

Canceling the Christ
Matthew 27:55-28:1

We all know how important funerals are. When we lose loved ones, we need to honor their memory even while we process our grief and take comfort in the faithful friends who surround us. Funerals provide more than a sense of closure – they can reassure us that life will go on.

But the chief priests and the Pharisees did the best they could to make sure there was no funeral for Jesus. For you see, it wasn't enough for them to make wild accusations against Him. It wasn't enough for them to whip the Jerusalem mob into a frenzy, threatening a riot unless Pilate authorized His crucifixion. No, after He was dead, they wanted to destroy His memory in the same way that ancient Pharaohs chiseled their predecessors' names from their monuments, in the same way that statues of General Lee, and General Grant for that matter, have been desecrated by those who consider themselves to be "woke." In short, they wanted to "cancel" Jesus.

But why? Why did these leaders of God's people want Jesus' body to be off limits? Because they thought He was a deceiver. After all, at His trial Jesus had clearly claimed to be the Son of Man, the One Daniel described as "coming with the clouds of heaven," the One Who "was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve Him" (Daniel 7:13-14). And just a week earlier, on Palm Sunday, the Jerusalem crowd had agreed, hailing Jesus as the Son of David, the Messiah they and their ancestors had been expecting for hundreds of years.

But the chief priests and the Pharisees didn't see Jesus that way. Oh, they couldn't deny the supernatural power He had so clearly demonstrated. Many of them had seen His miracles of healing with their own eyes, and everyone in Jerusalem was talking about how He had raised Lazarus from the dead. But because Jesus refused to go along with all the elaborations and additions they and their ancestors had made to the Law of Moses, they had come to the conclusion that His power was not divine but demonic. Moreover, they were outraged that Jesus had challenged their authority by throwing the moneychangers out of the Temple. And His death on the cross proved to them without a shadow of a doubt that Jesus had been a liar all along. For they just couldn't see how a dead man could possibly be God's Messiah.

But they also understood that lies can live on well after the deceiver who told them is dead. Karl Marx lied when he said that political power is the only important factor in human society. Adolf Hitler lied about the existence of inherent, immutable racial characteristics. Both men are long dead, but their lies have never been more popular than they are today. In the same way, the chief priests and Pharisees feared that Jesus' followers would not only remember but propagate what was perhaps the most astounding thing He ever said – that after three days, He would rise from the dead.

Now, make no mistake – they thought Jesus' prediction of His resurrection was just as big a lie as His claim to be the Messiah. But they thought that Jesus' followers might take Him seriously, and that they would steal His body in order to perpetuate the fraud that He had risen from the dead. That's why the chief priests and the Pharisees insisted that Pilate station armed guards around Jesus' tomb: they wanted fully and finally to destroy Jesus' memory, to "cancel" Him, once and for all.

Now, I doubt very much that any of us Evangelical Presbyterians would agree with such "cancelations," either ancient or modern. No, we are willing to reach across all sorts of racial and

denominational boundaries in order to further the ministry of God's Kingdom. Moreover, we are willing to disagree with one another about all sorts of controversial issues, from the ordination of women to the continuation of various kinds of spiritual gifts. Instead of vilifying those who disagree with us, or shouting them down, we tend to appeal to reason and to lean on love.

And we know that the best way to oppose any sort of "cancel culture" is simply to stand on the truth – for while we believe that everyone is entitled to his own opinion, no one is entitled to his own facts. And it was the fact of the Resurrection that proved that Jesus was right all along, right about everything He had ever said about Himself. Yes, we know that the Palm Sunday crowd really was right to hail Him as the Son of David, the Messiah whose coming so many of the ancient prophets had foretold, even if they changed their minds on Good Friday. So, no matter what the chief priests and Pharisees might have thought to the contrary, no matter how hard they tried to "cancel" Jesus, He really was, and is, the Son of God.

But the sad truth is that none of the chief priests' and Pharisees' efforts to guard Jesus' tomb turned out to be necessary. And that's because none of Jesus' closest friends even tried to claim His body, much less steal it in order to perpetuate a fraud. And why not? Because not even the men who had been with Jesus at His Last Supper, not even Peter or James or John believed what Jesus had promised them – that He would rise from the dead after three days. No, just as they had all abandoned Him in His time of greatest need, they refused to believe what He had told them about His resurrection. They thus canceled Jesus in a more serious way than the chief priests tried to do – instead of shouting Him down, they simply refused to believe what He had said.

And the same thing was true for the women who came with Jesus and His disciples from Galilee. Oh, they didn't abandon Jesus as His disciples had done: instead, verse 55 says that many of them were present at His crucifixion, even if they were only able to look on from a distance. Verse 61 says that Mary Magdalene and the other Mary (perhaps the mother of Jesus) followed Him to the tomb. And Mark and Luke both record that these devoted women went back to the tomb on Easter Sunday morning to clean and anoint Jesus' body, to take care of all the details that Joseph had probably neglected on Friday.

Yes, they stuck with Jesus through thick and thin. Yes, they were willing to do whatever they could for Him. But even while we admire their steadfast devotion, we need to remember this: they didn't believe what He said about His resurrection any more than the chief priests and Pharisees did, any more than the eleven disciples did. After all, the women didn't come to the tomb on Easter morning expecting Jesus to keep His promise to rise again on the third day – they just came to make sure that His burial was done in the proper and customary way. They came to weep over Jesus, not to have their risen Lord dry their tears.

And I wonder if that is where we are today. Oh, we don't cancel Jesus by refusing to listen to Him. We certainly don't reject His claims of authority. No, we believe everything the gospels say about Him. We believe that Jesus is the Son of David, the Son of God Who rose from the dead. But do we really expect our living Lord to make a real difference for us here and now, to solve the real problems that face us in real life? Do we believe His promises to forgive us and cleanse us, to protect us and guide us? Or like the women who looked on at His crucifixion from a distance, the women who made so many preparations for His funeral, have we canceled out those promises, allowing our devotion to Jesus to be watered down by discouragement, or even by despair?

Well, what about Joseph of Arimathea? Even if he didn't have the time or the skill to conduct a proper burial, surely he was just as devoted to Jesus as the women who came to the tomb. After all, verse 57 tells us that he was a disciple, a follower of Jesus. Moreover, Mark and Luke tell us that He was a member of the Council, the gathering of religious leaders who had passed judgment on Jesus. And Matthew points out that he was a wealthy man – after all, most folks couldn't afford a private tomb of this type. In short, Joseph of Arimathea was a somebody – and as such, he had a lot to lose by allowing himself to be publicly identified with Jesus.

Yes, it took a lot of courage for Joseph to step forward and ask the Roman authorities for the body of a convicted criminal. For what if Pilate had turned around and accused Joseph of participating in whatever sort of rebellion Jesus might have been intending to lead? No one in Rome would bat an eye if Pilate had crucified Joseph too. In fact, the emperor might have given Pilate extra congratulations for adding the possessions of such a wealthy rebel to the imperial treasury.

And what would all of Joseph's associates on the Council say about him giving Jesus a decent burial? Wasn't such an action a rather obvious denunciation of the Council's judgment? By laying Jesus to rest in his own tomb, wasn't Joseph making it clear that he thought Jesus was a good man, and thus that his fellow members of the Council had made a big mistake?

Oh, yes, by stepping forward to claim the body of Jesus, Joseph was putting his freedom, his fortune and his reputation at risk. But while we admire his devotion and courage, and while we affirm his willingness to identify himself publicly with Jesus we need to remember this: he didn't have any more faith in the resurrection of Jesus than the chief priests and the Pharisees and the women at the tomb had. For in verse 60 we read that he laid the body of Jesus in the tomb, but then he simply rolled a large stone across its entrance and went away. Like the eleven disciples and the women at the tomb, Joseph canceled out Jesus' promise by refusing to believe it.

And I wonder if some of us who call ourselves disciples of Jesus aren't actually following Joseph's example. Oh, we might not mind if people know we are Christians. In fact, we might even be willing to take a stand on what the Bible says about controversial subjects such marriage and family issues – after all, here in the buckle of the Bible Belt, that's not exactly dangerous, is it?

But even while we claim to be followers of Christ, and even while we publicly confess the authority of His Word, are we canceling out His promises through our unbelief? Are we just giving Jesus the sort of lip service that the Palm Sunday crowd offered to Him – acknowledging Him as our King only as long as He gives us what we want right here and right now? Do we reject His sovereign providence when the circumstances of our lives don't work out the way we think they should?

Or like the women and Joseph and the rest of the disciples, are we satisfied to decorate His grave, to honor His memory even while we deny the relevance of His teachings to the modern world? Instead of trusting His power to forgive us and cleanse us, have we resigned ourselves to our character flaws and besetting sins, having no real hope of victory or even of significant improvement? Have we canceled out Jesus' promises through our unbelief?

“Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn Him to death, and will deliver Him to the Gentiles to mock and

scourge and crucify *Him*, and on the third day He will be raised up” (Matthew 20:18-19). That’s what Jesus prophesied, and all of it happened just like He said, on Good Friday and on Easter morning.

So will we trust Him to keep His promises to mold us into His likeness, giving us not only the devotion of the women and the courage of Joseph but the sort of self-sacrificial, unconditional love Jesus has even for those disciples who abandoned Him, even for His enemies who betrayed Him and falsely accused Him and crucified Him, even for those like us who continue to doubt His power and His love? Will we trust Him not only to forgive us but to cleanse us and to give us abundant life? Will we repent of our sins, embrace Him as our Savior and crown Him as our King? Will we live the resurrection life He promises to all who trust in Him?