

# **First Serve**

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Studies in the Gospel of Mark

Text

Mark 15:40-47

Topic

Joseph of Arimathea persuades Pilate to give him the body of Jesus so he can prepare the Lord for burial

Title

*"The Persuasion of the Body Snatcher"*

## Introduction

The last lines in books and movies should capture the meaning of the entire story.

Can you identify this famous last line: *"Well, I'm back."*

Those are the last words spoken by Samwise Gamgee to end J.R.R. Tolkien's fantasy trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*.

Sam is an everyman character. He's the guy we are supposed to relate to in the story. He's a guy quietly going about his daily routine who is suddenly pressed upon to do something remarkable.

He returns from the journey changed, never to be quite as quiet or as timid, but valuing more than ever getting back to his routine life.

"Well, I'm back" captures perfectly the fact that his extraordinary exploits had preserved ordinary life in the Shire.

My thoughts went to Sam because of something we see in the verses we are about to read. Mark introduces us to Joseph of Arimathea. He steps forward out of nowhere to claim the body of Jesus, to assure He is prepared for a proper Jewish burial.

Joseph is a closet-disciple who is suddenly pressed into service to do something remarkable.

Mark also calls our attention to the group of women who had been following Jesus around as He ministered to others for three-and-one-half years. They served Him, performing routine, you might even say, mundane tasks.

- I mostly identify with the group of women. My service to the Lord is generally pretty routine.
- I'd like to identify more with Joseph, and do something remarkable.

The *routine* and the *remarkable* will be our theme. I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Don't Think That Your Routine Service For The Lord Is Insignificant, and #2 Don't Think That You're Remarkable Service For The Lord Is Inconceivable.

## #1 Don't Think That Your Routine Service For The Lord Is Insignificant

(v40-41)

Mr. Miagi's training regimens in *The Karate Kid* are the classic example of a person coming to realize **the significance of the mundane.**

He had Daniel sanding his floors, waxing his cars, and painting his fence and his house.

When Daniel complained he wasn't learning karate, Mr. Miagi asked him to demonstrate the repetitive movements:

- "Show me sand the floor."
- "Show me wax on, wax off."
- "Show me paint the fence."
- "Show me paint the house."

Each movement turned out to be a defensive response. What seemed repetitive and routine to Daniel was really quite significant in preparing him for his tournament.

Most of your daily activities as you walk with the Lord are pretty mundane, pretty routine. "Wax on; wax off."

***Never think they are insignificant.*** Doing *everything* as unto the Lord is honorable in itself, **and** it prepares you for whatever may be coming your way.

Mark introduces us to a group of ladies whose routine daily life was to minister to the mundane needs of Jesus.

Mar 15:40 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,

Mary of Magdala is how it should read. Since there were so many Mary's following Jesus, this one was distinguished from the others by reference to her Galilean hometown of Magdala.

This is the first mention of her in Mark's Gospel. The earliest reference to her is in Luke 8:2, where it is recorded that Jesus cast out of her seven demons.

She is mentioned twelve times in the New Testament, making her the second most mentioned woman, after Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Except in John 19:25, Mary is always named first in these lists of women. We can therefore deduce that she held an unofficial position of leadership among the women.

Mary of Magdala has been the victim of slander by church officials. Specifically, that she was a prostitute.

The Roman Catholic Church was guilty of fastening this slander upon Mary when at Naples, in 1324, it established its first "Magdalen House" for the rescue and maintenance of fallen women.

*There is zero biblical evidence that Mary was a prostitute or a notorious sinner.*

Nor was she the girlfriend or the wife of Jesus, as is sometimes portrayed in extra biblical literature. For one thing, the fact that she assumed a leading role among the women argues for her being a much older woman. We may imagine her in her twenties or thirties, but she was just as likely above fifty or sixty years of age.

Most of the references to her are found in the crucifixion and empty tomb accounts, where she is portrayed as a loyal disciple at the foot of the cross, and as one of the first witnesses to the resurrection.

The next Mary is distinguished by her sons. "James the less and Joses" must have been well known in the early church. The nickname "less" apparently served to distinguish this James from other men of that common name by a reference to his stature. He was either a little guy, or one of those big guys that you call "tiny."

Salome's name appears only in Mark's Gospel (15:40; 16:1). A comparison with Matthew 20:20 and 27:56 indicates that she was "the mother of Zebedee's children," the apostles James and John. From a comparison with John 19:25, it is commonly held that she was also the sister of Jesus' mother.

Mar 15:41 who also followed Him and ministered to Him when He was in Galilee, and many other women who came up with Him to Jerusalem.

Numerous other women followed Jesus to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover.

Mary, Mary, and Salome ministered to Jesus when He was in Galilee; **and** they "followed Him" when He was outside of Galilee. They were constantly serving Him.

Think, for just a moment, about Jesus and the Twelve, and sometimes many more, traveling from place to place, as Jesus preached the Gospel. There was grocery shopping to be done; there were meals to be prepared; clothes needed laundering and mending.

Everyday... Day-by-day... For three-and-one-half years.

They did it, quite literally, as unto the Lord.

*So ought we to do our mundane and routine activities as unto the Lord.*

Col 3:17 And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.

For some of us, it's going to be "wax on, wax off," for the better part of our lives. It is **not** insignificant if we are where the Lord wants us, doing what He wants us to do, in His Name, and for His sake.

At the same time, we don't want to settle for the routine if and when the remarkable presents itself.

## #2 Don't Think That Your Remarkable Service For The Lord Is Inconceivable

(v42-47)

In the Old Testament, Amos was a herdsman, and a grower of figs. About 755BC, God called him to leave his farm in the southern kingdom of Judah to go and prophesy judgment against the northern kingdom of Israel.

It was altogether remarkable:

- He had no formal training as a graduate of the School of the Prophets.
- He had no informal training.
- He had no experience.

As far as we can tell, his remarkable ministry as a prophet lasted just a few months. Afterward he returned to his hometown of Tekoa and, presumably, lived-out the rest of his life as a rancher and farmer.

No formal training... No informal training... No experience.  
Sounds like us!

**There's an 'Amos' in all of us, and we see that in Joseph of Arimathea.**

Mar 15:42 Now when evening had come, because it was the Preparation Day, that is, the day before the Sabbath,

"The Preparation Day" was a technical term that described the daylight hours on Friday leading up to sundown Friday, when the Sabbath began. Because no work was to be done on the weekly Sabbath, you must make *preparation* for it ahead of time - doing whatever needed to be done to avoid work.

The regular, weekly Sabbath was sundown Friday through sundown Saturday. It was never, and it is not, Sunday. Sunday is not somehow the 'new' Christian Sabbath.

Because we know Jesus was the fulfillment of Passover, and therefore was crucified at the same time the Passover lambs were being slain in the Temple, we know the date was the 15th of the month Nisan on the Jewish calendar.

We're not sure of the year, although it was most likely 33AD. That date is based on the classic and scholarly work of James Usher in the 1600's. In 33AD the 15th of Nisan fell on a Friday.

The Hobbits had "second breakfast." Jews had a first and second evening in their reckoning of each day.

Jesus died shortly after 3:00pm. "Evening" here means the *first* evening, from mid-afternoon to sunset, and not the *second* evening, from sunset to dark, since Jesus was buried before sundown.

It was probably about 4:00pm. Since no work could be done after sundown, time was at a premium if Jesus were to be prepared for burial. There were only about three hours remaining til sunset.

But, wait a minute. In all His talking to His disciples, about His crucifixion and resurrection, *no instructions had been given about His burial*. It seemed to be a major flaw in His plan.

God is always able to provide for His plan. That's essentially what **providence** is - God providing for His plan, without violating human free will.

In this case, God prompted a man to step forward. He was compelled, obviously, by the Holy Spirit, Who gave him boldness. But it's clear he was acting freely, and could have refused.

Mar 15:43 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.

Joseph comes out of nowhere. We meet him for the first time. So Mark provides some basic background information.

Joseph was yet another common name in Israel. This was the Joseph from "Arimathea." We don't really know where that was.



It may have been the town we know as Ramah. Wherever it was, Joseph now resided in Jerusalem.

"Prominent" stands alone as a descriptor. It means he was socially connected, held in esteem, and wealthy.

The "council" he was a "member" of was the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin. It consisted of seventy-one men. Think of it as a kind of Supreme Court.

Interesting but totally unimportant factoid: Several aspects of the U.S. Senate, including the semi-circle seating of the senators, were derived from the Jewish Sanhedrin by the Founding Fathers.

"Waiting for the kingdom of God" indicates Joseph was a spiritually-minded man. He was a devout Jew, in the best possible sense of their religion.

But, wait a minute. Wasn't it the Sanhedrin that had condemned Jesus of blasphemy, and had turned Him over to Rome as an accused traitor to Caesar?

- John's Gospel reveals that Joseph was a secret disciple of Jesus but that fear kept him from making any public confession of his hope (19:38).
- Luke notes that "[Joseph] had not consented to their decision and deed" (Luke 23:51).

Today we might label Joseph a closet Christian.

Nicodemus, who came to Jesus at night, shared a closet with him. I can only imagine them at the meetings, looking at each other, probably each hoping the other would be courageous enough to speak up.

Neither one did speak-up.

Before we criticize either or both of them, consider if there has ever been a time you or I held our tongue out of fear of sharing Jesus.

Closet Joseph suddenly gave way to courageous Joseph, coming forward asking Pilate for the body of Jesus.

Mark doesn't mention him, but Nicodemus also stepped-up. He bought the spices that were needed to prepare Jesus for burial, and he helped Joseph get Jesus down from the Cross.

Courageous doesn't begin to describe Joseph's actions.

Pilate must have been in a foul mood. The Jewish ruling council that Joseph was a member of, had cornered him into releasing a notorious terrorist, BarAbbas, and executing an innocent man, Jesus, against his better judgment. They had made a fool of him, pressuring him into a terrible decision.

I can't imagine Pilate would be happy to see a member of the council, or hear any more talk about Jesus.

Besides risking possible repercussions from Pilate, the Sanhedrin would be very unhappy to see one of their members showing compassion for Jesus, even in His death.

Political pressure, and peer pressure, were against Joseph. Pressure had kept him quiet before, but not any more.

We would attribute his boldness to the Holy Spirit coming upon him. Still, he had the choice to obey or disobey.

If Joseph had balked, God would have raised-up someone else.

It's reminiscent of Elijah in the Old Testament. On the run, being hunted by evil Queen Jezebel, Elijah complained to God that he was alone in his devotion. God responded by telling Elijah He had seven thousand people who were loyal to Him.

It seems they were in the closet, but any one of them could be tapped to step-up.

God is never without resources. He has made ample provision to see His plan for history, to redeem the human race, to its successful completion.

It's our privilege to be a part of God fulfilling His plan. He's chosen to use believers as His agents, rather than, for example, angels. It seems inefficient, but in reality it's brilliant, because God's strength and glory are revealed in our weakness.

Mar 15:44 Pilate marveled that He was already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him if He had been dead for some time.

Death by crucifixion could take days. The Romans liked to prolong death as a deterrent to crime. Cruel and unusual punishment was the goal.

The centurion in charge of the crucifixion doubled as the coroner. A seasoned soldier who had undoubtedly killed men on the battlefield; and a skilled executioner who crucified men for a living; he knew when a person was really, really dead, and not just 'mostly' dead.

You could say that the centurion issued a verbal death certificate.

Mark goes to great lengths to establish Jesus' death on the Cross. It's a good thing he did, because one of the false theories about Jesus is that He wasn't dead; that He revived after being taken off the Cross. Not true; He was officially pronounced dead.

Mar 15:45 So when he found out from the centurion, he granted the body to Joseph.

The word used for "body" is *carcass*. It's a strong word, again intended to communicate that no life was in Jesus' physical body.

Mar 15:46 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.

I found this quote regarding Jewish burial customs in the first century:

As soon as a person was dead... his body was to be washed. In this washing, the body was anointed with perfumes. Nard was the most usual of these, but myrrh and aloes were also used.

By the time of Christ, the custom was that the body was elaborately wrapped in a shroud and the face was covered with a special cloth called a *sudarium*. The hands and feet were tied with strips of cloth.

All of this happened in very short order; burial usually followed within eight hours of death. In such a hot climate, burial could not be delayed.

John's Gospel tells us that the tomb was near the place of crucifixion (19:42). It had been cut out horizontally into the side of a rock cliff. Such carefully hewn tombs were common around Jerusalem and generally belonged to well-to-do families.

It was Joseph's own tomb (Matthew 27:60) and had never yet been used (Luke 23:53). Jesus' burial in a rich man's tomb was a fulfillment of Isaiah 53:9, "And they made His grave with the wicked - But with the rich at His death..."

They "rolled a stone against the door of the tomb." The stone was not a rough boulder but a large, circular, flat stone, fitted in a groove, which could be rolled back to open the tomb when necessary. It was heavy, and would require several men to roll it open. The stone was rolled over the rectangular entrance to keep out grave robbers and animals.

[Mar 15:47](#) And Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus observed where He was laid.

If, in fact, Salome was the sister of Mary, the mother of Jesus, we may speculate that she went to comfort her.

Mark includes their observation of the tomb to counter-act another of the false theories about the resurrection of Jesus. They say that the disciples went to the wrong tomb on Sunday and, finding it empty, only thought that Jesus had risen from the dead.

People will believe almost any lie about Jesus rather than admit they are sinners who need to be saved.

Like Amos, Joseph of Arimathea burst onto the scene at the behest of God's providence to perform a remarkable service.

I said earlier that there was an 'Amos' in all of us. Allow me to clarify.

I think we'd agree that the Holy Spirit came upon Amos, and Joseph, giving them the boldness to serve the Lord in these remarkable ways. For their part, they chose to not quench the Holy Spirit, but rather to yield to Him.

So when I say there's an 'Amos' in all of us, I'm really talking about God the Holy Spirit's effect upon us.

If Amos and Joseph could be given boldness, how much more can we have boldness, since we have the Holy Spirit permanently residing within us?

We've further been promised His coming upon us, to empower us, as a gift to be received by faith.

I've made a comparison between us and the women and Joseph:

- Like the women who followed Jesus, most of our serving is routine, but it is never to be considered insignificant, since it can be done as unto the Lord.
- Like Joseph, we should not think it inconceivable that we be empowered to do something, or some things, that are remarkable.

Joseph is especially encouraging because we're told he was afraid in John's Gospel. We see him hiding his faith in Jesus.

How is that encouraging? **The Lord nevertheless chose him to serve.**

Jesus looks for the unlikely. If you're here today, cowering in fear of men, hiding your Christian faith, barricaded in the closet, know this. *You are not disqualified from being called upon to step forward and be used by the Lord.*

**You may, in fact, be the perfect candidate.** It goes against our thinking, but God delights in using frail, broken vessels, in order that the glory might be His and not ours.

Joseph was empowered to do this one thing, and afterwards nothing more is known about him. I think we're on safe ground to say he went on to walk with the Lord, but as far as the biblical record is concerned, he pinch-hit this one time.

I don't want to give the impression that we therefore can only perform one remarkable deed in our lifetime as we walk with Jesus.

The way to think about it is this: We should do everything as unto the Lord, expecting *at any minute* to do something out of our routine that is remarkable.

It could happen once in your lifetime... Or once a day... Or once an hour.

Leave it up to the Lord. He is the one providing for His plan.

For your part, believe you have received the empowering of God the Holy Spirit, then walk by faith, not quenching Him.