

*Meeting the People of Passion Week, Pt. 5*

## ***Love and Lost Causes:***

### ***Joseph of Arimathea***

*Luke 23: 50-56; John 19: 38-42*

**First Presbyterian Church  
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**Palm Sunday, April 5, AD 2020  
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Are you drawn to lost causes? I find I'll stick with something that seems apparently like a lost cause if something higher or deeper than immediate success drives me. I remember the year a friend and I coached a middle school soccer team. One Saturday morning, only 8 of our guys showed up. The smugly polite coach of the other team asked if we'd like to borrow some of his players so we could field a full team. Without hesitation, we looked him dead in the eye and said, "We'll play with 8." As we got ready for the game, I went to my big defender. He was looking up into the Saturday morning blue sky. "Dorian, buddy, we're down a few guys today. You're really going to have to focus on the field. You're the only man back here." Dorian said, holding his arms out, "I am like a flower. You must open me." His gaze returned to the sky. It was going to be a long morning. We got pounded. That's all right. I'd rather lose believing in my guys than importing some of the enemy players to make it seemingly more competitive.

When is it good to support a seemingly lost cause?

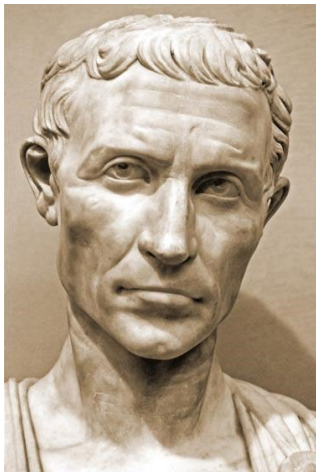
- When, even if no one believes, you know you have an invention to create, a program to write, an app to devise, a painting you have to render, a story you have to tell, a passion you have to express. You've got to try, even if you fail.
- When what is true and good and beautiful demands your allegiance even if you're going down supporting this person or cause.
- When you believe something deep in your soul.
- When you love someone with all your heart.

By Good Friday, Jesus was a lost cause. The crowds had turned against him. Jesus was trending downward like a boulder rolling down a hill. Most of his disciples fled. Peter, the Rock, had denied even knowing him. People passed by the cross, gawking. They finally had some place to hurl their venom. An acceptable target. Matthew records that these passersby "Wagged their heads, deriding him: 'If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross' .... So also

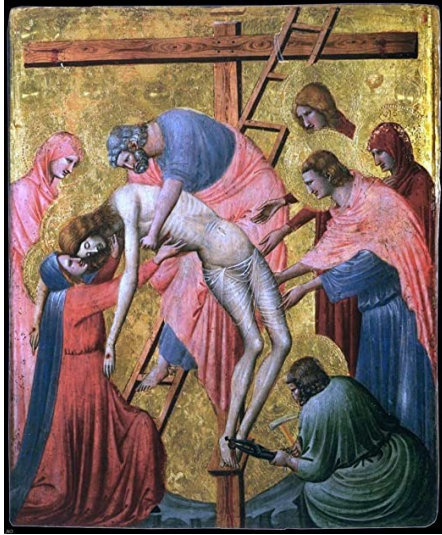
the chief priests, with the scribes and the elders mocked him, saying, “He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him (Mt. 27: 39--42). *Let him come down from the cross.* Such a cruel taunt. His arms and feet were spiked to the beams, through tendons, so that even trying to rip himself away would not work. Jesus was affixed to the killing tree. Only a display of divine power could free him.

But Jesus declined using such power. He did not take himself down from the cross. He let it kill him. Jesus left it for another to get him down from the cross. *He let love’s work for lost causes be his release from the cruel beams.*

Enter Joseph of Arimathea, a wealthy member of the ruling council who had not consented to Jesus’s condemnation. Joseph threw caution to the wind. When he had nothing to gain, Joseph brought Jesus’ body from the cross to an honorable burial site. This would cost Joseph politically, socially, economically and even physically. And it would be an act of everlasting significance. Let’s think of the stages and costs in Joseph’s quest to move the body of Jesus’ to his tomb. I’m going to show you some pictures from great Christian art as I walk you through the story.



**1) Political.** Joseph went to ask Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, if he could take away the body of Jesus. That’s stated so matter-of-factly in the Bible that we hardly realize what was involved. Imagine if you wanted to ask Gov. Edwards for the body of an executed criminal, and you wanted to see him this very afternoon. Who gets to do that? Surely not me. Maybe Franklin Foil because he’s a state senator. It has to be someone with some political clout, willing to cash in a lot of chips for this favor. Joseph was part of the elite, and he spent all his influence for this urgent favor from Pilate.<sup>1</sup>



## 2) Physical

Next was the matter of actually getting the body down from the cross. The Romans would have been no help. Joseph and his friend Nicodemus had to do the physical labor of unfastening Jesus' body from the beams of the cross. Jesus had been spiked onto the wood. Those nails had to hold the full force of a man writhing in agony for hours. You didn't just pluck them out. That's why you see the great tongs being used in this painting. It took jarring, prying force to extract the nails. And precarious balancing on a ladder to hold the dead weight of the body.<sup>2</sup>



All the while they did not want to tear or harm any further the precious body of Jesus. With tear-clouded eyes, after freeing him from the cruel nails, they had to let down the body of Jesus gently with a winding sheet. In this vivid painting by Caravaggio, you see Joseph holding Jesus under the knees while Nicodemus has him under the back. Lifeless bodies give you no help. Meanwhile, the distraught women cried out their grief and their concern that no further indignity be done to him. "Let him come down from the cross" the people had daunted. Oh, he did come down, but it took Joseph's tender, arduous service of love to retrieve him.<sup>3</sup>



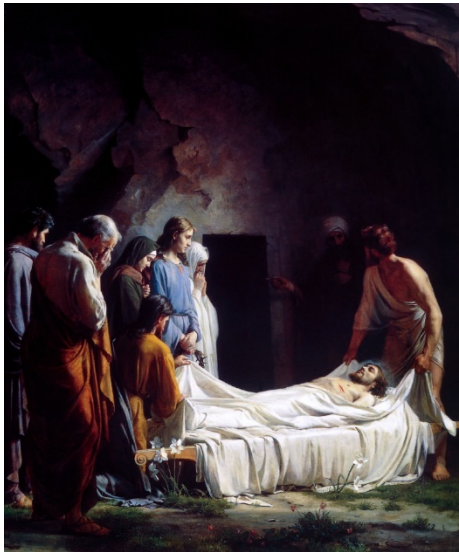
**3) Social.** Then Jesus had to be carried from Golgotha back towards the city to the garden where Joseph had carved out a new tomb in the rock that he intended to use for his family. They had to endure the stares and the jeers of those they passed. Normally, crucified criminals were thrown into a pit near Golgotha, to be devoured by

predators and flies. But these friends honored their Lord with a makeshift, struggling procession to the tomb. Joseph and Nicodemus were seen by the whole city. With every step, their social standing plummeted for showing such honor to a dishonorable, disgraced, convicted criminal. <sup>4</sup>



#### 4) Family Implications

In those days, the tombs would be hewn into rock, above ground. A body would be placed on a stone shelf, then covered with ointments and spices and wrapped tightly in the linen winding sheet to contain the smell of decay. In a year or so, when all the flesh had decayed, the bones would be placed in a more permanent stone box, called an ossuary. <sup>5</sup>



Inside the tomb, this handful of friends bid a heart wrenching but hasty goodbye to Jesus. Night was falling and the Sabbath was beginning. This would be the great day of Passover when everyone had to gather with their families for the sacred meal. But Joseph would not be partaking. Handling a corpse made him ritually unclean. He could not partake of the Passover meal for a month (see Numbers 9). For the first time in years, he would not be leading the great service of remembrance. <sup>6</sup> In fact, it was worse than that. Joseph had disgraced his entire family by putting this man from Galilee in the family tomb. His shame became all their shame

for years to come. Think of this in today's terms. Imagine if on Christmas Eve afternoon, you had arranged to personally take the body of an executed man to the new section of your family plot at Roselawn. You buried a criminal near where your ancestors had been put for generations. You then missed Christmas Eve dinner and worship, and could hardly get a word out to anyone because of your grief. You ostracized yourself for years to come from business, social and family connections. You backed a lost cause when all of life was right before you.

Why did he do it? Why, when to every appearance the mission of Jesus was a failure? What made Joseph back a lost cause? In the end, only *love* can account

for such extravagantly futile expression. Only love borne of belief that Jesus was the way, the truth and the life even if he had seemingly failed. Only Joseph's love that arose from believing Jesus had loved him.

Scottish folk singer Kim Edgar has a beautiful song whose theme is this line: "What is left is love." She sings:

*We live in fear of losing*

*Those we love.*

*We wonder what will last.*

*Love doesn't disappear.*

*Nobody can steal it. Love remains.*

*If you look, you can reveal it.*

*What is left is love. What is left is love. What is left is love.<sup>7</sup>*

It is love that we pour into lost causes. We read psalms to someone with dementia, even though we get no sign the words are comprehended. We keep praying for lost children, atheist relatives, friends separated from God, even though nothing seems to be happening. We foster children who have no one to care. We build schools like Gardere. We mentor at Buchanan. We encourage and support crisis pregnancies to continue until a child is born and a precious life is raised. We stick with each other when it seems like nothing will ever change. We believe in our guys even if we're going to get pounded with only 8 on the field. Because we'd rather lose showing faith, hope and love than save ourselves while breaking faith. In the end, what is left is love.

In the days of the Roman plagues, wealthy pagans fled the city to save themselves. They left even their relatives to die. After all, once the plague started, they were lost causes. Christians stayed. They nursed the sick. Many Christians died. But many people with plague also recovered. Not by magic. Medicines were crude and ineffective. But basic nursing care quite often made the difference between life and death.<sup>8</sup> Just helping someone drink and eat, clean up, breathe more comfortably gave the support that kept them through illness.

Today, we don't yet have a proven medicine for Covid 19. But we have nursing care. We have breathing aids. We have people who go to the frontlines to offer relief, personal care, and comfort. And it makes the difference. What is left is love. There's a reason we feel such affection these days for grocery clerks, doctors, delivery drivers, room sanitizers, nurses and decision makers. We feel the love given in a daunting fight against an invisible enemy. And it makes us hopeful.

Jesus' enemies taunted him: *Let him come down from the cross.* He could have. He could have called a legion of angels to stop the whole proceeding. But

that is not how love works. Jesus gave himself to the sacrifice that would take away the sins of the world. He gave himself to the helplessness of not getting off the cross. To leave it, he would require help. He would require participation from someone who loved him. He would make Joseph's faith in an apparently lost, futile cause to be one of the most important stages on his journey to save us.

Joseph just wanted to honor his slain master. He just wanted the cruel shame to end. So he was willing to sacrifice politically, socially, personally to give Jesus a proper burial. And what a difference it has made! If Jesus had been dumped in a mass grave, there would have been no empty tomb to point out on Easter. If he had been discarded in an unfindable place, the resurrection would have seemed like a mere fabrication. But the world saw Joseph take Jesus to his home address. They saw the Lord laid in a tomb with a stone rolled over it. They beheld the Roman soldiers guarding it. So Joseph's gift became an essential, everlasting witness to the resurrection of Jesus. He was buried in Joseph's tomb. On Sunday, the stone was rolled away and the tomb was empty. Jesus really died. A lost cause. He also really rose. The triumph of love. As Wesley wrote, "Love's redeeming work is done!"

Joseph of Arimathea assures us that love remains. The love you pour into another in Jesus' name is never wasted. Though you may never see the effects in your lifetime, that does not negate the eternal worth of every tiny gesture of love. Every diaper changed, every bed pan emptied, every midnight prayer, every child mentored, every team coached, every spouse served, every business run with integrity, every faith held firm in the storm. It all counts.

Jesus would not come down from the cross. He let it kill him. He also let Joseph have the burden and the honor of taking him from the cross and handling his body with love. That is the church in mission. Jesus sends us to love in his name. He will not do it for us. What is left is love. Love remains. And he sends us to love him by loving one another, and this broken world for which he died.

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<sup>1</sup> Sculpture of Pilate by Andrea Ferrurcci, 1514

<sup>2</sup> The Deposition by Pietro da Rimini 1325

<sup>3</sup> The Deposition by Caravaggio 1604

<sup>4</sup> The Burial of Jesus, Antonio Ciseri 1883

<sup>5</sup> The Burial, Titian 1559

<sup>6</sup> The Burial, Carl Bloch 1873

<sup>7</sup> "The Steamy Note," Kim Edgar, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> See Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*.