

THE TWELVE VOICES OF
EASTER



JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA: VOICE OF COURAGE

Matthew 27: 57-60

Sometimes there is nothing you can do. At least that's the way I felt that night. My last night on the council. I had never seen the Sanhedrin driven by such a mad obsession. I wonder if anyone could have said or done anything to deny them their objective.

We had been summoned with great urgency to Caiaphas' house. Quite out of the ordinary for the Jewish high court. Inside were the judges and lawmakers of Israel. Out in the courtyard were the temple police and a mob. And there before us, stood a man I had to come to know and admire. Jesus of Nazareth. I had come to believe that He was the very Messiah of Israel, the one we had long awaited. And more than that. I had watched Him heal the sick and feed the hungry. I heard Him teach in the temple. He was . . . well, the more I listened, the more I marveled, the more I loved Him. He said He had come to save those who were lost.

I was a respected member of the Sanhedrin. I held a high position of religious authority. Others on the council scoffed at His claims, "Let Him seek the lost and save them if He can, just as long as He leaves us alone! We have always followed the ways of God!" But that is not what Jesus meant. He spoke the very words of God. This man was God's appointed Savior for Israel. But I am not a brave man. I have never shown much courage in the storm of debate. I followed Jesus secretly because I was afraid of the others on the Sanhedrin. They would despise my faith, ridicule me, and put me out of the council. What would happen to a man my age then? There would be nothing for me back in Arimathea after so many years. So even though I believed that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah, the Savior of Israel, I never told anyone about it.

And then He stood before me and the others on the council. Angry voices derided Him and false accusers lied about Him. Still my voice was silent. Some of the council objected that this trial was illegal. I nodded agreement. The objections were thrust aside. Our leaders condemned Him and sent Him to Pilate the governor for a sentence of death.

Pilate passed sentence and sent Him to the place of the skull, where they crucified Him. I had been waiting for the kingdom of God just as many faithful Jews had been. I thought surely this Jesus would gather followers to His side, repel the Roman invaders and establish the kingdom of heaven. But now my hopes were nailed to a cross. I had never paid much attention to the crucifixions before. Horrid business. But this one I watched. Jesus hung on the cross in agony, more terrible suffering than I had ever imagined. I stood in the shadows, afraid to approach. I didn't want anyone to see me. I saw Him with His arms outstretched as though to embrace the world. I watched Him suffer. I saw Him die.

I believe now that He could have come down from that cross and saved Himself from the agony and pain. But He accepted that pain as the will of God. Before He died, He raised His voice in forgiveness. Forgiveness. More powerful than the armies of Rome and the strategies of all our leaders. Forgiveness. Something changed inside me. I decided that my seat on the council was nothing to cherish; it would never again bring any honor to me. I decided that it was past time for me to raise my voice. Perhaps my silent voice might become something better--a voice of courage.

The Roman soldiers determined that Jesus was dead. I left Golgotha and went straight to the Tower of Antonio. I requested an audience with Pilate. Because of my stature in the Jewish community, he received me. I plucked up my courage and asked Pilate to release the dead body of Jesus into my custody.

Pilate was surprised to learn that Jesus had already died. Sometimes, you know, the victims suffer for days. I was not sure what Pilate would do. I knew enough about Roman law to know that those condemned to death had no right to burial. Would Pilate enforce their law? I also knew that Pilate hated us Jews. He had nothing to gain by granting me a favor. But he signed a release. Maybe he saw in me an opportunity to get back at the Sanhedrin for forcing him into this business. I didn't linger to chat with him about it. I sent word to my friend Nicodemus to meet me at my family tomb. I hurried back to the scene of the crucifixion with Pilate's release. I presented it to the centurion and asked him to take Jesus' body down from the cross. He gave me a funny look and then put his men to work. Some of Jesus' followers were standing nearby, watching us, so I asked a couple of them to help me carry the body. We took it to my family tomb, which was nearby.

Nicodemus was there. He had brought linen bandages, spices and aromatics, a mixture of myrrh and aloes. We did not embalm Jesus' body like an Egyptian would, but we bathed it, and cleaned it, rinsing the wounds, His head, His side, His back. And we wrapped it in layers of the bandages and aromatic mixture. It was late in the day and we had to hurry to finish before the Sabbath.

My family tomb is not a natural cave, but rather is hewn out of solid rock. After we laid the body of Jesus in the tomb, Nicodemus and the others helped me roll a great stone in front of the entrance. It was a heavy stone and would not be easily moved. Later Pilate even sealed the tomb and commanded Roman soldiers to guard it. Our leaders wanted no one to have access to the body of Jesus.

When I think back on these things, it surprises me that I had the courage to do what I did. I knew that my actions meant the end of my term on the Sanhedrin--the end of my good name in the community, the end of everything I had thought so important in my long life. The Sanhedrin knew, the entire world knew that I was a believer in Jesus the Messiah. But what they thought no longer mattered to me. In the face of deep sorrow, I was thrilled to find my voice. And what a happy surprise to find that it was a voice of courage.

