, Genocide in Rwanda, sex trafficking in the United States is wrong, is because I believe, I have faith that God created such a thing as good and evil.

Faith is the thing that gives meaning and purpose to life. Everybody has faith. We believe faith in Jesus is the best way to hold the tension of faith and doubt that we experience in life.

Many throughout history have felt the same way. Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, Peter, Shaun and maybe you have also.

Some people think, "I'm not sure what I believe about Jesus. I'm not sure I believe a human being could be divine. I'm not sure what I believe about the resurrection. I'm afraid that means I'm out." Sometimes people think "I'm not sure I believe the right stuff about Jesus, I can't follow him."

But usually Jesus says, "Come follow me. And eventually as you follow, you'll come to believe the right stuff also."