

A Courageous Councilmember and Two Watching Women

Text:

Mark 15:40 – 16:8

There were also women looking on from a distance, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. When he was in Galilee, they followed him and ministered to him, and there were also many other women who came up with him to Jerusalem.

And when evening had come, since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the Council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God, took courage and went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Pilate was surprised to hear that he should have already died. And summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he was already dead. And when he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the corpse to Joseph. And Joseph bought a linen shroud, and taking him down, wrapped him in the linen shroud and laid him in a tomb that had been cut out of the rock. And he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where he was laid.

When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. And they were saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?" And looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back--it was very large. And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe, and they were alarmed. And he said to them, "Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you." And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

Introduction:

This is the final sermon in a series about some of the important minor characters in the passion narrative of the Gospel of Mark. We have been focusing on that handful of individuals who found the courage to do the right thing in a dangerous and difficult moment of time. We have been looking at them in light of the larger question of what motivates a small minority of people to do the right thing when the majority either remains silent and stationary, or worse yet, becomes an active participant in the evil.

We all understand fear. We know how it can immobilize us and cause us not to do what we know that we should do, and even to do what we know we should not do. But why do some overcome their fear and do right? All of us will have moments in our lives when, to do the right thing, to fulfill the mission that has been accorded to us, we will have need of unusual courage. As we finish the series today let us be reminded that all of the people we have talked about were ordinary people who performed extraordinary acts that had consequences beyond what they could have imagined at the time. None of them were expecting the final outcome, the resurrection. None of them were saying to themselves: "This looks dangerous to everyone else, but I know that in the end Jesus will rise from the dead and vindicate me." No, they were simply doing what they knew was right and leaving the consequences in God's hands. In the end that is the picture of faith that the Bible always gives us; Do what is right and leave the outcome to God. As we look at today's text and its heroes, Joseph of Arimathea, and the watching women, we will see that this is exactly what they do. They act out of faith, not out of fear, and in so doing forever leave their mark on history's central moment. Their courage is the child of their faith as ours must also be.

I. The Burial of Victims of Execution

In what many believe to be the earliest recorded confession of faith to come down to us in I Corinthians 15:3-6, The Apostle Paul writes that the gospel, the good news about Jesus Christ, can be summed up in four facts:

“That Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures,

that he was buried,

that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,

and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. ”

We generally emphasize the first and the third of these facts; that Christ died and rose again. Today I want to focus on the second; that he was buried. To appreciate these four words we must begin by reminding ourselves that Jesus has just been crucified, and the *titulus* that was carried before him and then fastened to his cross read “King of the Jews”. That meant that from the Roman point of view he had died for high treason against Caesar and the Roman Empire. Under Roman law the execution of a condemned man, especially one convicted of treason, did not mark the final moment of his humiliation. Roman law dictated the loss of all honors in death, and even the right to burial had to be determined by magisterial decree. It was not at all uncommon for the body to be left upon the cross to rot, or to be eaten by predatory birds or animals. The release of a corpse for burial depended entirely upon the generosity of the magistrate in charge. In most cases, if family members asked for the body, the request was granted. The one exception to the rule was those who had died for high treason, the crime for which Jesus had died. When the request was granted it required a special dispensation of the imperial magistrate. In the case of Jesus this was Pontius Pilate.

The Jews, on the other hand, considered burial a sacred duty and an act of piety. Josephus says explicitly, “We consider it a duty to bury even our enemies: (*War* III, viii. 5). The Jews did not crucify, but they did sometimes hang the bodies of victims of execution for public display. Even in these cases their law required that they be removed and buried before sundown (Deut. 21:23). Although they considered the executed victim cursed of God they would not let them hang after dark for fear of defiling the land. They had, therefore, designated an area outside the city of Jerusalem for the burial of executed criminals.

II. The Intervention of Joseph of Arimathea

Normally, the request for his body would have come from Jesus’ family or from his disciples. There is no evidence that any of his family was present except Mary, his mother, who was too overwhelmed to make the request, and his disciples had fled in fear of suffering the same fate as their leader. It is here that Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish court that had first condemned Jesus and brought him to Pilate to be crucified, enters the scene. His piety is indicated by the statement in verse 43 that he was “looking for the kingdom of God.” Matthew goes so far as to say that he was a “disciple of Jesus” (Matthew 27:57). According to John he was, like Nicodemus who assists him, a secret disciple (John 19: 38-39). Luke records that he had been present at the Sanhedrin’s trial of Jesus, but he had not consented to the verdict.

What moves him to make the request to Pilate could be debated. It might be simply his regard for the law, but, in that case, would he not have simply buried him in the designated area

instead of in his own tomb. No, there must be more to his decision. Even though we have no reason to believe that he was more perceptive than the other disciples of Jesus, and that he was expecting the resurrection, he was perceptive enough to know that a righteous man had died for trumped up charges, and if he had not been able to prevent his condemnation, he could at least provide the final dignity of a proper burial so Mark says: "he took courage and went and asked for the body of Jesus." The difference between Joseph and all those who thought like him but didn't act is found in the two words "took courage." William Lane states that "his request was daring because it amounted to a confession of his commitment to the condemned and crucified Jesus" (*Commentary on the Gospel of Mark*, p. 579). This was the very thing that Peter, out of fear, had tried to avoid when he denied knowing Jesus.

It was, no doubt, only because Pilate was convinced that Jesus was not guilty of the crime for which he was crucified that he granted Joseph's request. It is his way of getting back at the Sanhedrin and their mob for forcing him to condemn Jesus.

The lesson we learn from Joseph is courage. He was not the only one moved to compassion for Jesus, not the only one who loved Jesus, not the only one who wanted to accord him the final dignity of decent burial, but he was the one who "took courage" and acted. Did he not feel fear like the others? Undoubtedly! But in his moment of decision he overcame his fear, took courage and acted. All of us have had in the past, and will have in the future such moments of decision when we either like Joseph "take courage" and do the right thing or we allow fear to silence and immobilize us.

III. The Watching Women

Our discussion of this part of the passion would not be complete if we did not point out one other group of people. They are mentioned three times. There was a group of women who were disciples of Jesus who had accompanied him from Galilee. Three of them are named in 15:40, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, of whom we know nothing else, but her sons must have been well-known in the early church, and Salome the wife of Zebedee and mother of James and John. In the first passage we are simply told that when Jesus died they were watching from afar. Then at the end of the burial passage in 15:47 we are told that two of them, the two Marys, were watching as Joseph buried Jesus. Finally at the beginning of chapter 16 we are told that the same three were going to the tomb on Easter morning to finish anointing the body of Jesus when they discovered the empty tomb and became the first witnesses of the resurrection.

The glory of these women is that they never let Jesus out of their sight. Their love for him made them faithful to him in his darkest hour. Their status as simple Galilean peasant women may have prevented them from intervening as Joseph did, but they kept Jesus in sight even when he was dead. With the tenacity that only their kind of unshakable devotion can give they would not let him out of sight until the time came when they could perform their final act of love. Little did they know how their devotion would be rewarded. They would be the first to hear the words that have sounded through the ages and given hope and courage to millions, the words that perhaps better than any others express the wonder that is Easter: "Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him."