

 **Main Street**
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Matthew 27:55-65, 28:1
“Fussing Over A Corpse”

April 13, 2014
(Palm/Passion Sunday)

Pastor Phil Thrailkill
Main Street UMC
211 North Main St., Greenwood, SC 29646
Church Office: 864-229-7551
Church Website: www.msumc1.org

“Following Christ From City Center!”

MATTHEW 27:55-65, 28:1

"FUSSING OVER A CORPSE"

FRIDAY, APRIL 7, 30A.D, AFTER 3pm (Vermes' date)

//Mk. 15:42-16:2, Lk. 23:50-56, Jn. 19:38-42, Acts 13:26-31

1) vv.55-56 THE WATCH OF THE THREE FAITHFUL WOMEN AT THE CROSS.

55 There were also many women there, **looking on** from afar, **Same Verb (theoresai) As 28:1, Psalm 38:11**
 who had *followed* Jesus from Galilee, ministering to (serving) him; **Disciples: Count Cost, Give, Witnesses, Lk. 8:1-3**
 56 1 among whom were **Mary Magdalene**, **Not A Prostitute, Not Lk. 7:36-50, Not Viewed As A Threat**
 2 **and Mary** the mother of James and Joseph, **//Mt. 13:55, For Orthodox Mary Is Isoapostolos (Equal To Apostles)**
 3 and the mother of the sons of Zebedee. **20:20 (James/John), Male Disciples Absent, Replace Inner Circle: Three**

Wider Circle: Women (Not 2nd Class), Rich, Religious Disciple

2) vv.57-60 JOSEPH AND PILATE: 1) REQUEST, 2) REPLY, 3) RESULT.

SABBATH, 6pm

Tobit 1:17-18, 2:4, 12:12-13 **ACT OF RESPECT**

a) vv.57-58a Request: Joseph Asks For Jesus' Body (No Speech Reported).

Lk. 23:50

57 When it was evening, there came a 'rich' man from Arimathea, named Joseph, **Providence, 19:6-26, Is. 53:9-12**
 who also was a disciple of Jesus. **14:12, Mk. "respected member of the council, looking for kingdom."**
 58 He went to **Pilate** **Model: Courage, Risk, Reputation, Jn. 19:38**
 and asked for the body of Jesus. **Dt. 21:22-23, Realm Of Dead, Rock Already Breached By His Death**
Corpses Were Ritually Unclean, Josephus J.W. IV.317

b) v.58b Reply: Pilate Grants The Request (Certifies The Death).

Then **Pilate** ordered it to be given to him. **Joseph Gets A Favor, So Does Sanhedrin**

c) vv.59-60 Result: Rich Joseph Buries Jesus In His New Tomb, 5 Actions (5 And's).

59 1 And Joseph took the body, **Adjectives: Joseph rich, Linen clean, Tomb new, Stone great**
 2 and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud, **New Purchase (Ritual Purity), No Anointing Noted**
 60 3 and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock; **Easily Found, Not Common Grave**
 4 and he rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb, **Jesus Is Dead, Protection From Animals**
 5 and departed. **Corpses Usually Washed, Anointed, Wrapped, Carried, Put On Shelf, Secondary Burial**
Joseph's, Great Stone, Witnesses, //1 Cor. 15:4, Rom. 6:4

3) v.61 WATCH OF THE TWO FAITHFUL WOMEN AT THE SEPULCHRE.

Mary Magdalene and **the other Mary** were there, **Jesus' Mother Mary? Grief Rituals**
 sitting opposite the sepulchre. **Mk. "were observing where he was laid."**

Big 1st Century Debate With Jews, Justin *Dialog* 108, Celsus vs. Origen

SABBATH, ?am

2') vv.62-66 THE CHIEF PRIESTS AND PILATE:1) REQUEST, 2) REPLY, 3) RESULT.

Nothing Worse Than An Alive Martyr! **ACT OF DISRESPECT**

a) v.62 Request: Sanhedrin Asks For A Guard (Speech Reported).

Apologetic/Polemical

62 **Next day**, that is, after the day of Preparation, **Mt.'s Jerusalem Source?**
 the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before **Pilate** ⁶³and said, **21:45, Pharisees Are Teachers, 28:15**
Before Unclean Gentile On Sabbath?
 a "Sir (Lord, *kyrie*), we remember how that **imposter** (deceiver, *planos*) said, while he was still alive,
 b 'After three days I will *rise again*.' **Prediction = 16:21, 17:23, 20:19, cf. 12:40, 28:6**
 64 c Therefore order the sepulchre to be made secure until the third day,
 c' lest his disciples go and steal him away, **28:11-15, Liars, Bunch Of Bums!**
 b' and tell the people, 'He has *risen from the dead*,' **Anticipates Preaching, Resurrection Conspiracy**
 a' and the last **fraud** (deception, *plane*) will be worse than the first." **Anticipates Great Impact, Bury The Movement!**
Powers Of Rome/Israel Try Vainly To Avoid Censure

b) v.65 Reply: Pilate Grants The Request, More Likely A Roman Guard?

65 **Pilate** said to them, **Body Theft = Oldest Alternative Theory, Jn. 20:19 (in hiding/fear)**
 "You have a guard of soldiers; go, make it as secure as you can." **Ps. 2:1, Lit. "as you know how"**
Friends/Foes Knew Where He Was Buried, Tomb Empty

c) v.66 Result: Stone Sealed And Guard Set At The Tomb.

Stone/Seal/Guards

66 So they went and made the sepulchre secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard. **Josh. 10:18, Dan. 6:17**
Tomb Now In Under Guard! Both Sides Agreed It Was Empty On Sunday

SUNDAY, early

1') 28:1 WATCH OF THE TWO FAITHFUL WOMEN ON SUNDAY MORNING.

28:1 Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, **On Customs: Semahot 8:1**
Mary Magdalene and **the other Mary** went to **see** the sepulchre. **See Death, Burial, Empty Tomb, Risen Lord**

AN ARCHAEOLOGIST LOOKS AT JESUS' TOMB

“Revisiting Golgotha and the Garden Tomb - Part 3” by Jeffrey R. Chadwick

<http://www.meridianmagazine.com/articles/030916golgotha3print.html>

“In reviewing recent archaeological literature, I am not alone in suggesting that Jesus was placed in a single-chamber, triple-bench tomb. In a very useful article in *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Israeli archaeologist Amos Kloner, an expert on ancient tombs in Israel, comes to essentially the same conclusion. [30] Kloner also makes a somewhat surprising suggestion: that Jesus’ tomb was not sealed with a disk-like “rolling stone” of the type generally imagined. Pointing out that “98 percent of the Jewish tombs from this period . . . were closed with square blocking stones,” Kloner suggests that the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ burial and Resurrection are probably referring to that type of stone—a square, plug-like stone about a meter wide—as the type of stone that was “rolled” to and from the door of Jesus’ tomb: “Matthew, Mark, and Luke all describe the stone being ‘rolled’ (in John it is ‘taken away’), and thus it is only natural to assume that the stone was round. But we must remember that ‘rolled’ is a translation of the Greek word *kulio*, which can also mean ‘dislodge,’ ‘move back’ or simply ‘move.’”[31] Kloner further points out that “the Hebrew word for these blocking stones, both round and square [is] *golal* or *golel* (plural *golalim*). The root means ‘to roll’ as well as ‘to move.’”[32] He also suggests three other interesting considerations:

1. That only four of the huge disk-type “rolling stones” have been discovered from the time of Jesus, versus hundreds of the square blocking types—this statistically favors the latter as the type of sealing stone at Jesus’ tomb.
2. That the huge disk-type of stone was employed only for very elaborate multichambered tombs (as opposed to single-chamber tombs of the type proposed above for Jesus’ burial).
3. That the New Testament description of an angel sitting on the stone moved away from the tomb door (see Matthew 28:2) does not work well with a huge disk-like stone—“A square blocking stone would make a much better perch.”[33] So how would Jesus’ tomb have looked? Based on a decade of research, and including Kloner’s blocking-stone suggestion, a drawing of the tomb with a cutaway view (see figure 20) shows a small, square entry that someone would have to stoop down to look into or enter through. The single chamber of the tomb, only about three meters square, would have featured three connected benches. Quite probably, the body of Jesus was laid on the back bench, directly opposite the entry, where on Sunday morning, John, “stooping down, and looking in, saw the linen clothes lying” (John 20:5). Shortly thereafter, Mary “stooped down, and looked into the sepulchre, and seeth two angels in white sitting [on that back bench], the one at the head, and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain” (John 20:11–12). The bench on the right-hand side of the entry would probably have been the place where the women mentioned in Mark “saw a young man [angel] sitting on the right side” (Mark 16:5). The square, plug-like blocking stone, a meter wide and very heavy, had been “taken away from the sepulchre” (John 20:1), and an angel “sat upon it” (Matthew 28:2—or “two angels” sat on it, according to the JST). It is even likely that if this tomb were cut into the eastern scarp of el-Edhemieh (the Saladin Street side), the entry faced east, allowing the first rays of Sunday dawn to illuminate the sepulchre enough for visitors to peer in and see the place where Jesus had lain. Outside the tomb (not pictured in figure 20) were olive trees—the garden of Joseph of Arimathea, where Mary Magdalene momentarily thought she was speaking with a gardener.

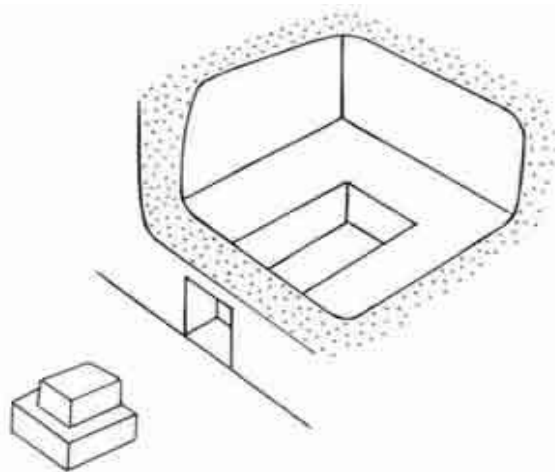


Figure 20. Proposed design of the tomb in which the body of Jesus was laid.

Note that the body would have rested on the bench opposite the door.

Note also the square, plug-like blocking stone to seal the entrance.

FUSSING OVER A CORPSE

“And Joseph took the body.”

“The work of love is hands-on, sometimes grisly.”

M A T T H E W 2 7 : 5 9

Novelist Anne Rice- *The Queen of the Occult*- has sold millions of thrillers about vampires and witches, several made into films starring Tom Cruise and Brad Pitt.

But in 2002 Anne turned to Christ and said, "from now on that I will only write for the Lord." Then four summers ago, because of the failings of the her Catholic church and its scandals, she backed off her earlier confession.¹ She may not yet have given up on Jesus, only his church- which in my mind marks her as a bit shallow about the true nature of her favorite topic- which is evil. She's not spent much time reading church history which is a great cure for naive faith. But in her first Christian novel, the 2005 release *Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt*, she portrays Jesus as a 7-year-old, and works carefully not to contradict Scripture. In the novel's Afterword, she calls him "the ultimate supernatural hero... the ultimate immortal of them all."²

To apply comic book images to Jesus- *the ultimate supernatural hero* and *the ultimate immortal*- is to get part of the story right. Superman disguised himself as Clark Kent, the mild-mannered reporter. Christian teaching is that God the Son assumed flesh in Jesus, and in some sense was disguised by it. "Veiled in flesh the godhead see..." is how Charles Wesley described it.³ When you met Jesus, you met a man, of that there was never any doubt. The God part took a while to discern in his words and actions, and not everyone agreed.⁴

¹ For an article, www.verumserum.com/?p=16259.

² Edited from PreachingToday.com search under Mt. 27:55-28:1.

³ *U.M. Hymnal*, "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing," No. 240.

⁴ James Dunn, *Did The First Christians Worship Jesus?* (Louisville, KY: WJK, 2010). For all Dunn's sophistication, his return to an essentially pre-Jesus Jewish mono-

With Superman and Jesus, there's more to the man than met the eye. The man of steel's X-ray vision and Jesus' ability to know the thoughts of the human heart are similar. Superman swoops down to rescue people from crime and disaster; Jesus moved into village after village driving back demons, disease, and death in the powers of the Spirit and the Father's kingdom. Both were vulnerable Saviors: Superman to the weakening effects of Kryptonite, Jesus to a deadly Roman cross, so the comics have a measure of mythic truth, but not the whole. And that is because Jesus voluntarily gave himself up to death; the new life he gave others was not available to him that fateful Friday, not if he was to be obedient. There was for him no supernatural escape this side of death, only one that came three days later.

Our Lord Jesus laid down all weapons but love and took the worst the world could give. He stripped off heaven's protective armor and laid himself bare to the full force of our hatred and violence: unjust hearings, the bite of the lash, the pierce of the nails, the crowd's mockery, the shame of nakedness, and finally the point of a spear between the ribs to puncture a heart filled with compassion. He let us do it; he baited his opponents til they could stand it no longer and acted against him. They were right; he was a fundamental threat to their world and had to be done away with.

And that- so far as I understand it- was for two reasons. That we and our institutions of government and religion might have our true colors shown: this is what we think of a God who messes with us; we want him dead. Secondly, that Jesus might take a journey into the deep caverns of death, and from there be raised and his life loosed into all space and time to have effects into eternity past in one direction and eternity future in the other. He who was *then and there* is now found everywhere with unlimited access, but Jesus had first to die. The time and place look like accidents, but the deeper logic is that both were chosen. He trusted himself to One who had been faithful, breathed his last prayer and gave up the ghost. The great and good warrior of God is now dead on the battlefield of our conflict, and his corpse lies in the power of those who tortured him to death. Barbara Taylor writes:

“Lord, I believe, but help my unbelief, because I still do not want to die.
I believe Jesus has power to raise the dead, only I do not want him

theism is unsatisfactory as it guts the Trinity. On self-awareness, see Michael Bird, “Did Jesus Think He Was God,” in Michael F. Bird, et. al., *How God Became Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 45-70; James Edwards, *Is Jesus The Only Savior* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), Chapter 5, “Did Jesus Consider Himself God?” 67-99.

practicing on me.... I want a God who will rescue me from death, who will delete it from the human experience.... What I, what all of us, have instead is a God who resurrects us from the dead, putting an end to it by working *through* it instead of *around* it– creating life in the midst of grief... love in the midst of loss... showing us... that the only road to Easter morning runs smack through Good Friday.”⁵

TURNING TO THE TEXT

The stories the four gospels retain are highly selective.⁶ Much of the life of Jesus was left on the cutting room floor because of the limits of the materials at hand. But you didn’t have to tell it all at first; there were people well past the middle of the first century who’d been first and second hand observers. When a gospel story was read in Jerusalem, someone in a house church might say, “Yes, and let me tell you what the Matthew left out; I know what happened the next day,” or, “My mother was there; let me tell you what she said.”⁷ Only so much room on a papyrus page, only so many pages can be stitched into a folio, only so much room on a scraped hide of parchment that must be rolled up as a scroll.⁸ The stories are true-to-life but highly selective.

When we Americans tell the story of George Washington as the tale of the cherry tree, then the young Virginia surveyor, then the Valley Forge general, and end with the first President and Father of our country dying at Mt. Vernon, we are highly selective and don’t mind it. Everyone understands. Same with Jesus; what we have are four portraits full of anecdotes, not enough to answer all questions but enough to introduce us to the content of Jesus’ life as the raw material for the Holy Spirit to

⁵ “Reflections: The Only Road to Easter,” *Christianity Today*, April 6, 1998.

⁶ On the history of gospel formation, see Martin Hengel, *The Four Gospels And The One Gospel of Jesus Christ* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 2000). On the related question of historicity, see Anthony LeDonne, *Historical Jesus: What can we know and how can we know it?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011). On their reliability, Mark D. Roberts, *Can We Trust The Gospels?* (Wheaton, ILL: Crossway, 2007).

⁷ On the role of eyewitnesses enriching and disciplining the canonical memory and retelling, see Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006).

⁸ On ancient writing, see Jerome Murphy O’Connor, *Paul the Letter-Writer* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995).

instruct, illumine, convert and grow us up if we cooperate. What have enough to be saved;⁹ we can know enough to begin to follow Jesus and his new way of life in the kingdom of God now.¹⁰ We will learn the rest when we meet him face to face.

When I sit down with Matthew I ask, Why these five segments in this particular order?¹¹ Why weave the women in and out of the stories of Joseph and Pilate, then of Pilate and the Jewish leaders? Why weave them in and out of the corridors of Jewish and Roman power where Joseph uses his connections to gain the body and the priests use theirs to secure a guard? I found my answer in an imaginary dialog.

“And that, dear friends, is how the story ends,” says Matthew, “Jesus was raised from the dead, the grave found empty. We call him Lord, and so should you.”

“Maybe Jesus never really died?”

“No. Guards kept watch. He was released by Pilate. The death was certified.”

“There must have been a mix-up in the tombs.”

“No. It was Joseph’s tomb, and he was well known. The women saw exactly where Jesus was buried. No mistaking the place.”

“It was all a big conspiracy. To confirm Jesus’ foolish predictions, his no-good friends stole the body to make him and them look good to the people.”

“No. The disciples fled; they were nowhere to be found. No conspiracy here.”

⁹ The soteriological (saving) and therapeutic (healing) intent of Scripture as a means of grace to restore our relationship with God is consistent with U.M. Doctrine as found in our *Articles of Religion*, “Article V: Of the Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for Salvation, ‘The Holy Scripture *containeth all things necessary to salvation*; so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man that it should *be believed as an article of faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation....*” See the substantial proposal of William J. Abraham, et. al., *Canonical Theism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), particularly Jason Vickers, “Medicine of the Holy Spirit: The Canonical Heritage of the Church,” 11-26; Douglas Koskela, “The Authority of Scripture in its Ecclesial Context,” 210-223.

¹⁰ For a simple introduction to the kingdom as a correction to a reduced Christian message, see Todd Hunter, *Christianity Beyond Belief: Following Jesus for the Sake of Others* (Downer’s Grove, ILL: IVP, 2009), Chapter 2, “Jesus’ Surprising Gospel,” 33-48.

¹¹ The Scripture sheet shows 5 distinct segments in the larger thought unit: 17:55-56, 57-60, 61, 62-66, 28:1. Their organization is concentric (1-2-3-2'-1') with the units concerning the women in the framing (1-1') and center (3) positions. Matthew has given great care to his retelling of Mark 15:40-16:2 and made his own additions in vv.62-66.

“Then someone else stole the body”

“No. A large stone was over the opening, sealed and guarded by soldiers.”

“The soldiers must have gone to sleep.”

“No,” they were bribed. The tomb was found empty because Jesus was raised. Witnesses are multiple. We Christians are a new form Judaism with Jesus at the center of our new understanding of who our God is. The one God of Israel has pulled back the veil and shown himself as the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit.”

“Then you too are a deceiver and false prophet, an enemy of God’s people.”

“As you like it, but what if you’re wrong? Wouldn’t that be a bad surprise!”¹²

We cannot make people believe in our Savior or the Christian reading of his life which the gospels present. Conversion under coercion is no faith at all. What we can do, and the name for this is *apologetics*- meaning the intellectual defense of our faith, is remove false obstacles that hearers may face the true obstacle which is the living Lord himself, and only the Holy Spirit has the right to broker that encounter.¹³ We present evidence, answer questions, counter bogus arguments, give testimony, and exercise patience and prayer. But only the Holy Spirit can draw back the veil and give a glimpse of the One about whom we care so much. To have Jesus become a pressing reality in your life is the goal. Reasoning is a preparatory bridge to cross over into divine revelation, but reason alone is not enough. Faith is about personal loyalty; it’s about responding to One who comes with the offer of new life.

It’s a lot like one college freshman arguing with a new friend as to why she ought to go out on a blind date with a guy from the first girl’s home town.

“I know him. He’s a great guy. Handsome, good manners, lot’s of fun.”

“I don’t know. Blind dates have always been disaster for me.”

“This guy is something else, and he’s available Friday night for the basketball

¹² Adapted from W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *Matthew: A Shorter Commentary* (New York, NY: T & T Clark, 2004), 536.

¹³ For an apologetics text by a first class philosopher, see William Lane Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers* (Wheaton, ILL: Crossway, 2003); on a popular level, Mark Mittelberg, *The Questions Christians Hope No One Will Ask* (Carol Stream, ILL: Tyndale, 2010). On the dynamics of conversion, see Scot McKnight, *Turning to Jesus: The Sociology of Conversion in the Gospels* (Louisville, KY: WJK, 2002); and, with Hanna Ondrey, *Finding Faith, Losing Faith: Stories of Conversion and Apostasy* (Waco, TX: Baylor Univ. Press, 2008); also Bob Whitsel, *Waypoint: Navigating Your Spiritual Journey* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2010).

game. I've already told him all about you.”

“Really?”

But at some point they have to meet. Either your friend finds your testimony confirmed by her experience, or she asks to be taken home early. That's matchmaking; it's also evangelism. However much we talk *to Jesus* about them in prayer and *to them* about him in testimony, the final issue is between the two of them.

Matthew was about the serious business of countering false objections to Jesus' resurrection. That is why the burial materials are arranged as they are.

1) vv.55-56 The Watch At The Cross.

One of the continuing divisions among Christians worldwide is the role of women. Shall they be ordained or not? Methodists and Pentecostals say Yes; Catholics and the Orthodox say No. Some Presbyterians, Baptists, and Anglicans say Yes, others No. The modern cultural revolution of feminism has only sharpened the categories.

“You Methodists are just caving into the culture and leaving the Bible behind.”

“Well, you Baptists pound on the Bible a lot, but have you given it a careful reading lately? The men ran away; it was the women who remained faithful and were the first witnesses of Jesus' resurrection. Doesn't that mean anything to you?”

“Yes, but none of *the twelve* were women during the ministry.”

“I agree, but that's because they were a living symbol God was remaking Israel to whom Jesus' initial mission was limited, and since none of the twelve patriarchs were female, with women that symbol would not have worked. Apart from that, women were also Jesus' followers; the wealthy ones even paid the bills.”

“Yes, but Jesus was a man.”

“So what's that prove, that only men can be saved?”

“No, but only men can be preachers and leaders.”

“Why is that when the women were the only continuous witnesses to what matters most- the very heart of the Creeds: the cross, the death, the burial, the resurrection, the initial preaching. They were living epistles to the absent apostles!”

“Well, it's just the way it's always been.”

“That is a highly selective and prejudicial reading of church history.”

“But if we let women do everything, men will leave; then what will we have?”

“Aha! Sounds like the real issue to me, but if the issue is fear of a feminized church (which I in some sense share), then why hide behind the Bible? Why not help men come to terms with the real issue of learning to be full partners.”

Now I admit that this little exchange is biased towards my prejudices which is for women to serve with men as equals to show the world a new way of living, but there's also merit here, and it is grounded in Scripture. In verses 55 and 56 Matthew uses loaded language to describe the sorority of sorrow who gaze on Jesus' cross from a distance. That they were left alone is testimony to their low status; it was precisely *as women* that they posed so little threat to the all-male proceedings of crucifixion violence. There were, as Matthew notes, *many* of them, not just a few but *many*. As disciples they counted the cost and answered the call to *follow Jesus*. Jesus healed many women; clearly some were allowed to become part of the entourage.¹⁴ That they are highlighted as *from Galilee* means they were eyewitnesses of the ministry; they knew Jesus' words and deeds from the start; they were living libraries of apostolic memory, just like the guys. That they *ministered to* or *served him* shows how central they were to the movement. They followed, observed, served, gave, and showed great courage to watch him die. That their names were remembered is significant when so many characters in the gospels are not remembered by name. What did it mean later on for James and John- the fabled *sons of thunder*, to admit in public, "We fled, but our mother was right there!" Mary of Magdala- the one out of whom Jesus cast seven demons- heads the list of women, just as Peter heads the list of the twelve. That rabbi Jesus allowed female disciples in spite of the scandal their traveling together would have caused demonstrates how important it was to show forth a new kind of community.

The community around Jesus was a living symbol; first, of Israel reconstituted around himself as a new center, and secondly of a new partnership between men and women. It is risky for men who are used to privilege to accept women as full peers, and it's hard for some women who have always been taught to hold back in the presence of men to stand up and find their own voice. But this was the dynamic Jesus ignited, and the church has still to catch up to his example. Gender is a polarity of creation; it's very good. But when it comes to leading and serving, *it's more about character and calling than gender*. We live together as community of differentiated equals under the Lordship of Jesus. And all that silly business about Jesus having an affair and a child with Mary Magdalene is historically bankrupt; there is no evidence, and it says more about our modern erotic obsessions than anything about Jesus. He was not married, not because marriage is a sin but because it was a voluntary constraint on his calling. Jesus chose not to marry and died a virgin, and if you think that makes him less masculine and manly, you've a lot to learn both about him and

¹⁴ Luke 8:1-3 is particularly important because it includes high-status females.

yourself. So if you are a single man or woman, so was Jesus! Our Savior is a single, unmarried, virginal man in whom was more life and love than can be contained!

2) vv.57-60 A New Disciple Crosses The Stage.

It's a good thing to show up at the right time with the right stuff. Every day is a classroom for those who pay attention. Joseph of Arimathea was such a man. By the providence of God he had been prepared across a lifetime for a single act of courageous discipleship for which he would literally become legend.¹⁵ It all came together late one Friday afternoon.

Joseph was *rich*, and in this situation it was an asset. Mark tells us he was “a respected member of the Sanhedrin and himself looking for the kingdom of God.”¹⁶ He had financial power, positional authority, what the pundits call *gravitas*. Joseph was a man to be reckoned with, a man with immediate access to Pilate. Matthew goes a step further and says he was *also a disciple of Jesus*. God leaves some of us in obscurity, but some followers are well-heeled and well-placed for special missions. To envy such is to misunderstand both their challenges and your own gifts.

Adjectives highlight the man from Arimathea: Joseph was *rich*; the linen was *clean*, the tomb *new*, the stone *great*, and when the time came, Joseph was *there*. Verse 57, “When it was evening, there came- as if from nowhere- a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus.” God has servants in all sorts of hidden places. Christians later found delight in an echo from Isaiah 53 that Jesus “made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death...”¹⁷

True courage is rare, isn't it? We live in a culture that prizes conformity, but courage is the quality of heart that steps out from the crowd for the sake of conviction. Joseph of Arimathea was that man. He was skilled in success, but not submerged in it to the point that he could not risk it all. To identify with an enemy

¹⁵ For an introductory article, see “Joseph of Arimathea,” www.britannia.com/history/biographies/joseph. Also “Joseph of Arimathea: Biblical and Legendary Accounts,” www.sundayschoolcourses.com/joseph/joseph.

¹⁶ 15:43.

¹⁷ 53:9.

of both church and state was an extreme risk.¹⁸ If Joseph were here today, I'd ask:

“Why did you- a respected leader- risk the suspicion of Pilate by becoming an advocate for a questionable false prophet? Why contract uncleanness by messing with a corpse on the Sabbath Eve when the family’s waiting, the candles lit, and the children asking, ‘Where's poppa?’ Why buy fine linen and clutter up the new family tomb with the corpse of a crucified criminal? Why do it?”

As a learned man, Joseph might give the scriptural answer: a body left on the cross after sunset- and especially on the Sabbath- would defile the whole land,¹⁹ or that Jews were generally decent enough to give even an enemy a decent burial.²⁰ But something more than duty was at work. It cost Joseph something to identify with Jesus in this manner, and that is apparently what God required of him, that he risk loss of status for Jesus. The next day his children would hear, "Your old man's a Jesus lover." Then the silent treatment from old friends. Joseph stepped over the line and publicly identified himself with the crucified Jesus. I suspect it was a long walk from his quarters to Pilate's palace, verse 58: "He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus." That, my friends, is courage, and sometimes it's a lonely walk.

I admire Joseph. Would that there were more like him, men of achievement who risk their reputations to identify with Jesus Christ in the halls of government and the executive suites of power. Because of his association with Jesus, Joseph was a good man made better and a wealthy man made richer.²¹ God is looking for such. Men and women who will take stands for the despised and forgotten. It took guts and faith for the women to watch; it took the same virtues for Joseph to go to the powerful Pilate and rescue the corpse of his friend. Will you speak up? Will you stand out?

¹⁸ Donald Senior writes, "Public association with a criminal executed for allegedly revolutionary activities involved genuine risk, especially for an influential person who may even have been a member of the very council that had condemned this criminal" (*The Passion of Jesus* [Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1984], 133).

¹⁹ Deut. 21:22-23.

²⁰ Joel Green, "Burial of Jesus," in Joel Green et. al, editors, *Dictionary of Jesus and The Gospels* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 1992), 88-91.

²¹ Ralph Martin, *Mark* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1981), 93.

It heartened Joseph when Pilate released the body. His prayer was answered. What follows are five connected actions, each linked by the little word *and*. Events move along rapidly in verse 59:

*“And Joseph took the body,
and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud,
and laid it in a new tomb- which he had hewn in the soft limestone;
and he rolled (or placed) a great stone to the door of the tomb,
and departed.”*

Jesus is dead, buried in a known location by a prominent man. The corpse would decompose over a year’s wait; the bones would then be gathered and put in a stone box, an *ossuary*. It was the custom, and to this day we find them in Jerusalem.

Western art has often portrayed with pathos the disposition of Jesus from the cross, and popular piety has been fascinated by legends of the shroud. I was overwhelmed as I entered St. Peter’s in Rome and stood before Michaelangelo’s *Pieta* where Mary holds the limp corpse of her son. One day I want to ask Joseph, “What was it like to pull out the nails and catch the dead weight of the corpse, rinse away the blackened clots and sweaty dirt, then wind the body in linen?”

With sunset near, Joseph acted quickly. The body was laid on one of the rock shelves and the large stone placed to keep out scavenging animals, mainly buzzards and dogs. Jesus is not like the modern myths of Elvis or John Lennon, living secretly in seclusion after having survived an attempt on his life. It was a new tomb, Jesus the first resident, and there he lay. The powers thought they were rid of him.

3) v.61 The Women Again.

Verse 61 at the center reads like an afterthought, "Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the sepulchre." Two bystanders, or in this case by-sitters. Why note them again? To assure us it was not the wrong tomb that was found empty. Maybe he never died? No, the death was certified by Pilate and the corpse handled by Joseph. The body was never out of sight: on the cross, in the hands of Joseph, in the tomb, under the women’s watchful eye.

I admire Joseph; I also admire the women. Would that there were more like them, women whose devotion gives them tenacity to endure and to be at the right place at the right time. When one betrayed and the eleven fled, God called another

man and other women to the front lines of faith. This story will be established and made credible by evidence and experience; God will see to that.

Thomas Jefferson is rightly honored as a founding father. He read the Bible; he just didn't believe much of it. As a deist and rationalist, his was a deity who wound up the world and left it to run without interference as a closed system of cause and effect; all references to the supernatural were naive misunderstandings.

In an act of true hubris, but consistent with his beliefs, Jefferson took scissors and literally cut out all references to the supernatural. Don't like it? Get rid of it! Give the people a better Bible! Jefferson confined himself to the moral teaching of Jesus and remade him into a philosopher. What was left after mutilation was published as *The Jefferson Bible* with the approval of Congress. And if you find a copy, here are the last words of the gospels, "There laid they Jesus, and rolled a great stone to the mouth of the sepulcher and departed."²² The rest of the story- the messy stuff about emptied tombs and appearing angels and personal visits with the risen Lord- is excised as fond stories to match foolish dreams.

"No thanks, Mr. Jefferson," I say, "you write a great Declaration of Independence but not a good Bible. Your philosophical prejudices deny too much of the evidence. We don't believe in your God, a distant deity who cannot save. We believe in an *involved* God, one *immersed* in the brutal web of history, a God who embraces broken life to his bosom to the point of death. Who is our God? Our God is whoever raised Jesus from the dead!"

2') vv.62-66 Hostilities Not Yet Over.

As soon as word got out Pilate was passing out favors, a delegation showed up the next morning, the Sabbath. That one of their own- Joseph- had broken rank and sided with Jesus was disturbing. It was not enough to snuff out the false prophet; it was now necessary to set up a perimeter to guard against his followers perpetuating an even greater fraud on the faithful. In their speech Jesus is labeled *a deceiver, an imposter*, a false prophet, and suspicion extends to his followers. At their request Pilate let a guard be placed, whether his or their own temple squad is not clear.

I wonder if Pilate thought, "This is getting complicated. But since I did a favor for Joseph, why not for his colleagues on the other side of the aisle? Maybe start a fight that will be fun to watch." Then publicly, "You have a guard; go; make it as

²² R. Kent Hughes, *1001 Illustrations* (Wheaton, ILL: Tyndale, 1998), 353-354.

secure *as you can*.” The church grew to love those last words: such a joke- *as secure as you can*! But nothing is secure in a world where God is active, not even crucified corpses in borrowed graves! Was Jesus dead? Yes. Buried in a known tomb? Yes. Was it secured? Yes, and in three ways: *great* stone, *official* seal, *night* watchmen.

We learn two things here. That the stealing of the body was the first rival theory to Jesus’ bodily resurrection. Secondly, both sides agreed the tomb was empty on Sunday, and if the officials could have located the body, their case would have been made, which it was not. An empty tomb is an historical fact; a stolen body is a rival explanation, but only a risen Lord reveals why the corpse was gone and the tomb emptied. “We can’t find it, and the disciples don’t have it.” What happened to Jesus? It was his surprise appearances that provided the key to the ambiguous evidence. An empty tomb has several explanations, a risen and re-embodied Lord only one. Who is our God? Our God is whoever raised Jesus bodily from the dead!

“There ain’t gonna be no Easter this year.”

“Why not?” Dr. William Lane Craig responded to his student.

“They found the body.”

Dr. Craig then makes this comment, “Despite his irreverence, my friend displayed a measure of insight often not shared by modern theologians. Many are perfectly willing to assert that Jesus rotted in the grave, but that the resurrection still has value as a symbol of ‘newness of life’ so Christianity can go on quite nicely as though nothing were changed. My friend’s joke implied that without the resurrection Christianity is worthless.”²³ He was right.²⁴

1') 28:1 The Women Are Everywhere.

There is a silence in the story, a long pause- the Sabbath. All were numb; there were

²³ “Resurrection Life,” in Calvin Miller, *The Book of Jesus* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 488-489.

²⁴ U.M. doctrine insists on a fully re-embodied resurrection: the *Articles of Religion*, “Article III—Of the Resurrection of Christ. ‘Christ did truly rise again from the dead, and took again his body, with all things appertaining to the perfection of man's nature, wherewith he ascended into heaven, and there sitteth until he return to judge all men at the last day’” (*U.M. BOD 2012*, 60). For a literary and homiletical treatment of twenty N.T. texts on resurrection, see Phil Thrailkill, *Resurrection* (Fort Valley, GA: Bristol House, 2014), to be released April 16, 2014,

tears and questions. Those who came to the city with Jesus were bewildered by the last thirty-six hours. On Saturday Jesus lay in the rotunda of a borrowed tomb. Several women slept the night with a mission in mind, a mission begun early the next day, chapter 28, verse 1: “Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary sent to see the sepulchre.” There they are again. Right place, right time. “If no one else will mourn him and add spices to keep down the stench, we will.” Tell me if you dare these women can’t preach, and I will tell you that the best preaching is not lofty words but costly deeds of devotion.

CONCLUSION

Dr. Len Sweet once overheard a student’s complaint. The budding preacher received an appointment from the bishop that didn’t suit his abilities. Another student replied, “You know, the world's a better place because Michelangelo did not say, 'I don't do ceilings.’”

Come to think of it, the world's a better place because Moses didn't say, "I don't do Pharaohs or mass migrations."

The world's a better place because Noah didn't say, "I don't do arks and floods and tons of manure.”

David didn't say, "I don't do giants."

Peter didn't say, "I don't do Gentiles."

John the Baptist didn't say, "I don't do deserts and decapitations."

Mary didn't say, "I don't do virgin births and rumor management."

Paul didn't say, "I don't do correspondence."

The world's a better place because Mary Magdalene didn't say, "I don't stand watch and show up early."

Joseph of Arimathea didn’t say, “I don’t do borrowed graves and last minute duties.”

Jesus didn't say, "I don't do crosses."²⁵

Saying “I don’t do...” may mean you miss your destiny. “Yes, Lord,” is the best prayer of all, and who knows where it might lead? We enter this Sunday the holiest and most disturbing week of the year. Enter with great care. It’s dangerous territory. You might be drawn into a new life and never find your way back to the old. There is One who is seeking you. Will you let yourself be found?

²⁵ Edited with additions from PreachingToday.com search under *crucifixion*.
