

Places Of The Passion: The Cemetery

Mark 15:33-47

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We've been on a journey these last six weeks. A journey to some of the places where Jesus went in the final hours before his crucifixion. And along the way we've met some of the people -

- at the Upper Room where the Passover meal was eaten
- in Gethsemane
- before the High Priest
- in Pontius Pilate's court
- on the road to Golgotha.

We've come across certain people who appeared for the moment, and then, just as quickly, are gone again.

There is the woman in Bethany who anointed Jesus hours before he ate the Passover meal.

There is the fellow who lent a room to Jesus and his disciples for that meal.

There is the certain young man, in the shadows of Gethsemane's trees, naked, running for his life.

There is Simon, the pilgrim turned cross carrier.

Today we're at our last stop on the Lenten journey.

There's one more person for us to meet.

One more figure that emerges from the shadows to play a part in God's plan of salvation for the world.

His name is Joseph of Aramathea.

We see him only for a fleeting moment.

And yet, what a powerful moment it is!

Joseph.....

A member of the ruling aristocracy, so we're told.

A rich, powerful man.

"Respected" says Mark.

One who made wise decisions. Never too outlandish in his actions. Always ruling for the benefit of the people and the nation. Trusted.

Not sure about something? Go see Joseph. He'll help.

That used to be the talk.

Not so sure anymore.

Did you hear what he just did?

Ah yes, Joseph stepped **way** out of bounds this time.

Really, it was a crazy idea.

The council had worked through the night to achieve their long-sought and ruthless objective.

They'd wanted Jesus dead.

Now he was.

Outside the city - which was good, since they'd not have to worry about his dangling body defiling the Passover celebration. It could dangle out there, on that little hill near the garbage dump. If someone wanted it, they could have it.

Turns out someone **did** want it.

And that someone was Joseph.

He'd seen the rage in the High Priest's eyes.

He'd witnessed the venom spray from the lips of the condemning crowd.

He'd been there.

Perhaps at the time, when sentence was being past, he was still trying to figure it out in his own head - mind whirling.

Perhaps he realized that he had no hope and would simply be shouted down, so stayed quiet.

Perhaps....

Well, we don't know, really.

But **this we do know**.

Joseph **now** does what only a family member would do - claim the body of a convict. Spare it the indignity of burial in a mass grave.

He identifies as close as family with Jesus.

Everyone else had run away - except the women. Who watched. Problem was that there were strict rules about women and bodies and the like. This was man's work.
So Joseph steps up.

He doesn't care anymore what the rest of the Council will say.
He doesn't care what will be reported in the morning paper.
He doesn't care what the townsfolk will say at the coffee shop.

But he **DOES** care for the dignity of Jesus.
He **DOES** care that it will be properly treated.
So he steps up.

Joseph has changed.

A power has begun to work in Joseph - the same power that ripped in two the curtain in the temple has been ripping away the cover of propriety and safety and caution in Joseph's heart.

The one who had always done the respectable thing - the pillar of the Council - now becomes a rebel. He walks away from the group. He leaves the power and prestige behind. He abandons his position and identifies with Jesus.

And, you know, as I watch Joseph walk away from all that, it's as if I've seen him before. Can't tell if it is exactly the same person I'm thinking of. But if not, well then, it's someone very much like that other fellow.

I'm thinking of a fellow you meet in Mark 10:25.

Also an unnamed chap. Also rich. According to Luke 18, a ruler.

He had been interested in Jesus.

He desired to experience eternal life.

But his wealth was getting in the way.

Jesus perceived that immediately.

And had to hit him with hard truth.

In Mark 10 that rich ruler walks away grieving, without giving a commitment to Jesus. He's struggling. He's got to think about things and try to sort them out.

Here we are now - 5 chapters later we're introduced to a rich ruler.
Same one?

Not really sure.

But there is a strong resemblance!

It could be that the ruler of Mark 10 did some hard thinking;

that God didn't let go of his soul;

that he wrestled and watched and listened to Jesus;

and that now he came down with a firm position.

This time on Jesus' side.

If it is **not** the same person, a rich ruler, it is **certainly** someone in that same life situation. Faced with the same challenge, presented with the same choice.

Now Joseph makes the choice - he identifies clearly and publically with Jesus. "Yes, I'm family" he says to the Roman guard at Pilate's door as he states his case.

It would be unpleasant work - the horribly abused body. All that blood.

Having to work the nails out without damaging things any further.

Lowering it carefully down.

Not a chance that he'd be able to celebrate Passover.

Him and Simon of Cyrene - both would now be declared unclean.

..... at least, unclean to the religious establishment.

Their status in the eyes of God in Heaven

whose son had just shed his blood to cleanse people from sin

that would be a different matter entirely~

Joseph pauses while the guard relays the message.

This is the second big risk he takes.

Pontius Pilate has been pushed to the edge once already by the rulers,

the **same** group to which Joseph belongs
those rulers who had whipped the mob to a dangerous frenzy.

Would he even want to see, let alone have conversation with someone else from that group?

Add to that the nature of Joseph's request.

Normally crucified convicts were left dangling for quite some time - a lesson for all who would pass by NOT to mess with Rome.

This would be highly irregular.

Did Joseph **really** want to push Pilate again?

Was it worth the risk?

Well, things seem to be moving.

Seems like something's going on.

Because, well,

Not only is Joseph finding this new direction and strength in his life
but, after a quick check with his officers, Pilate says "Yes"!

And Joseph got to work.

- brought a linen cloth
- took the body down
- wrapped it and laid it in a cave-tomb
- sealed it in to protect it from robbers.

And as you watch him work, it dawns on you that there is power at work, bubbling beneath the surface of this scene.

It dawns on you that death doesn't seem to be having as firm a grip on the situation as may have first appeared.

(though, for more details on that you'll need to come for next weekend's two-part service, which begins on Friday and continues on Sunday).

It dawns on you that this power is at work in changing people.

It's changing Joseph.

Death tries to destroy, but this power at work beneath the surface is beginning to give Joseph a new life.

Who else will it affect, you wonder?

And what other strange events will this power effect?

Yes, there are big changes in the air that death cannot control!

And they'll go way beyond this one solitary man.

The influence of Jesus is far from over.

And as you watch Joseph roll the stone over the grave's opening, somehow you get an inner sense that you've not heard the last of him.

But.... well.... that's getting ahead of myself.

See you next Friday!

In the meantime, you and I, we stand back.

And we marvel at Joseph.

Another in the parade of little people that we have met these past weeks. And they've been taken up and gathered into God's work. Though they REALLY were not aware of it at the time, their actions became woven into a tapestry that was far bigger than themselves.

As they surrendered themselves into the service of Jesus, their actions were caught into a scheme with a design far grander than anything they could conceive, with a divine choreographer guiding it all.

Sometime later some of them caught on.

And some of them, perhaps not.

But it was so - **AND REMAINS SO** -

that in the hands of God **no** life committed to the service of Jesus
is ever a life wasted,
or ever futile,
or ever insignificant.

That was true for the woman in Bethany who anointed Jesus.
It was true for the fellow who lent a room to Jesus.
It was true for the young man, in the shadows of Gethsemane's trees.
It was true for Simon of Cyrene.

Yes, it was true for Joseph of Aramathea.

And friends - it is true for you and me, also.
We surrender our lives to the control and service of Jesus.
And step out to take risks that perhaps at the time we don't fully understand.
With consequences we could never predict.
But something inside compels us to act for Jesus.

Know this - it will be taken up and woven into that same grand tapestry of salvation into which Joseph's actions were woven.

You may not know at the time.
You may not know for a long time.
You may **never** come to know exactly what the part is that your actions play in God's overall plan.

But whether they are big, or small -
Whether others see, or not -
Whatever the consequences at the time -
God takes what we do in Christ's name,
orchestrates it all,
and surrounds it with his meaning.
He directs and effects it with His eternal power of Life,
the same power that was beginning to bubble
even as Joseph buried Jesus's body.

Believe it.
And live in the confidence of that belief.