

“Witnesses to Wonder”
The Gospel According to Mark 15:39-47
February 17th, 2019

If this past Thursday is like Valentine's Days of the past over \$1 billion was spent on chocolate, another \$1 billion on cards, and 218 million roses were sold in the pursuit of or in an attempt to demonstrate love. Yet, all of those astronomical numbers fade to nothing when they are compared to God's demonstration of love for the people He chose in Christ – the death of Jesus Christ, His only Son.

Have you ever participated in something bigger and more profound than your normal life? In other words, have you been part of something big or historic? Maybe you've been to a Super Bowl game in person, or you've attended a presidential inauguration? It could be that you were somewhere minding your own business and something newsworthy took place, and you were interviewed by television reporters as to what you saw or experienced.

What if you were near Jerusalem that Good Friday when Jesus was crucified and He died on a Roman cross? Can you even imagine the kind of things that might race through your mind as you saw and heard what took place or the grief you may have felt as a result of Jesus' bloody, horrible death?

The verses before us today portray several witnesses to the most noteworthy event of all human history – the death of the eternal Son of God, Jesus Christ. Bible commentator JC Ryle referred to Jesus' death as “the most important fact in Christianity.” Ryle asserts, “On it (Jesus' death) depend the hopes of all saved sinners both for time and eternity.” (Ryle, 349)

Today, we come to the end of the 15th chapter of Mark's gospel account. These verses cover the space of time between Jesus' death and His resurrection from the dead. Something very powerful had just taken place; and now, it was the aftermath. Imagine the silence – like that following the destruction of a tornado or hurricane when the sun breaks out and an eerie solitude overlooks the devastation. An ominous feeling of dread could have been sweeping through Jesus' followers as they gazed upon His lifeless body.

Mark 15:39-47:

³⁹So when the centurion, who stood opposite Him (Jesus), saw that He cried out like this and breathed His last, he said, “Truly this Man was the Son of God!”

⁴⁰There were also women looking on from afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the Less and of Joses, and Salome, ⁴¹who also followed Him and ministered to Him when He was in Galilee, and many other women who came up with Him to Jerusalem.”

⁴²Now when evening had come, because it was the Preparation Day, that is, the day before the Sabbath, ⁴³Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent council member, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, coming and taking courage, went in to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. ⁴⁴Pilate marveled that He was already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him if He had been dead for some time. ⁴⁵So when he found out from the centurion, he granted the body to Joseph. ⁴⁶Then he bought fine linen, took Him down, and wrapped Him in the linen. And he laid Him in a tomb which had been hewn out of the rock, and rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. ⁴⁷And Mary Magdalene and Mary *the mother* of Joses observed where He was laid.”

The focus of this message are the witnesses mentioned or referred to in this passage. There are three persons/groups of people:

- 1 – A Roman centurion;
- 2 – Three women – Mary Magdalene, Mary mother of James the Less and Joses, and Salome;
- 3 – Joseph of Arimathea (who we'll see was helped by another man).

We'll begin with the Roman centurion. He is featured in just one verse, verse 39 – “So when the centurion, who stood opposite Him (Jesus), saw that He cried out like this and breathed His last, he said, ‘Truly this Man was the Son of God!’”

It's helpful to know the responsibility entrusted to a centurion. He was a leader of men, some 100 Roman soldiers reported to him. This centurion was the Roman officer who had the responsibility to oversee Jesus' execution. In reporting Jesus' death on the cross, Matthew comments there were others present with the centurion. Perhaps, they too, were soldiers. All of them responded with the same words – “Truly this was the Son of God!” (**Matthew 27:54**)

To refer to Jesus as the “Son of God” was to use a title that belonged only to the emperor. These men would have sworn their allegiance to the Emperor. This is an amazing conclusion when we consider that none of these men could have had a complete view of Jesus' earthly ministry. They only witnessed the very end of it. At most, they may have witnessed Jesus' arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, or the trials before the Jewish Sanhedrin and Pontius Pilate, perhaps even the scourging and mocking inflicted on Jesus, by some of these very men. Even so, they came to the correct conclusion of Jesus' identity as the Son of God.

Does that mean these men trusted in Jesus for the salvation of their sins? It's possible, but the Scripture doesn't give us the answer to that question. There were many people who witnessed Jesus' death, who didn't connect the dots. They may have believed Jesus to be merely another person deserving the disfavor of the Roman government.

And, that lead us to an application of this text. **If we're not careful, we can say all the right words and not actually be in Christ.** We can give the impression that we are followers of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and still miss out on Him entirely. We can have a front row seat in the sanctuary every Sunday of our lives, like this Roman centurion had a front row seat to Jesus' death, and not be with Jesus in the next life! *Impossible?* No, it is not! We are masters at deception, easily deceiving others, and just as easily deceiving ourselves. Dear ones, hear me – *are you trusting in Jesus? What does your life say?* Jesus Himself said in **John 14:15**, “If you love Me, keep My commandments.” *Who is Jesus to you? Is He the Son of God? And, if you agree, will you commit yourself fully to Him and His people?*

From the Roman centurion, we turn our attention to three ladies mentioned in verses 40 and 41 – “There were also women looking on from afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene, Mary the

mother of James the Less and of Joses, and Salome, ⁴¹ who also followed Him and ministered to Him when He was in Galilee, and many other women who came up with Him to Jerusalem.”

In his account of the gospel, Matthew adds there were “many women” present. **(Matthew 27:55)** Now, that could be as few as three, but more probably refers to a greater number. These women had been with Jesus since His ministry in Galilee; they, like the 12 apostles, were disciples of Jesus. Yet, at this point in time, there was no apostle to be found – but, these ladies were there “looking on from afar.” **(Matthew 27:55)**

In a culture that is falling over itself to blur any distinctions between males and females, it is refreshing and informative to be reminded that God created us male *and* female. And because of that, He has given certain gifts and capacities to men that He doesn’t give to women, and gifts and capacities to women that He doesn’t give to men. For instance, most women are blessed of God with a more nurturing nature than many men. This is especially manifested in a difference between mothers and fathers. It didn’t take long for our children to realize that Mom is much more comforting, soothing, and even more gracious than Dad.

Case in point. In his junior high years, our son Zach participated in track and field. At one chilly meet in Sherrard, he was in the high jump competition. Each student had three jumps. As he was completing his first jump, Zach’s foot hit the bar which was then between his body and the mat. When he landed on the mat, his arm and the mat sandwiched the pole. He came up from the mat holding his wrist, fighting off tears. I encouraged him to get back in there; he still had two more jumps! But, Jan realized that Zach was hurt, and we needed to get him to the hospital. Sure enough, his wrist was fractured. Moms very often interpret the pain of their children much better than dads can!

The presence of these ladies at Jesus’ crucifixion, even from a distance, spoke well of their faith in Christ. “The faith of women sometimes stands upright, when the faith of men fails and gives way.” (Ryle, 350) This should help us to understand that “women have an important place in the Church of Christ...There is a great work that women can do for God’s glory...Happy is that congregation in which women know this, and act upon it!” (Ryle, 351)

We as a congregation are blessed by the gifts and talents of so many women who head up and serve in various ministries. Among them, teaching children in Sunday School and “Bible Bunch;” directing and teaching in our Vacation Bible School and “Wonderful Wednesday” catechism ministry; leading our various music ministries; participating in the incredibly important ministries that fall under the purview of the Women in the Church (WIC) ministries; praying together; serving in financial ministries; and even providing input to the Session and Diaconate. We are most blessed by our own Mary’s and Salome’s!

To this point, we’ve discussed the Roman centurion and the group of women who witnessed Jesus’ death - Mary Magdalene, Mary, and Salome. We now conclude with a look at Joseph of Arimathea. He comes on the scene in verses 42-46: “Now when evening had come, because it was the Preparation Day, that is, the day before the Sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent council member, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, coming and taking courage, went in to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Pilate marveled that He was already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him if He had been dead for some time. So when he found out from the centurion,

he granted the body to Joseph. Then he bought fine linen, took Him down, and wrapped Him in the linen. And he laid Him in a tomb which had been hewn out of the rock, and rolled a stone against the door of the tomb.”

John’s gospel account reveals another man was present with Joseph; he also a member of the Sanhedrin. *Do you remember who it was?* He came to Jesus at night to ask Him about the entry requirements to heaven. Nicodemus! Nicodemus helped Joseph gain permission to bury Jesus’ body from Pilate, remove Jesus’ body from the cross, prepare His body for burial, and lay Him in a nearby tomb.

There was a time that Joseph and Nicodemus were reluctant believers in Jesus Christ. They weren’t reluctant to believe that Jesus was Lord, but they were, for a time, reluctant to publically confess their faith in Jesus Christ. Remember, Nicodemus came to Jesus...at night for fear of the Jews. They were concerned with the cost of such a revelation. *Would they lose their standing among the other members of the Jewish Sanhedrin? Might they, too, be tried and executed for their faith in Jesus?* There are many possibilities.

But, now they were courageous and bold. They were no longer secret disciples; they had now shown their true colors. “For (them) to claim Jesus’ body is to identify (themselves) with the crucified criminal.” (Card, 186)

“No one can remain a secret disciple of Jesus indefinitely. There invariably comes a point at which we must burn our boats and cross our bridges.” (Ferguson, 267) And, so I ask you dear ones, *with whom must you risk the health of a friendship or potential personal hardship by confessing Jesus as Lord and Master?*

There’s one more thing. Matthew refers to Joseph as a “rich man.” (**Matthew 27:57**) Joseph was a man of financial means who could afford to give Jesus a biblical burial. Down through the ages, God has blessed millions of His followers with riches. Such riches fund the operation and ministry of God’s Church throughout the earth. All believers in Jesus are to support the work of the church with the finances with which God blesses them. But some of His followers He has blessed with riches that they eagerly and generously share for the work of the Church.

I find it intriguing that as Jesus’ life on earth as a human began with earthly parents named Joseph and Mary, so at the end of Jesus’ physical life on earth, His earthly ministry concluded with a Joseph (of Arimathea) and a Mary (two, even!).

Chapter 15 of Mark’s gospel account closes with two of the women taking note of where Jesus would be buried. That sets us up for what takes place as Chapter 16 begins, and the first 8 verses of that final chapter in Mark are on the agenda for next Sunday, Lord willing.