

# “A Life Transformed”

a sermon by

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**Text: “He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be given to him” (Matthew 27:58).**

**One of the fascinating aspects of Holy Week involves the “faces around the cross.” To be sure, there are some individuals who play very powerful roles in the events of this week. One thinks immediately not only of Jesus, but Pontius Pilate, the Roman procurator; Herod, the King of the Jews; Caiaphas, the High Priest; Simon Peter, Judas--certainly these names leap off the pages at us.**

**But there were minor actors as well. Simon of Cyrene was a pilgrim coming from Africa to Jerusalem, who happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time and who was forced to carry the cross of Christ, when Christ was no longer able to do so. There were women present as well--women with names like Mary Magdalene, Salome, Mary, the mother of James and John, and of course, Mary, the mother of Jesus. We do not know a lot about them, except we do know that when all the disciples had fled, the women did not abandon Jesus. On Easter morning they were the ones who went to the tomb, found the stone guarding the tomb rolled away, and the tomb empty.**

## I.

One of these lesser-known participants was a man by the name of Joseph of Arimathea. He was from a small town in the central hill country of Judea. We know very little about Joseph of Arimathea, though he is mentioned in all four of the Gospels (Matthew 27:57,59; Mark 15: 43; Luke 23:50; John 19:38).

Here is what we know about Joseph of Arimathea. We know that he was a wealthy man and he was a prominent Jew and member of the Sanhedrin, the governing council of the Jews and the group that would have conducted the trial of Jesus. Luke tells us that he did not agree with the Sanhedrin's decision to convict Jesus and that he was looking for the Kingdom of God (Luke 23:50). All of the gospel writers agree that after the crucifixion and death of Jesus on the cross Joseph of Arimathea went to Pontius Pilate and asked him for the body of Jesus in order to give the body a proper burial, and that when Pilate agreed to his request, he took the body of Jesus and buried it in a tomb, which he provided for Jesus.

John's gospel, however, gives us a further insight into Joseph of Arimathea. John tells us that Joseph was actually a disciple of Jesus, but that he was a secret disciple, because he was afraid of the Jews (John 19:38). In other words, he was like a lot of us. He didn't mind following Jesus, as long as it did not threaten his livelihood, his status in the community, or his money. You know the more you have, the harder it is to give it up.

But something happened to Joseph of Arimathea. After the death of Christ, Joseph of Arimathea did something that demanded a great deal of courage. He went to Pontius Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus in order to give Jesus a proper burial. That was not an easy thing to do. He knew there would be criticism, even hatred, toward him. I think I know what happened to Joseph. I think he watched Jesus die on the cross, giving his life for our sins and that in doing so, something happened inside of Joseph that changed his life forever. I think he gritted his teeth and said, "I will never waver when God asks me to make a tough decision."

I wonder if there is someone here today who is like Joseph of Arimathea, someone who has been a follower of Jesus in secret, but someone who like Joseph needs to have a wake-up call, to have a bell rung.

## II.

One of the things we know about Joseph is that he was rich. Most of the time in the church we don't say many nice things about people who are rich. But wealth can make a difference when it is used in a constructive way. There are two people that come to mind when I think of wealth used in a positive way.

One man is James B. Duke, who was one of the great philanthropists of the State of North Carolina, and who built Duke University. I don't know a lot about the life of James B. Duke. I know that like powerful people he was a very complex person. On one occasion

he referred to himself as a “whiskey drinking, cigar smoking, divorced, member of the Methodist Church.” But I do know two things about him. When he built Duke University, his vision was to build a Gothic chapel in the center of the campus that would dominate the entire campus, and he did that. I know that he stipulated in his will that at graduation every Duke student would receive a copy of the New Testament, which is, as you can imagine, a deep embarrassment to the administration of the college.

Another person of great wealth was a philanthropist by the name of John Templeton, who spoke at this church some years ago as part of our Uptown Forum. John Templeton was an investment banker and founder of what is today known as the Templeton Fund. Several years ago he established the Templeton Prize for Religion and Science, which recognizes contributions in the field of religion for the betterment of society. For his accomplishments he was recognized by Queen Elizabeth of England and granted the title of a Knight of the Royal Order. John Templeton is an elder in the Presbyterian Church. As a young investment banker in the 1970s he was invited to serve on the Board of Princeton Seminary. He was asked to serve on the endowment committee of the Seminary, which he agreed to do, but only on the condition that he be the chair and sole member of the committee. Tom Gillespie said that when he became President of the Seminary in 1982 the endowment of the Seminary was \$52 million dollars. By 1990 the endowment had grown under Templeton’s leadership, to \$150 million dollars. A decade later the endowment had grown to \$950 million dollars. Today, the endowment of Seminary is \$1.1 billion dollars, which is an amount greater than the endowment of all the other Presbyterian Seminaries combined.

I remember meeting John Templeton on several occasions. He was a quiet, modest, and unassuming person. He was not what you would call an outstanding speaker. But he did have a talent and he used that gift in service to the church and to humankind.

Now, let’s be honest. Most of us here will not be James B. Duke or John Templeton. But I do think that there is something that each of us can do to make a difference. Several weeks ago a member of this church changed jobs in order to make a difference. Elizabeth Little left her job at the Westin Hotel to go to Mississippi to help in the recovery efforts in the wake of the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. Now, I don’t believe that Elizabeth thinks of herself as a saint. In fact, she would be very embarrassed if she knew her name was being used in a sermon. But she did something that I think God is calling each one of us to do. She moved from being a secret admirer of Jesus to becoming a disciple.

Today is Wednesday of Holy Week. Tomorrow we move toward Maundy Thursday and then on the following day to Good Friday. For most of us the rhythm of Holy Week is familiar. We have all been here before. But, can you imagine the difference we could make if each one of us showed the courage that Joseph of Arimathea did in going to Pontius Pilate and asking for the body of Jesus in order to assure a proper burial for this one whom he now was following.

**Over the past few years we have seen our shares of scandals in this country--on Wall Street, in the White House, on the campuses of Universities such as the terrible events now being played out on the Campus of Duke University. Was there ever a time in which people needed to move from being secret admirers of Jesus to becoming real disciples, that we will do everything in our power to honor God with our bodies, our minds, and our souls, with our deeds as well as our methods and money, to take a position of zero tolerance to the things that demean the human in us and erode confidence in our society?**

**Joseph of Arimathea was unquestionably one of the little people of lent. But he made a difference. And by God's grace we too can move from being an admirer of Jesus to a disciple of Christ.**

**Amen!**