**The Drama Behind the Cross Series**

“Joseph of Arimathea – A Secret Disciple Exposed ”

John 19.38-42

**Introduction**

In preparation for Passion Week we have been looking at the supporting cast behind the drama of the cross. In any great drama there are people who might not be center stage but are essential for the story to be told.

Last week we consider the criminal of the cross who experienced a change of heart as he saw Jesus crucified next to him, confessed his sin, and said*, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.* *Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”**It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two.* *Jesus called out with a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” When he had said this, he breathed his last.* (Lk.23.42-46)

Jesus breathed His last breath around three o’clock on Friday afternoon and since the Sabbath was to begin in just three hours someone had to do something quickly if Jesus was going to have a proper burial.

Hear now the Word of God from the Gospel of John chapter nineteen:

*After these things Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but a secret one for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate granted permission. So he came and took away His body.**Nicodemus, who had first come to Him by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds weight. So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen wrappings with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. Now in the place where He was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid. Therefore because of the Jewish day of preparation, since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.* (Jn.19.38-42)

This morning I want to focus our attention on “Joseph of Arimathea – A Secret

Disciple Exposed ” by looking at the man, the ministry he performed, and the main reason for his secrecy. Let’s first consider the man.

**The Man – Joseph of Arimathea**

The city of Arimathea was located several miles northwest of Jerusalem. The town doesn’t have any spectacular history, which has led many to conclude that Joseph was known as “Joseph of Arimathea” to distinguish him from the other Josephs in the Bible not because there was any special about town itself.

Joseph is mention by name in all four Gospel accounts – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Matthew tells us that Joseph of Arimathea was a rich man but we don’t have any idea about he acquired his wealth. Mark tells us that Joseph was a prominent member of the council of the Sanhedrin, which gives us a clue to how he was able to get immediate access to Pilate after Jesus’ death. Remember that the council of the Sanhedrin was like our Supreme Court of Israel. So, Joseph was a very important man in both political and religious circles. Also, remember that the council of the Sanhedrin was the one who plotted to kill Jesus. Luke tells us that Joseph was a good and righteous man who even though was a member of the council had not consented to the Sanhedrin’s plans or actions to put Jesus to death on a criminal’s cross. And all the Gospel writers (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) tell us the Joseph was a disciple of Jesus who was waiting for the kingdom of God. What this means is that Joseph believed that Jesus was the Messiah who would restore the kingdom of Israel by ushering in the Kingdom of God. And now his Messiah, his hope for the future, is dead. Crucified on a criminal’s cross.

I’m sure that Joseph was proud of his financial, political, and religious accomplishments but on that day he must have been overwhelmed in the shadow of shame. Yes, Joseph was a prominent member of the council of the Sanhedrin but he was also *a disciple of Jesus, but a secret one for fear of the Jews.* And Joseph had allowed his fear of the Jews to hinder his faith in Christ. He had been front and center through all of the events of Jesus’ arrest, trial, and sentencing to death.

As the council plotted together to kill Jesus, Joseph did not consent but neither did he speak up for his Messiah. As they paid off one of Jesus’ disciples to betray the Lord, Joseph did not consent but neither did he speak up for his Messiah. As the Sanhedrin sent armed troops to arrest Jesus in the garden, Joseph did not consent but neither did he speak up for his Messiah. As they paraded false witnesses trumping up charges against Jesus, Joseph did not consent but neither did he speak up for his Messiah. As the council presented false charges to Pilate accusing Jesus of being an insurrectionist against Rome, Joseph did not consent but neither did he speak up for his Messiah. When the Sanhedrin stirred up the crowd to demand that Pilate release the insurrectionist and murderer Barabbas and crucify Jesus in his place, Joseph did not consent but neither did he speak up for his Messiah. I always have said, “No response is a response.” And Joseph of Arimathea never responded to any of these actions and by remaining silent he denied the Lord. The only difference between Peter and Joseph is that Peter denied the Lord with words and Joseph denied the Lord with silence.

But now Joseph stood at the foot of the cross having watched his Messiah breathe His last breath and die a victim of a torturous death. The sky was covered in darkness, the crowd that had surrounding the cross had disbursed, the council went back to the temple to get ready for the Sabbath and Passover, and the disciples had fled. But something happened inside of Joseph at that moment at the foot of the cross. He was no longer going to hide his faith. He gathered up courage and went to Pilate to ask for the body of Jesus.

*After these things Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, . . . asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate granted permission.*

Pilate granting permission for a crucified body to be taken down for a proper burial was way outside of normal operations. The sole purpose of crucifixion was to humiliate, torture, and kill criminals in clear view of the public. The Romans normally left the dead bodies on the cross for the vultures to devour or sometimes they would transport the dead bodies to a smoldering trash heap outside of the city. But for some reason Pilate granted Joseph’s request to take away the body of Jesus. Maybe Pilate was still sympathetic towards Jesus’ innocence. Maybe because it was the Jewish day of preparation for Passover and he didn’t want any further problems with the Jewish council. (19.31) Maybe he felt threatened because of Joseph’s prominent position on the council. We don’t know but after ascertaining from the centurion that Jesus was dead Pilate ordered that Jesus’ body be given to Joseph. *So he came and took away His body.*

**The Ministry He Performed**

This was a difficult task. Joseph needed help. Maybe Pilate ordered some soldiers to help lower Jesus’ body from the cross. Regardless, the Bible describes Joseph treating Jesus’ body with dignity as he took him off the cross. Lowering Jesus down with a linen cloth. (Mk.15.46) Nicodemus, another silent disciple, also helped Joseph with the body. You remember Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a Jewish religious leader who came to Jesus at the beginning of Jesus’ earthly ministry. Nicodemus came to Jesus in the dark of night out of fear of his Pharisee peers. During that encounter Jesus shared with Nicodemus that a person must be born again to enter into the kingdom of God. (John 3) Well, that conversation must have had a life changing impact on Nicodemus because here we see him *bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds weight* to give Jesus the royal burial for the King of kings.

*So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen wrappings with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. Now in the place where He was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid. Therefore because of the Jewish day of preparation, since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.*

This was Joseph’s own tomb that he had just recently paid to hew out in the rock for his own burial. (Mt.27.60) This type of tomb was for the rich and the noble. By placing Jesus’ body in this tomb, Joseph without knowing it fulfills Messianic prophecy that said, “*His grave was assigned with wicked men, Yet He was with a rich man in His death.”* (Is.53.9a) Joseph of Arimathea overcame fear, showed courage, and demonstrated love for his Lord. He surrendered his reputation by asking Pilate for Jesus’ body. He surrendered personal riches by placing Jesus in his own tomb. He surrendered his role in the Passover feast by being in contact with a dead body. Joseph willingly surrendered all of those things to make sure that Jesus received a burial fit for the King.

After preparing the body for burial Joseph rolled a large stone against the entrance of the tomb. As he walked away from the tomb that Friday evening he didn’t realize that he had just set the stage for the greatest event in world history. The resurrection of Christ! Joseph didn’t realize that on Sunday morning Mary Magdalene and the other Mary would come to that tomb, discover that the stone had been rolled away, and an angel sitting on it. On Friday evening Joseph didn’t know that the angel would said to the women*, “Do not be afraid; for I know that you are looking for Jesus who has been crucified. He is not here, for He has risen, just as He said. Come, see the place where He was lying.* *Go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead; and behold, He is going ahead of you into Galilee, there you will see Him; behold, I have told you.”* (Mt.28.1-10)

Joseph didn’t know that his tomb was the launch pad for the greatest revolution known to humanity – the advancement of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Good News that Christ suffered and rose again from the dead on the third day that repentance and forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed to all nations. (Lk.24.46-47) Joseph didn’t know that generations of believers to follow would look at his tomb not as a place of divine defeat but rather a place of resurrection and eternal hope. Joseph didn’t know that we would gather in this church and join believers around the world saying, “He is risen! He is risen indeed!” Isn’t it amazing that everyone who has ever believed in Jesus has been encouraged by Joseph’s empty tomb? Joseph step of faith to overcome his fear and placed Jesus’ body in his own tomb became the scene of the most extraordinary event that has ever happened.

Just think of the questions that must have been racing through Joseph’s mind just hour before as he stood at the foot of the cross. Question like: “If Jesus was the Messiah why didn’t God protect Him from this terrible tragedy?” “How could the One who performed all of those miracles not save Himself from death?” “Maybe I have followed Jesus in vain.” But instead of allowing the questions of doubt and confusion to conquer his life Joseph took a bold and courageous stand and overcame his fear.

It is important to recognize that Joseph wasn’t bold and courageous because he had figured out what God was doing. He took a stand of faith in the darkest time of his life. He took a stand of faith when he didn’t had a clue what God was doing. He took a stand of faith when he had no idea of how God was going to use him. And isn’t that real faith. Faith is believing in God when you lose your job. Faith is believing in God when you receive that a bad diagnosis? Faith is believing in God when your marriage ends in a disastrous betrayal. Real faith is when we take a stand when we don’t have a clue what God is doing? Joseph of Arimathea came to the place in his faith that he was no longer going to be a secret disciple. When he could have stayed under the radar, Joseph inserted himself into the middle of a religious and political drama, the very drama that sent the rest of the disciples into hiding. In one step of faith, Joseph surrendered his reputation, his riches, and his role on the Sanhedrin. He surrendered his life in order to honor his Lord and Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

**The Main Reason for Secrecy**

The main reason for his secrecy was *fear for the Jews.* Joseph had believed in his heart that Jesus was Lord but he had not confessed with his mouth. But the Bible says, *that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation.* (Rom.10.9-10) Maybe you are here today and you have been a secret disciple. But the Holy Spirit is calling you to step out today and not just believe in your heart but confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord!

Faith doesn’t mean that you just believe. Faith means that you are willing to put feet to your faith. Faith means that you are willing to go when the Lord says to go and do what the Lord is telling you to do. Joseph had allowed his fear of the Jews to hinder his complete surrender of faith in Christ but no longer. On that Friday afternoon while standing at the foot of the cross Joseph took his first step of real faith and did what he knew he needed to do as a follower of Christ.

What is hindering your faith today? What fear do you have that is stopping you from putting feet to your faith? Joseph had a faith deficiency until that day when he stood at the foot of the cross and surrendered his fear and stepped out in faith. And that’s what I want to challenge all of us to do today. In your bulletin is a card and this morning I asking for you to write down the thing that has hindered you from stepping our in faith in Christ. For others I want to challenge you to write down what you are surrendering to the Lord today. And others I want you to write down something that the Lord has told you to do but you haven’t done it because of fear. And after you have written it down – I want you would come forward and place your card at the foot of the cross. Asking the Lord to overcome your fears and hindrances so that you would follow Him.

**Benediction**

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.* (I Peter 1.3)