

**There's Someone I'd Like You To Meet: Joseph of Arimathea**

Mark 15:42-46

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Joseph of Arimathea might be the most hopeful figure in all of scripture.

I'm grateful for this sermon series, *There's Someone I'd Like You To Meet*, because it gives us a chance to look at some of the people that show up in scripture ever so briefly. Because even if their appearance is brief, each of them has something important to teach us.

The beloved disciple, from the first week, teaches us that we all have a part to play when it comes to the gospel.

Tabitha, from last week, who is also called Dorcas, teaches us that kindness matters, that kindness should never be underestimated, because sometimes, kindness has changed the church, and the world.

Joseph of Arimathea, teaches us about hope. If I understand the text, no one, absolutely no one, embodies hope more than him.

We need Joseph, especially when we are having a day like Alexander. Do you remember Alexander? I loved his book as a kid, but somehow, I love it even more as an adult: *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*.

Here is just a bit of it:

*I went to sleep with gum in my mouth and now there's gum in my hair, and when I got out of bed this morning I tripped on my skateboard and by mistake I dropped my sweater in the sink while the water was running, and I could tell it was going to be a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.*

*At school, Mrs. Dickens liked Paul's picture of the sailboat better than my picture of the invisible castle. At singing time, she said I sang too loud. At counting time, she said I left*

*out 16. Who needs 16?*

*It goes from bad to worse. There were lima beans for dinner and I hate lima beans. There was kissing on TV, and I hate kissing. My bath was too hot, I got soap in my eyes, my marble went down the drain, and I had to wear my railroad-train pajamas. I hate my railroad-train pajamas. It has been a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. My mom says some days are like that.*

My love for this book has only grown over time, because it doesn't sugarcoat the truth — some days are like that. You know that already. That's why we need Joseph of Arimathea.

There's more than a few Josephs in scripture, so just to make sure we're all thinking about the same one: this is not the same Joseph of the many brothers or the coat of many colors, and this is not the same Joseph that is Mary's husband and Jesus' daddy. This is Joseph of Arimathea, a man we meet just this once, on what is, I'd wager, the most terrible, horrible, no good, very worst day in history — the day we humans revealed that not only do we sometimes want to destroy God, we're arrogant enough to think we can.

Even still, this Joseph teaches us about hope. We see his hope through his courage. He asks Pilate for Jesus' body. This was courageous because crucifixion wasn't just a way that people were put to death. It was not intended just to torture them. It was intended to humiliate them as well. And so the bodies were typically left hanging, waiting for animals and nature to have their way. They were denied a proper burial, and all who passed by were reminded, "Do not do what these ones did."

Crucifixion, all told, was about death and humiliation and intimidation and control. It was a flagrant display of power, reminding everyone who had it and who didn't. For Joseph to know all of this and still ask Pilate for Jesus' body, well, that took tremendous courage.

He is able to summon this courage, I suspect, because he is waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God. That's one of the other few details we are given. He is from Arimathea. He is a respected member of the council, the Sanhedrin, the very body that essentially sealed Jesus' death warrant. The gospel of Luke tells us that he was against the plan. The gospel of Matthew tells us he was wealthy, and that the tomb he used for Jesus was on his own property. The gospel of John tells us he was a secret disciple of Jesus. The gospel of Mark tells us that was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God.

That's all we know of him, at least according to scripture. But it's more than enough.

"I would like Jesus' body, please," he says to Pilate. When he says this, he asks for the *soma* of Jesus. *Soma* is the Greek word that means body. But *soma* is a bit of a complicated word, because it also means somebody. *Soma* isn't just flesh and bones — it's a person, in all their fullness. So the way Joseph phrases it, he doesn't just ask for Jesus' body. He asks for Jesus.

I assume that Pilate rolls his eyes a little, or maybe even laughs a bit in disgust or disbelief. But after confirming that Jesus' death is, in fact, complete, he agrees to Joseph's request. "Sure," he says, "you can have the body." But he corrects Joseph's vocabulary. You can have the *ptoma* of Jesus, he says.

*Soma* and *ptoma*. They sound similar, but they could not be more different. *Soma* is a person; *ptoma* is a corpse, a carcass. Joseph asks for Jesus. But Pilate reiterates the truth of the day: all that's left to be given is a corpse. A carcass. And everyone seems to know that,

except for Joseph.

Joseph, well, he's waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God, even as he takes Jesus' body down from the cross, wraps it in a cloth, and lays it in the tomb. He, of all people, he who has held the body, the *ptoma*, he who could verify for himself that there is no pulse and there is no breath, there is no life, not even a drop... even after all that, he is still waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God.

That's what hope looks like.

And I think it's incredibly instructive to us that we encounter this kind of hope on the very worst kind of day. Because it is easy for us to misunderstand the power of hope.

The poet Emily Dickinson penned some of the most famous words about hope. She wrote,

*Hope is the thing with feathers  
that perches in the soul  
it sings the tunes without the words  
and never stops at all.*

I love that poem. It's one of my favorites. I quote it all the time. But sometimes, especially on terrible, horrible, no good, very bad days, we need hope that's less like a cheerful songbird and hope that's a little more like, well, like this poem, written by Caitlin Selda:

*Hope is not the thing with feathers  
that comes home to roost  
when you need it most.  
Hope is an ugly thing,  
with teeth and claws and  
patchy fur that seen some things.  
It's what thrives in the discards  
and survives  
in the ugliest parts of our world,  
able to find a way to go on  
when nothing else  
can even find a way in.  
It's the gritty, nasty little carrier  
of such diseases as  
optimism, persistence,  
perseverance and joy,  
transmissible as it drags its tail*

*across your path and bites you.  
Hope is not some delicate,  
beautiful bird,  
Emily.  
It's a lowly little sewer rat,  
one that snorts pesticides  
and still shows up on time  
to work the next day  
looking no worse for the wear.*

This poet's hope is Joseph's kind of hope, I think. Hope that isn't very pretty, but that's okay, in fact it's better than okay, it's *relieving*, because it has to take on a reality that isn't very pretty, either. Hope that's a little more like a sewer rat — that's a hope that doesn't flinch, not even when presented with a *ptoma*, a carcass, not even when it's the carcass of Jesus Christ. That's the kind of hope we want, the kind of hope we need, isn't it?

That is why, and how, Joseph refuses to give up on his conviction that God will be God, even on terrible, horrible, no good, very bad days.

I have been thinking about a friend of mine, a colleague of mine, a lot this week. The Rev. Dr. Robert Meneilly, the founding pastor of Village Presbyterian Church, died this past week at 96 years old. He was called to start that church, a brand new church, right after he graduated from seminary. He stayed there his entire career, serving as pastor for 47 years, building the congregation from 200 members at its charter to over 7,700 members at his retirement.

He was outspoken in the pulpit, addressing racism head on and insisting that Christians not allow the religious right to be the loudest voice of faith in public discourse. He spoke so prophetically the New York Times published the text of his sermon on more than one occasion.

He was outspoken in his actions, too. When Village was founded, the city surrounding the church did not allow anyone with black skin to own property within its borders. Dr. Bob

pushed back against local officials and organized community members, unrelenting in his efforts until the unjust law was struck down. In an article about his death, current city officials said, "His vision changed the shape of the entire county."

In a sermon he preached in the early 80s, Dr. Bob said, "Hope may well be the greatest, and strongest, four letter word in our vocabulary. There is no such thing as a hopeless situation." And then he said this: "God has already given to each of us more faith, hope, and love, than we could ever need, more than we could ever even use."

We need to remember that and trust that. It is our temptation to think we aren't faith isn't sufficient, that we don't love well enough, that we're running pretty low on hope. But the apostle Paul says in to the church in Corinth, "Faith, hope, and love, they abide."

The best sense I can make out this is that whatever amount of faith, whatever amount of love, whatever amount of hope you have, it is enough. Even if it doesn't seem like it. Even if you can't imagine it to be so. I promise you — whatever amount you have is the amount God has given to you. So if it's a small amount — fine. Because that small amount will abide and abide and abide again. It will abide, just like the *soma* of Christ abides. It doesn't seem possible, until it is.

So whenever the day comes that you are desperately searching for hope, remember Joseph of Arimathea. On the very worst day, with the lifeless body of Jesus in his arms, with more evidence of death than anyone else has ever had, he was still waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God.

Barely more than a blip in the overall story of the Gospel. Mentioned only once. We don't know what became of him, but we do know who he was when it mattered most. He couldn't have told us what exactly was coming. All he knew was that death wasn't going to get the last word. That the cross would come to

stand for love, not hate. That every present  
heartbreak would give way to inescapable joy.  
That the Pilates of this world would be  
defeated, every one. That the Alexanders of  
every story would wake to a brand new  
tomorrow. That God's promised day would  
dawn.

In this we place our hope. Just like  
Jospheh.