

The Darkest Day ***Mark 15:40-47***

***No one would dare to criticize
A mother with such tear drained eyes
(Her children all in fresh turned graves)
That she would doubt the One who saves.***

***Without the warmth of faithful friends,
Her husband's bleeding, pot-scraped skin's
A harbinger that widowhood
Shall strip away what's left of good.***

***She spits the words out viciously,
"Why hang on to integrity
When no one sees and no one cares,
When God is gone and life's not fair?"***

***But God gives only to His best
The greatest trials: severest tests
To plum the depths of servants' love
And plant a seed that blooms above.***

The sky was no longer a shroud. The strange midday stars hid above the bottomless blue bowl overhead. And the sun was out again.

But the Light of the World had gone out. The Healer and Teacher from Galilee was dead. Caked and crusted with blood, His mangled body hung limp and lifeless against the nails.

Far to the west, the sun was drifting down toward the sullen line of steel that marked the Mediterranean. In the marketplace, shoppers studied the lengthening shadows and hurried to make last minute purchases. And on the temple courtyards, Passover pilgrims squinted up the sun and hurried down the broad stone steps to the street.

When the last sliver of sun sizzled into the sea, Preparation Day would be finished. And the Sabbath would officially begin.

But for the Master's men, it was the midnight of despair. Racked with sobs, John and the Master's mother walked back down the hill toward the western gate to the city. And across town in the upper room, the other ten disciples huddled together.

Stung by the savagery of the Savior's crucifixion and stunned with sorrow over the death of their Lord, they sat in a heavy silence.

Wandering the shadow lands between terror and torment, they were too dazed to sift through the shattered shards of their highest hopes and decide what to do. But others knew exactly what to do.

The Servants

The Gospel accounts are careful to name the twelve men Jesus called and commissioned to serve Him as disciples. And our Lord devoted long years to training them. But of those men, only one dared to stand at the foot of the cross.

Only John watched the Master die. The rest ran and hid. But on a distant hill, other servants stood strong.

There were also some women looking on from a distance, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the Less and Joses, and Salome. Verse 40

It is worthy to note that all of those watchers were women. Mary of Magdala was there. And so was Salome, the mother of James and John. With them was another Mary, the mother of James the less.

They kept their distance, not out of fear, but out of respect and reverence for the Redeemer. And for good reason .

Crucifixion was designed to maximize physical torture. But to heightened their emotional torment. condemned men were nailed to crosses naked. And the women didn't want to add to their Savior's shame and sorrow.

Still, they were determined to be with their Lord in His last hours. So they found a far off hill. And there, in the midnight of their misery, they stood vigil, staring through veils of tears at Christ's cross until the very last moment.

Those women stand for all time as models of selfless service for the Savior. And they were not alone. Many other women also served who are not named.

When He was in Galilee, they used to follow Him and minister to Him; and there were many other women who came up with Him to Jerusalem. Verse 41

There is an order here that must be observed. The women Mark mentioned didn't start out serving Jesus.

First, they followed the Master. And their trust in Christ began, as it always must, when His touch transformed them.

That is the way it must be. If we are to serve Jesus Christ, we must first come to Him in confession and commitment. Opening ourselves to Him as our Savior and our God, we must choose to trust and obey Him.

We can't pretend to serve Christ if we aren't first His faithful followers. We must start by trusting Him, living by His counsel and obeying His commandments.

If we don't, any service we might offer Him is both unworthy and unfruitful. After all, we must serve our Savior in His wisdom not our own, by His power not ours.

And that demands that we trust Him, obey Him and love Him with all our heart. Some of those women opened their purses to donated glittering golden coins to Christ. But most of them served in any way they could.

It didn't matter how menial the task might be. Some days their service might be walking to the market to shop for food. Other days, they rubbed clothes clean on river rocks. And still other days, they cooked food for the Master and His men.

All Christlike service demands true humility. And the women who followed Jesus are models of humble service. Again and again, the Master taught that those disciples who would be first and foremost in His Kingdom must be willing to serve all the others.

However, the disciples only half listened to that lesson. Walking up the twisted mountain road to Jerusalem, James and John begged to be given the best seats and highest offices in the coming kingdom.

Even in the upper room, the disciples argued about who would hold the most powerful positions in the Christ's kingdom.

The disciples might not have listened, but the women did. They performed menial tasks without so much as a thought of reward. They simply served their Savior, laboring for Him and Him alone.

And that is just how we should serve. Whether we are visiting a lonely shut-in, scrubbing a floor or telling a neighbor about the God's love, we are to consider our efforts as being performed personally for Jesus Christ.

That is why the Savior said He will reward those who feed the hungry, clothe the poor and visit the lonely. He considers any service we perform for others as being personally offered to Him.

There isn't so much as a hint in any of the Gospel accounts that the women who served Jesus demanded any gratitude or expected any reward. They served selflessly. And if we would serve Christ, we must be as selfless as they were.

Mark's last look at these godly women is a portrait of faithfulness in the center of a sea of sorrow. As Joseph and Nicodemus strained to roll a stone to seal the sepluchure, two of the Mary's stood nearby, still watching.

Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses were looking on to see where He was laid. Verse 47

Those women were at the black end of their highest hopes. Before that last bloody Friday, they were serving the King.

But now their Lord was a cold corpse, wrapped in linen in a garden grave. So there didn't seem to be any reason to continue.

No reward awaited them. As far as they knew, they wouldn't even be warmed by the Savior's smile. Nevertheless, they were determined to serve on, just as they had in Galilee.

If we are to serve Jesus Christ, we cannot allow hopelessness or failure to blunt the edge of our faithfulness. Our service must endure even when all seems lost, when no one notices and neither recognition nor reward is possible.

If we do not, we are no more than sunshine servants. And our Lord's love deserves much better than that.

The Senator

Today we would call him a closet Christian. Joseph of Arimathea was a secret believer.

After a lifetime of studying and serving, of discipline and determination, he had reached the pinnacle. He was finally a leader of his nation.

As a member of the Sanhedrin, Joseph was prominent and powerful, wealthy and influential. Like Nicodemus, he had heard about the miracle working Carpenter from Nazareth. And what he heard stirred his heart.

But also like Nicodemus, he had a lot to lose. So while He did believe Jesus was both the Messiah and the Son of God, out of fear of his fellow council members, he kept his faith hidden away.

Now the Master was dead. And the setting sun presented a problem. Soon, the Sabbath would begin.

When evening had already come, because it was the preparation day, that is, the day before the Sabbath, Verse 42

And the Law of Moses prohibited leaving the body of an executed man hanging on a tree, especially on a Sabbath day.

If a man has committed a sin worthy of death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his corpse shall not hang all night on the tree, but you shall surely bury him on the same day... Deuteronomy 21:22-23

Joseph of Arimathea still trembled with fear inside. Nevertheless, he knew what he had to do.

So for the first time in his life, he found some courage.

Joseph of Arimathea came, a prominent member of the Council, who himself was waiting for the kingdom of God; and he gathered up courage and went in before Pilate, and asked for the body of Jesus. Verse 43

It was a very dangerous thing to do. The Sanhedrin was still full of murderous rage. They hated Jesus and everyone who dared to follow Him. So asking the Roman ruler for the Master's body could easily cost Joseph his power, his prestige and his fortune.

We can't help but marvel at this man's late-blooming courage. But we must go beyond admiration. We must also search for the source of Joseph's boldness.

After all, we harbor secret fears, too. And we desperately need courage such as his. It isn't possible to stand for our Savior in this dark age if we don't have the courage to be identified with Him.

True, the presence of God's Spirit breathes boldness into trembling saints. But Joseph was utterly without that powerful Presence. He was living in the dark days between the cross and empty tomb. Jesus was dead and His Spirit was yet to come.

So just what was it that gave Joseph the courage to stand for Christ when all his powerful friends were hungering for the blood of the Nazarene's disciples?

We find the answer in the fact that Mark coupled his account of Joseph's courage with a description of him as a man who was waiting for the kingdom of God.

That is what breathed boldness into this man. His focus wasn't on the here and now but the world to come. And that eternal focus is also what gives Christians courage today.

Most of us would have to admit that, while we do have God's Spirit within us, we are often too frightened to stand for Christ. Like Joseph, we are secret saints who cringe at the very thought of openly identifying ourselves with the Lord who loves us.

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul explained precisely what we must do if we are to have courage as Christians.

Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. Colossians 3:1-2

That is the key to the courage Joseph of Arimathea found. It is setting our affections and aspirations upon Heaven. If we are consumed with concerns about results here on earth, we will never have the boldness stand for Christ as we should.

However, when all we care about is the result of our actions when we stand before our Lord's throne, we can stand for our Savior as never before.

We discover the sweet savor of being identified with Christ. We even find joy in suffering because we belong to Jesus.

In his darkest hour, Joseph of Arimathea mastered the lesson every believer must learn.

Only a heavenly focus can give us an earthly boldness.

The Sepulcher

Neither the women who watched from afar nor the council member who dared to ask for our Lord's body knew God had a purpose in those dreadful hours. But He did.

Joseph of Arimathea was moved to seek the Savior's body out of love and compassion. But God had a higher purpose in the council member's request.

When Joseph made that request, Pilate was surprised. Death by crucifixion usually came only after days of excruciating agony.

Pilate wondered if He was dead by this time, and summoning the centurion, he questioned him as to whether He was already dead. And ascertaining this from the centurion, he granted the body to Joseph. Verses 44-45

God knew what Joseph didn't. On the first day of the week, Jesus would rise up from His tomb, alive never again to die. And when that happened, our Lord's enemies would start spreading lies to deceive those who would trust Christ.

But they couldn't say the Savior never really died. The Roman centurion who stood at the foot of Christ's cross watched Him die. And he personally confirmed that the Master was indeed dead.

With the help of Nicodemus, Joseph lowered Christ's blood battered body from the cross. Then he wrapped the cold corpse in new linen and laid it in his own garden grave.

Joseph bought a linen cloth, took Him down, wrapped Him in the linen cloth and laid Him in a tomb which had been hewn out in the rock; and he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. Verse 46

Joseph's gift of an expensive grave fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy, that God's sinless Servant would be buried in a rich man's grave.

...they made His grave with the wicked—but with the rich at His death, because He had done no violence, nor was any deceit in His mouth. Isaiah 53:9 (NKJV)

If Joseph had given into his fears, Jesus' body would have been thrown into the burning dump in the Valley of Hinnom southwest of the city wall. But that was not the only way God used Joseph of Arimathea.

The grave was hewn out of solid rock and a stone sealed the entrance. So the Master's enemies could never say His disciples snuck in a back way and stole His body. There was no back way.

Also, the grave had never been used. And that too was important. After Elisha died, a man was raised back to life merely by touching the prophet's bones.

But those who hated our Lord could never say that was what raised our Redeemer. His body was alone in Joseph's grave.

Of course, Joseph didn't know how God would use His faithfulness in this hour of darkest despair. The godly women who watched the two men bury their Master didn't know how God would use their faithfulness, either. But He did.

Early Sunday morning, when dewdrops diamonded the grass outside the garden grave, the women who watched their Lord's burial would confirm that He was indeed alive.

Those godly servants didn't know why their faithfulness in their darkest hour was so important. And we cannot know what eternal purposes God has in our own faithfulness.

Courage and commitment might have seemed pointless to Joseph and the women who served our Savior that dark day. And faithfulness might seem just as empty and insignificant in our own hours of despair and defeat.

But we don't have to know God's purposes. We can rest in the knowledge that He who rewards the faithfulness of His children does.