

THE TESTIMONY OF THE UNTRUSTWORTHY

Mark 16: 1—8

Function Statement of Sermon: To call disciples to follow Jesus even in subversive and dangerous conditions.

SCRIPT

Introduction

One of the reasons we chose to preach on this book of Mark was because of its particular focus on following Jesus. As we have been saying since June, there is a theme of discipleship that we are tracing throughout the book. So, we've been following the story and where we are today, Jesus is still on the cross and is about to be buried. There is something puzzling though: Jesus was always with large crowds yet right now it seems like he is alone. It looks like all those who were following have left him alone. Those who remain are all watching from a distance. The man who always had throngs of people following him is now left alone. Are we not familiar with this narrative—when you are on top of the world, everyone is your friend. The minute things get difficult, those who were always there begin to disappear. There's a saying about this: when days are dark, friends are few. In our text, it seems like Jesus is living this saying. But... there are some people who remain. These people are not those we expect to continue following. In their persistent following, they risk a lot, even their lives, to show their commitment to their crucified Lord. The text shows us that...

Move 1

When everyone had deserted Jesus, the women continued to follow.

• Peter, James, and John, the three disciples in Jesus' inner circle, all ran away when the going got tough.

- The previous night, Jesus had taken Peter, James, and John to pray at the Garden of Gethsemane.
- This was one of Jesus' most trying moments... and he sought the spiritual support of his closest followers.
 - It is human to seek support from others when you are going through difficult times.
 - We are people of relationship, and we hope that those closest to us will show up when we need them.
 - We hope they will help us be strong when we are weak.
- Instead of watching and praying with Jesus, they sleep.
- Three times Jesus comes to check on them but finds that their "spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."
- He finally realises that he is alone and tells them to continue sleeping.
- I wonder how Jesus felt here...
 - Was he hurt by his friends' lack of support?
 - Did he feel abandoned?
 - Did he 'cut them off' because they had shown their 'true colours'?
 - Did he adopt the popular saying, "prioritise yourself because everyone else puts themselves first?"
- When Judas and the others come to arrest Jesus, armed with knives and clubs, the three run away.
- Later in the night, we are told that Peter was following from a distance... but he eventually denied ever knowing Jesus.

- So, we are left with a question, has everyone who followed him desert him at the end?
- Even though the inner circle of three deserted Jesus, at the cross we meet another circle of three who do not desert Jesus.
 - Mary of Magdala, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and Salome.
 - Even though these women were observing from a distance—like Peter—, there is something different about them.
 - These women form the true and faithful inner circle of Jesus—they are with him right to the end.
 - We know that the first circle of three ran away because following Jesus had become dangerous.
 - These women refused to let the danger drive them away from following their master.
 - They had followed him from Galilee... and were now with him right to the end.
 - The language of following is about discipleship.
 - These women were not just walking behind Jesus:
 - They were his disciples.
 - They were learning from him.
 - They were his students.
 - In a world where women received little to no education, Jesus allowed women to be part of his students.
 - It was not just the three though...
 - There were many others who had come with Jesus to Jerusalem.
 - Even though it doesn't specifically say that these many others were women...
 - We are left to conclude that they were women because the subject here is women who were following Jesus.
- These women were not only following but ministering to Jesus.
 - Our Bibles say different things here:
 - Some say, “attended to his needs.”
 - Some say, “ministered to him.”
 - Some say, “served him.”
 - The word used here is the same word from which we get the words, “deacon, ministry, and serving.”
 - We first meet this word in 1:13.
 - After his baptism, the Spirit took Jesus to the wilderness to be tested by the Satan.
 - In the wilderness, Jesus was with the wild animals, and “the angels were serving him.”
 - The next person we meet serving Jesus is Peter's mother-in-law in 1:31.
 - After Jesus heals her from fever, she started “serving them.”
 - Now, we find these three women doing what the angels were doing to Jesus in the wilderness.
 - The wilderness was Jesus' first moment of testing, and angels served him.
 - At the cross, we find three women who were serving him throughout his life.

Unlike the three who ran away, these ones stay despite the danger and challenges of following Jesus.

Move 2

The women are not the only ones who risked everything to follow Jesus: another man called Joseph did likewise.

- Joseph did not allow the dangers of following Jesus stop him from showing his devotion.
 - This man was a respected councillor—which means he was a member of the Sanhedrin.
 - The Sanhedrin was the highest decision-making body in the Jewish society.
 - They were the most respected people among the Jews.
 - Some members of the Sanhedrin did not like Jesus and his message.
 - The previous night, Jesus appeared on trial before this council.
 - They found him guilty of the charge of blasphemy (making himself equal with God) and eventually took him to Pilate for another trial.
 - Joseph must have been there during these proceedings.
 - Maybe Joseph was not pleased with the trial but couldn't raise his objections.
 - Even though he was part of the Council that condemned Jesus, it seems like he was a spy.
 - He was a spy for God's Kingdom and his Messiah within this Council.
 - His actions are not in line with those of other members of the Council.
 - He is with them, but not part of them.
 - Even though Jesus had been condemned by his group, he goes to ask for his body in order to give him a proper burial.
 - This must not have been received kindly by his colleagues.
 - He risked being labelled a traitor.
 - He risked being condemned like Jesus.
 - He risked his status.
 - He risked even death.
 - But seeing what had happened to Jesus and what he knew about him, he chose courage over fear.
 - He chose Jesus over comfort, and status, and power.
- Not only did he risk himself to the Council, but he risked himself to Pilate as well.
 - The text says he went to Pilate to boldly ask for Jesus' body.
 - Jesus had been killed under the charge of blasphemy (claiming to be God) and treason (claiming to be king).
 - His charges were religious and political.
 - Anyone who was seen associating themselves with this criminal risked being given the same treatment.
 - Imagine the worst criminal in your country.
 - Imagine someone who could come and imply that they were associated with them.
 - How would people react?
 - How would the authorities react? Wouldn't they want to investigate them just in case they were also involved in the criminal activities?
 - That's what Joseph was exposing himself to by asking for Jesus' body.
 - The dangers of associating himself with Jesus were not enough to stop him from publicly showing his association.
 - Using what he had, he gave Jesus a dignified funeral.

Mary of Magdala, the other Mary, and Salome, and Joseph show us that that following Jesus is worth any risk that may be before us.

Move 3

Following Jesus is not only for the days when our security, survival, power, and comfort is not threatened.

- Joseph challenges us to make following Jesus a matter of great importance above everything else.
 - In Joseph, we see someone who challenges us to follow Jesus regardless of what we stand to lose.
 - A man of status, power, and privilege, Joseph had so much to lose by publicly associating himself with Jesus.
 - But he did not count that as worth the commitment to Jesus.
 - He chose Jesus over comfort and security.
 - He became the embodiment of Jesus' words, "Anyone who saves his life will lose it, but anyone who loses his life for my sake will gain it."
 - His action may have cost his life... and that was okay with him.
 - What are you willing to risk as a cost for following Jesus?
 - What are you not willing to lose?

- The two Marys and Salome also show us that following Jesus sometimes requires us to go against some established cultural norms.
 - The women broke cultural stereotypes about who can and should be a student of Jesus.
 - Because of the patriarchal nature of their society, I am sure that they received some rejection from some men within the followers of Jesus.
 - Maybe they were sometimes reminded that their place is not in learning but in cooking, giving birth, washing, and taking care of the house.
 - Maybe their opinions were sometimes overlooked because they were women.
 - But we see them consistently following Jesus and serving him throughout his life.
 - They follow because Jesus has welcomed them and made them feel like they belong.
 - It didn't matter what others said or thought, what mattered was that Jesus welcomed them, and elevated them.
 - Their devotion to Jesus is a model for all of us here:
 - A model to welcome the women in our midst in spaces that are culturally said to belong to men.
 - A model to promote and elevate women so that they know that they are as good as their male counterparts.
 - A model to bring more chairs to the table and say, "All of us belong with the Lord."
 - A model to eat the same bread and drink the same cup as a testament that we are all people of the same Lord.
 - When we do this, we are following in the footsteps of the King who walked with everyone, promoted, elevated, and eventually died for everyone.
 - The least we can do is do as he did.
 - The least we can do is follow him courageously.