When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who was also a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. So, Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away.

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You ever heard a sermon on Joseph of Arimathea? I hadn’t. Every Easter I had heard about him. He buried the body of Jesus. But then one day I got curious. Who is this guy?

He’s in all four Gospels. Matthew has one paragraph on him; 83 words and three short verses. What he did, and why he did it, has been recorded in history for all time.

He’s standing there at the end of the Gospels, just after the crucifixion. Jesus hung on the cross from 9 a.m. Friday until 3 p.m. in the afternoon. So sometime after 3pm, Joseph goes to Pilate asking for the body of Jesus, which is a very interesting thing! Pilate had Jesus crucified with a plaque over his head that read, “King of the Jews.” No one can claim to be a king while Rome is in charge. The emperor is King!

If Pilate went to all this trouble to send this message, why would he agree to give the body to Joseph? It would be the custom to leave the body on the cross for days in order to make the point. Seems counter-productive to allow the body of Jesus to be removed so soon. It would be like wasting a good crucifixion. It raises the question, “Who was this Joseph of Arimathea that he gets the body of Jesus?”

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Mark tells us that he was “a respected member of the Council.” The Council would be the Jewish Sanhedrin, a court of 70 Jewish leaders that ruled Israel under submission to Rome. They were allowed to maintain Jewish traditions and customs, but they answered to Rome. In a sense, they were a puppet court, or council.
So, Pilate would have known Joseph. They would have worked closely together. Mark says Joseph went “boldly to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.” (15:43) Not too many people would go “boldly” to Pilate. But Joseph gets an audience, on short notice.

Matthew tells us that Joseph was a “rich man.” (27:57). Why tell us that? He doesn’t tell us what Joseph does for a living or who he is married to, or how many children he may have. He doesn’t say Joseph has a 6 handicap, loves to fish or anything else. He says Joseph was rich. Why? Why do I need to know that?

Think about it. Would Pilate have talked to a poor person? No. A poor person wouldn’t even get an audience. This man is not only rich, but he has influence. He could get into see Pilate. Not only that, but he persuaded him to do something that doesn’t make any sense. Pilate gave him the body of Jesus! This is really an incredible thing that many of us have overlooked!

Wouldn’t you love to have been a fly on the wall in that meeting?

Pilate; “What do you want Joseph?”

Joseph; “I want the body of Jesus?”

Pilate; “For what? You were on the Council that brought him to me for crucifixion.”

Joseph; “I am one of his disciples.”

Pilate; “You’re a traitor to your people is what you are.”

Joseph; “May be, but I want to give him a proper burial and I need to do it before sabbath that begins at 6pm.

Pilate; “So you want to do this now?”

Joseph; “Yes, right now.”

Do you think it went something like that? This is a most unusual request. It happened so fast. Joseph was taking so much risk. Pilate was breaking all his own rules. Why?

This is a new thought for me. Could Joseph have purchased the body of Jesus? Think about that. Did he bribe Pilate, or make a generous contribution to The Pilate Foundation? If he did, he would have never told anyone. That part of the story would have never made it into the Bible. Maybe that’s why Matthew told us Joseph was rich!

Did he buy the body of Christ? What a purchase that would have been!

Or, maybe Pilate consented because of his confusion over Jesus’ trial and conviction. Apparently, he never did feel good about it. His wife told him not to do it. Was this to balance the score? But it wouldn’t be like a Roman ruler to have such guilt, or to display it in such an irrational act. It would be seen as weakness. Whatever the motive, Pilate released that body to Joseph.
Once Joseph gets permission from Pilate, they have less than 3 hours to get this body buried. John tells us that Nicodemus helped Joseph with the burial. Nicodemus was also on the Council and was likely a wealthy man.

Neither of these guys should be associated with Jesus. They are Jewish leaders. Their High Priest had proclaimed Jesus blasphemous. Talking to Pilate, taking the body, and being seen burying him was all very risky business. Mark tells us that Joseph even had to go and buy a new linen cloth in which to wrap Jesus. (15:46). These guys are committed and they are using their resources and their political capital to get this done, in spite of the risk. And it all happened within hours.

So, Jesus ends up in a rich man’s tomb! The Bible clearly, and repeatedly tells us there are dangers with wealth. Wealth can create a false sense of security. Power can corrupt. Prosperity can lead to a self-centered life. It’s all in there. But wealth in the hands of a person whose heart is in the hands of God can be a powerful thing. A life-changing thing!

Most of Jesus’ ministry was with the poor and the oppressed. He said some pretty harsh things about the rich. He came from nothing and he had nothing. Yet, he ends up in a rich man’s tomb, hand-hewn; a Mercedes Benz of all tombs!

Catherine and I have been in that tomb and knelt before that slab. We were in Joseph’s tomb, which became the tomb of Christ! That tomb became a symbol of hope for all generations to come. It was no longer Joseph’s tomb. It is our tomb. It belongs to all of us.

You think Joseph knew what was going to happen in that tomb? No. Did his money and influence cause the resurrection to happen in that tomb? No. It’s not that God needs us to accomplish anything. God chooses to use us, to use human vessels to accomplish divine purposes. We get to participate in what God is doing in the world.

What a powerful person Joseph of Arimathea must have been. He had influence with Pilate. He had money. He had a heart for Christ. He had courage. He took risks. There he is standing at the end of the story, in the right place, at the right time, with the right stuff. And God used him! That’s stewardship, when your entire life belongs to Christ.

God, in your mercy, use us; our time, our money, our influence in this world of need, for your Kingdom’s sake.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Congregation; Amen