

Trial and Triumph: Mary and Joseph the Second

Mark 15:40-47

April 10, 2022

Dan Hoffman

My childhood could be boiled down to two contradictory realities. First, I was the smallest boy in class – I was short and scrawny, and insecure about it. I hated being picked last for sports. I wanted to be in the in-crowd. But at school it never happened. And I took that insecurity home and I bullied my little sister. I hurt her. I made her cry. I thought that's what brothers did. I was not nice. That was the first reality.

The second was that I experienced the radical acceptance of two boys who lived next door. Jared and Sean were each other's best friends but accepted me into their inner circle. And the three of us did everything together after school. We built forts. We rode bikes. We made a club and I collected the dues. They were great friends.

But I remember one day one of the boys had a birthday and invited a bunch of friends to their house including me. And I realized in that moment that my friendship with them was a bit strange. I wasn't their only friend, and all their other friends were way cooler than me. And the reason was that Jared and Sean were way cooler than me. But they had never given me that impression.

And on that birthday I found myself tagging along with a bunch of people who amazingly extended friendship to me – I was on the inside of a circle that I ordinarily would never have qualified to be part of.

...

If you are joining us today we are in the second last week of our walk through the Gospel of Mark; we are right at the end of chapter 15. So please grab your Bible and stand with me as we come before God's word. This takes place just after Jesus died. Hear now the word of the Lord:

[Read Mark 15:40-47]

This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated.

If I say Mary and Joseph we all think of the same people. Those two remarkably unremarkable peasants who played incredible roles in God's entrance into creation.

Well, it turns out that there is another Mary and Joseph who are equally remarkably unremarkable but for very different reasons. And they too were awarded the opportunity to participate with God in His redemption of the world.

And so today I want to look at Mary and Joseph the second and how we too can be part of God's story.¹

¹ Outline adapted from Tim Keller <https://gospelinlife.com/downloads/women-pagans-and-pharisees-5512/>
(Accessed April 7, 2022)

First, Mary the second. There are actually two Marys here and a bunch of other women, but Mary Magdalene is one of those mysterious characters in the Bible. This is the only time she gets mentioned by Mark², but she gets named 12 times in Luke, 5 times in Matthew, and once in Acts. So she was a prominent women.

And there are all sorts of stories that have grown up around her, but what we know for sure is that Jesus healed her, she used her resources to provide for Him, and she was present at His death and resurrection. That's all we know.

And so you might just gloss over her presence here, but that would be a mistake. Her presence highlights a striking absence. And of course the primary people who weren't there were Peter and the other disciples. And this meant it was a bunch of women who witnessed the death and resurrection.

Now more on this next week, but this is strange. And that's because women in Jewish and Roman culture had testimonies with no value. If something terrible happened and the only person who saw it was a woman the perpetrator would get off because a woman couldn't give testimony in court.

And the reason for this was that women were viewed as inferior and unreliable – that's what people thought. And yet, God ordained that Mary and a bunch of other women would be the only witnesses to the most crucial moment in all of history.

Think about it, everything in Christianity revolves around the death and resurrection – this is the lynch pin. And yet in the decades that followed, the people who could testify that they had seen Jesus die, be buried and then resurrected were all women. This is the most important fact of human history and God entrusted it to people no one would trust. What's going on here? Is God just ahead of the times, or could it be that the gospel is about bringing those on the periphery into God's inner circle?

...

So everyone wants to be in the inner circle and to know the right people and get the right career and wear the right clothes and get the right affirmation. And the reason we all want this is because we love it when people center around us. We want them to see all the things we are doing and be jealous. Facebook and TikTok have figured out how to monetize one of the central things that is wrong with the world. We want to be in the center.

...

So I've got four kids, three boys and one princess to rule them all. But having kids has given me the opportunity to become an expert on original sin. Some people watch those Natural Geographic videos where the lion hunts the baby wildebeest and I sit on the couch, drink coffee and watch boys play Lego.

² She is also listed in Mark 16:9, but this section is not original to Mark.

And it's shown me some things about myself. So you've heard the saying "two is company, three is a crowd." And I will assure you that four is a bigger crowd. But something interesting happens with three and that is the wicked art of triangulation.

Triangulation is a manipulation tactic where one person gets someone else to join their team against the third person. There's a persecutor, a victim and a rescuer and it's all about power and being in the inner circle. And broken people play this game – I know because I've played it.

I remember trying to break into the relationship between Jared and Sean. They had already accepted me, but I wanted more. I wanted to be in the center. And so, as a 12-year-old I remember whispering in Jared's ear "I'm going to tell Sean he's my best friend, but really you are my best friend." And then I went over to Sean and whispered, "I told Jared he was my best friend, but really you are my best friend." I was trying to play them off each other because I wanted to be in the center. And if they had been broken and searching for acceptance they would have bitten, but unlike me they weren't insecure in their relationship with each other, and it didn't work. Broken people want to be in the center because we want power and control.

...

But we are more complicated than that, there is another passion that exists within the human heart and that is for justice.

So three thousand years ago Solomon bemoaned:

Again, I observed all the oppression that takes place under the sun. I saw the tears of the oppressed, with no one to comfort them. The oppressors have great power, and their victims are helpless. (Ecclesiastes 4:1)

Nothing has changed in 3000 years. Powerful people are still oppressing the weak and everyone has a keen sense when they aren't being treated fair.

So, on occasion, I will interject myself into one of those Natural Geographic Lego fights that breaks out in our basement. And it doesn't matter who stole what or who hit who back, by the time dad gets called in someone is always bemoaning the injustice of it all.

But it's not just when we are losing something that we bemoan injustice. We are also keenly aware when someone else is being mistreated. This is why the world gets up in arms when one comedian slaps another. It's injustice and we love to humble perpetrators of injustice.

And these two realities are at war within us. We want to be at the center even though we don't belong there, and we want to humble the perpetrators of injustice even though sometimes they are us. And it is into that mess that Jesus breaths redemption.

You see our God both hates injustice and loves bringing those on the margin into His inner circle. And it's the journey from the margin to the inner circle that we get with these women. God entrusts those that no one else would trust with the central message of His gospel.

But there is something else that's beautiful in this text, and that is that God also redeems some who are rich and powerful and uses them to fight injustice. And we get this with Joseph the second.

...

So Jesus is dead, and Sabbath is coming. This means they had to bury Him fast or wait till Sunday. And in this context, we get verse 43.

Joseph of Arimathea took a risk and went to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body. (Joseph was an honored member of the high council, and he was waiting for the Kingdom of God to come.) (Mark 15:43)

Now we learn a couple things about Joseph here. So he was an honoured member of the high council or the Sanhedrin. This means he was wealthy and powerful and a Pharisee. He would have been pious and respected. And he wasn't alone.

Now Mark doesn't tell us who was with him, but John lets us know there was another Pharisee there named Nicodemus.³ And together these two guys buried Jesus and I'm going to treat them as one for the rest of our time today.⁴

...

So, here's an interesting thing about the cross: it brings together some very different people. On one hand we've got Mary and these other women who had no power and testimonies that weren't worth anything. They were marginalized. And yet God brings them into the center of His plans. He empowers them and affirms them.

But on the other hand we've got Joseph and Nicodemus who were powerful, rich men. And usually Mark would paint these guys as the enemy, but here they are sharing space with these women. Something has happened.

Mark says these guys are risking everything to go to Pilot. Here's what they are risking: the Romans had just sentenced Jesus to death for treason. And the Sanhedrin had just found Jesus guilty of blasphemy. So Jesus wasn't popular in their circles and they had to be careful who found out about their interest. This is why John calls them secret disciples of Jesus.

You see here's the thing with power: when you have it you do everything you can to keep it. So powerful people will talk about the good they are doing with their power. But the one thing they won't do is give it up. Powerful people don't do that.

³ John 19:39

⁴ This point is adapted from Tim Keller

And these guys used to be afraid of losing their power but now they are putting their influence and authority and even their lives on the line by asking for Jesus' body. And this is surprising at all sorts of levels.

So in Israel when someone died there were some very specific practices that would be observed. The body would be carefully washed and then covered in spices and wrapped in special burial clothes. This was the final act of love you would give a family member or close friend.

But don't let this idea get romantic. They were washing a dead body. It was gross. And in Jesus' case the body had been mutilated. Whipped. Beaten. Stretched out and contorted. Pierced. There would be guts. It would have been loathsome. So who would do this kind of job?

...

Let me tell you it wasn't powerful, rich men. It was women. This was not 2022, and this was a pink job. But here's the crazy thing, we know there were women present who could have done it – they were watching. But Joseph and Nicodemus did it. They risked their power and lives to honour Jesus and take care of these women.

So what is going on? Why aren't these guys afraid anymore? Why aren't they protecting their dignity and passing this job off to the women? Something has happened.

...

And here we have to read between the lines a bit, but in John 3 we find out that when Nicodemus first approached Jesus he did it at night because he was scared of having people find out he wanted to be a disciple. He was afraid of losing his power.

And in that exchange Jesus responded by giving him that famous picture: "If you want to enter My kingdom you must be born again." What does that mean?

...

Well, here it is: everyone gets born naked. Everyone gets born with nothing. And so the call is to start over. Nothing you try to bring to the table counts. When you come to Jesus you have to begin your journey to God again. But Nicodemus was a righteous man! He was a Pharisee. He had spent his life reading scripture and going to church. And Jesus tells him to be born again? How does this work?

I mean porn addicts should get born again. Drug addicts should get born again. Those guys need to leave yesterday behind and have a fresh start; probably plumbers and painters too – and lawyers for sure. But not Pharisees; they have a head start right? Like they've been being good for a living.

Doesn't that make sense? Obviously Jesus wants us to leave the bad behind. But the good stuff we've been up to, isn't He happy about that? Aren't good people like us a few steps up from the bad?

...

Jesus doesn't think so. Jesus thinks prostitutes and pastors are exactly equal. We all need to be saved by grace. We all start at ground 0 or we don't start at all. That's what being born again means.

You see it turns out there are two ways people rebel against God; there are two ways we try to be the center and make everyone revolve around us. Some people try to be the boss of their own lives by breaking all the rules and doing whatever they want. Sex, drugs, violence, all that. These people look God in the eye and say, "I'm the god of my life and I make the rules."

But other people try to be the boss of their own lives in the opposite way – they follow all the rules and do all the right things. And these people look God in the eye and say, "I'm so good that You have to bless me and take me to heaven."

And these people look very different on the outside, but they are identical at the heart. They both want to be their own saviour, and both kinds of people make a mess of the world – some through sin, others through self-righteousness. And the only way out of both positions is to acknowledge that we need a Saviour to give us a gift we don't deserve.

Pharisees and pagans, prostitutes and pastors, we all need to be born again. And when we are we change.

...

Back in chapter 14 when Jesus was at the Last Supper, He presented an interesting picture no one had imagined before. He took bread and broke it and said, "This is My body, take it and eat." And now, a chapter later, Joseph and Nicodemus are doing just this. They are taking Jesus' body.

Now what does it mean to take Jesus' body? It's more than simply to saying "I believe in Jesus." That's part of it, but it's not the whole thing. To take Jesus means to lay hold of Him and adopt everything He is as your own. It means to make Jesus a part of you and let Him change you.

And this is what happened to Joseph and Nicodemus at the cross. It changed them. Jesus' death shifted their identity. Instead of being people of wealth and power they risked these things to become people of Jesus. And in that moment they used their power and positions to become champions of justice. This is what happens when Jesus changes powerful, rich people.

...

Last week we looked at how Jesus saved a centurion – a professional killer. Here Jesus saves a Pharisee – a professional good person. And we all fit somewhere on that spectrum. And the reality is that for a lot of us here we are more towards the latter end. And so if you are a bit like me then this text is for us.

When powerful, rich, connected people get born again we leave everything behind just like poor, lonely, broken people do. Before the throne of grace everyone starts at 0. But there are aspects of transformation that are unique to people like us.

You see, prior to the incarnation Jesus was the ultimate expression of wealth and power and connection. The God we serve is a Trinity and this means Jesus was part of the ultimate inner circle. In John 17 we find out that the Father glorifies the Son and the Son glorifies the Father. And what this means is each member of the Trinity is constantly centering around the other. They say "I love You. I submit to You. I give Myself for You. And the Father, the Son and the Spirit have been doing this for eternity.

And Jesus traded this wealth and power in to become poor and marginalized. And then when He suffered the scandal of the cross He gave us the ultimate expression of who God is and what He wants us to become. So in Mark 10 Jesus says:

The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give His life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45)

Jesus came not to be circled, but to circle and show us how it is done. He radically emptied Himself of His own interests to stoop and serve. And if people like you and me will see this it will change us like it changed Joseph and Nicodemus. And the evidence they changed was that instead of holding onto their power and positions as their identity, they risked them to honour Jesus and take care of the marginalized.

...

Here's the point as we close. Jesus wants to change you. He wants to become Lord in your life. And that will mean different things depending on where He finds you. Some of us will be empowered and brought into the inner circle like the women in this text.

They were brought in from the margins and given an opportunity to participate in what God was doing. And if you are on the margin today this is likely what Jesus will do. He will invite you into His inner circle, He will give you a new identity, and empower you to leave your brokenness behind to honour Him.

...

But for others of us, when we see Jesus we will realize that all our righteousness is filthy rags and we too will need to start from 0. And when we embrace this Jesus extends the same opportunity to participate with God. But the call to us is also to live like Jesus. And this means risking our power and position to fight injustice and raise up the marginalized.

Friends, the gospel is an incredibly equalizing agent. Its message is the same to each of us, and that is that you are so bad that the God of the universe had to die for you, but you are so loved that He rejoiced to do it.

...

I wish I could tell you that immediately after Jared and Sean had that birthday I changed my tune and started treating my sister right, but it was several years later and the arrival of a pretty girl before any of that changed.

One day, just as I was getting to know Nikki, I walked into the church and saw this guy with his arm around her. And I asked one of her friends, who is that guy? And she replied, oh that's her brother Mike, he's always doing that.

And the penny dropped. That's the way a brother is supposed to treat his sister. He's supposed to use his power and position to protect and encourage. And I realized I needed to change if I was going to follow Jesus. And I realized I needed to change if I was going to get Nikki's attention. And Jesus used that moment to begin a redemption process in me. And I had to get out of the center and go to my sister and repent and start using my power and position to bring her in and build her up.

Friends, we serve a God who hates injustice and loves to bring the marginalized into His inner circle. And by the power of His blood He invites us into this work.