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**From the Pulpit: March 31, 2024**

Easter Sunday

**The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg**

Matthew 27:7–61; 28:1–10

***God's Odd Benedictions, IX: Two Josephs***

*After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you." So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers and sisters to go to Galilee; there they will see me."*

*"I say 'loaned' rather than 'gave' because as it turns out, Jesus wouldn't need his borrowed grave for long."*

Now who is this Joseph of Arimathea and what makes him more important in all four Gospels than the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, the Magi, the Shepherds, and Zacchaeus? Joseph appears quadruple the number of times as those other events. Who is he and where did he come from? Where is Arimathea? But that's just the point—no one knows. There are some educated guesses, but no one's sure. This cryptic character comes out of nowhere and is never heard from again.

In the Gospel drama, Joseph of Arimathea bounds out recklessly to center stage as if from nowhere, disappears just as quickly, and is never heard from again. One New Testament scholar calls Joseph

"The Man Who Did One Thing."<sup>11</sup> I love the way he puts that: The Man Who Did One Thing. But what a One Thing Joseph did!

**W**hen you come to the end of all four Gospels, no matter what Gospel you're reading, you're going to see an obscure, minor actor with a walk-on part who appears out of nowhere, disappears just as quickly, and is never heard from again.

His name is Joseph of Arimathea, and he is the guy who talked Pilate into handing over Jesus' bruised, beaten, battered, bloodied body from the cross and then loaned him his own personal grave so that Jesus could have a proper burial. I say 'loaned' rather than 'gave' because as it turns out, Jesus wouldn't need his borrowed grave for long.

Actually maybe Joseph of Arimathea did more than one thing. Matthew tells about Joseph in five verses and 95 words; Joseph's story is very lean. And when the Christian Church comes across a biblical story that is so terse and lacking in details, the Church tries to fill in the background with myth and legend. Tradition says that Joseph of Arimathea was Mother Mary's uncle, which makes him Jesus' great uncle of course.

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<sup>11</sup>Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*—Vol. 2: *The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1990), p. 772.

They say Joseph of Arimathea brought Christianity to the British Isles. When he got there, weary from his long journey, he stabbed his walking staff into the earth, and it instantly sprouted branches and leaves and flowers. This is a real tree. It's called the Glastonbury Thorn. They say it came from Joseph's walking staff.

But that walking staff was not the only thing Joseph brought to England. Did you ever wonder how King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table even knew about the Holy Grail, the chalice Jesus drank from at the Last Supper? At the cross, after Jesus died, Joseph of Arimathea filled it with Jesus' blood, which gave it miraculous healing powers. Joseph buried it in England. King Arthur and his ilk have been looking for it ever since.

But all of that is a bit sketchy. It's probably all myth and legend. Joseph really is The Man Who Did One Thing. This quiet Joseph is so important he's mentioned in all four Gospel Easter Stories; not even Peter the future pope nor John, Jesus' best friend, merit that distinction. But most of you have parsed my sermon title for this morning. In **this** Gospel, in **Matthew's** Gospel, there are Two Quiet Josephs. Matthew bookends his Gospel with Two Quiet Josephs.<sup>22</sup>

Matthew's Gospel is so shapely; it comes with two Joseph bookends. Two Quiet Josephs. At the beginning, a modest carpenter to usher him into this life, and at the end, a rich lawyer to escort him out of it. A midwife at the beginning, and an undertaker at the end. Neither of them ever says a word, not in direct discourse anyway; it's their quiet actions that matter.

Two points today: Thanksgiving and Motivation. Thanksgiving first. Go ahead: think of a quiet Joseph in your life who midwifed you into life at the beginning or showed up at the end in the cemetery and shoveled the dirt where resurrection happens.

<sup>22</sup>I borrow the idea for this sermon from Frederick Dale Bruner, *op. cit.*, pp. 769-770.

Maybe it was a fourth-grade schoolteacher who wouldn't give up on you after everybody else did and patiently taught you to read when the words on every page you scanned seemed all scrambled up like alphabet soup. You only spent nine months in her classroom and then she disappeared from your life and was never heard from again. Her name is Josephine.

*“Joseph really is The Man Who Did One Thing.”*

Maybe it was the awkward friend you made in the seventh grade when the cool kids ignored you and the cheerleaders tormented you and the star athletes batted away every shot you didn't want to take anyway and the bullies feasted on your lunch money. He was just as socially clueless as you but you made your halting way together through your thirteenth year and

learned something about girls and played Nintendo and joined the Chess Team and started a Star Wars Fan Club but then after graduation, you went to the University of Wisconsin and he went to UCLA and you haven't heard from him since. His name is Joseph. He was The Boy Who Did One Thing.

Maybe it was the boss who gave you a job when she didn't have any jobs to give and a chance when you thought there were no chances left. She died of cancer months after she hired you, but you were on your way. Her name is Josephine.

Maybe it was the friend who swooped in and stayed when your child was hit by a car and you just wanted to die too, you just wanted to die. Your broken heart turned you into a seething, swirling volcano of rage and you were unfit for human company because you lunged and snapped at anyone who came close.

But this friend, she **dares** to come close. She **dares** to touch your sleeve. She swoops in and she stays and stays and stays as you flail away at her with your words and she absorbs the percussion of your anger until its energy ebbs away, and you are okay now. You believe in **God** again. You believe in **life** again.

You don't see her much anymore. She doesn't come around much anymore. She's disappeared from your life. Her name is Josephine, and she is The Woman Who Did One Thing. She couldn't raise your child from the dead; all she could do was show up in the cemetery to shovel the dirt where resurrection happens and screw down the lid of the coffin from which your child will one day rise from the dead.

So much for Thanksgiving. How about Motivation? Are you a Quiet Joseph to anybody, anybody at all? Look, we can neither create new life at the beginning nor raise the dead at the end, but we can be midwives and undertakers. We can usher in new life at the beginning and give it a dignified exit at the end. I may be The Man Who Did Just One Thing, but without that one thing, resurrection can't happen; without that one thing, there is no Easter morning.

Do you remember how Mitch Albom's wife Janine becomes a Quiet Joseph to Morrie Schwartz in *Tuesdays with Morrie*? During a newspaper strike, the sportswriter Mitch Albom flies from Detroit to Massachusetts every Tuesday to visit Morrie, his favorite professor from his college days at Brandeis University. Morrie has ALS, Lou Gehrig's disease, and he is dying by inches.

Mitch thinks so highly of Morrie he flies 800 miles to visit him every Tuesday, and on one of these Tuesday pilgrimages to the beloved guru, Mitch brings his wife Janine. "Mitch tells me you're a professional singer," says Morrie. "Yes," says Janine. "He says you're great." "No, he just says that." Morrie is not convinced. "Will you sing something for me?" he asks.

Mitch has heard this request of his wife hundreds of times. When people find out you sing for a living, they always say "Sing something for us." But Janine is not only shy, she is a perfectionist. She is not given to singing at cocktail parties or in living rooms without a seated, attentive audience, proper accompaniment, and decent amplification. She would always

politely decline. Which is what Mitch expected now. Which is when she began to sing:

*The very thought of you  
and I forget to do  
the little ordinary things that everyone ought  
to do.*

*I see your face in every flower,  
your eyes in stars above,*

*it's just the thought of you,  
the very thought of you,  
my love.*

"Thanksgiving  
and  
Motivation."

When Mitch notices the tears rolling down Morrie's cheeks, he realizes that in all the years he's heard his wife sing, he's never heard her sing quite like this.<sup>3</sup> Janine Albom

can't cure the sick or raise the dead, but she can usher a dying man off this mortal coil with a transcendent serenade. Listen: can you hear the quiet whisper of the rustling shroud, can you hear Joseph groan as he heaves Jesus' bruised body into his virgin tomb, can you hear the shovel scrape the dirt in the cemetery where resurrection happens?

Listen: Can you hear the silence of the quiet cemetery on Saturday? Now feel it: do you feel the earth trembling beneath your feet, the rocks riven apart, the vast universe itself split apart by a blinding flash of light too bright and beautiful for words?

Friends, that is the Easter promise: our story is never over. And it starts with someone who will do just one thing.

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<sup>3</sup>Mitch Albom, *Tuesdays with Morrie* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), pp. 146-147.

## —Prayers of the People— The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

Incarnate One, Word made flesh, Vulnerable God made known in the empty tomb: here we are transformed, the world aglow in a kind of resurrection hope.

We pray to you: the one to whom we sing Alleluia. The one about whom we say Christ is risen, Christ is risen indeed.

We carry to your throne of grace our Easter alleluia. We are surprised. There is something here we did not expect. The empty tomb. The stone rolled away. The mystery of the Easter promise. It holds something we did not yet know how to express. And, we arrived here hard pressed. We carried into this vaulted place our own sorrow, our own worry, our own burdens too hard to hold.

Some part of us expected to carry them back out again. Some part of us expected to remain unchanged. And yet here you are, alive with possibility, primed, prepared and ready to love.

Let us be open now. Let us carry a kind of Easter hope within us. Let there be renewal, restoration, resurrection, revival. Bind what is broken. Mend what is torn. Paint a new beginning across the canvas of our lives.

Let the underbelly of our fears be met by your gentle words “do not fear,” duplicated across the ache and dream of this life. Disclose to us a kind of peace we never thought possible, especially on the days when the thickness of loss and unraveling make anything and everything hard.

Disclose to us your peace that passes all human understanding. Let your empty tomb become for us a kind of reality, a necessity, a way toward the mystery of forgiveness and blessing, redemption making room for our own trembling spirit to meet yours. Let us trust that you have opted out of the sin-accounting business and chosen a kind of powerlessness such that humility meant facing even death on a cross.

And now, the empty tomb, its own mystery, where your welcome is wide, and your arms are open wide, and the door swings open for those who seek you. We turn to you to lay down our burdens. For the one who has had surgery, too young, too vulnerable to face such pain, we pray. For the one finally home and recovering after too long a season of hardship, make a way through. For the one whose grief came unexpected and urgent, give comfort. For the one whose memory fades, let love be more than remembering. For the one who held unspeakable news of an impossible diagnosis, let there be a way toward love, a vulnerable kind of love. For the one whose major surgery approaches, let your spirit hold every worry. For the many situations we never expected, hear our prayer.

We are an Easter people and alleluia is our song. Make a way through toward alleluia for the ones we hold most dear. Now that our burdens are held in your arms of love, hold, too, our joy. We give you thanks for the new ones in our midst, small and fragile and instantly beloved. For the season of renewal, much anticipated and yet still a delight. For the one who has found themselves and their place in this world, thanks tumbles forth. For the longevity of love, side by side, a steady thanks. For the phone call to a friend, the familiar laughter that can still spark the hidden heart of things, a grateful prayer. For the star-filled sky, the symphony, the cloudless blue-sky day filled with birdsong, we are in awe. For the new that springs up, and the season of spring that echoes your renewal. Hold our gratitude, hold our thanksgiving, hold our lives, tender and awake.

And let us pray for the world. For the nations at war, we dare to pray for peace: for Palestine and the infinite grief, for Israel, for Russia, for Ukraine, for Myanmar, Pakistan, Haiti, where violence has the capacity to stop, if only hearts were open to another way. For leaders on the global stage, give them clarity of their pursuit of goodness and mercy, justice, and truth.

Easter God, punctuate this day with your incomprehensible grace. Unfold the dynamic possibility of your presence to us. And hear us as we pray: Our Father.... Amen.

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