

Tennessee Williams's short story "Something by Tolstoj," tells the story of Jacob Brodsky, a shy Russian Jew who runs his father's bookshop. Jacob's dream seemed complete when he married his childhood sweetheart, Lila, a beautiful, exuberant French girl. The life of a bookshop proprietor suited him fine, but *not* his adventurous young bride. An agent for a vaudeville touring company heard Lila sing and talked her into touring Europe with their show.

In the process of explaining to Jacob that she had to seize this opportunity and leave, she also cleft a chasm-sized hole in his heart. But before she left, he gave her a key to the bookshop and said, "*You had better keep this because you will want it some day. Your love is not so much less than mine that you can get away from it. You will come back sometime, and I will be waiting.*"

Lila went on the road, and Jacob went to the back of his bookshop. To deaden the pain, he turned to his books as someone else might turn to drugs or alcohol. Weeks turned into years. When fifteen of them had passed, the bell above the bookshop's front door signaled the arrival of a customer. It was Lila.

The bookshop's owner rose to greet her. But to her astonishment, her abandoned husband didn't recognize her and simply spoke like he would to any other customer. "*Do you want a book?*" Stunned and trying to maintain her composure, she raised a gloved hand to her throat and stammered, "*No—that is—I wanted a book, but I've forgotten the name of it.*" Regaining

some poise, she continued, "*Let me tell you the story—perhaps you have read it and can give me the name of it.*"

She then told him of a boy and a girl who had been constant companions since childhood. As teenagers, they fell in love, eventually married, and lived over a bookshop. She told him their whole story—the vaudeville company's offer, the husband's brokenhearted gift of the key, the return of the wife who was never able to part with the key. How, after fifteen years, she finally came to her senses and returned home to him.

Then with a desperate plea she said, "*You remember it—you must remember it—the story of Lila and Jacob?*" With a vacant, faraway look, he merely said, "*There is something familiar about the story. I think I have read it somewhere. It seems to me that it is something by Tolstoi.*" Only the heartbreaking, metallic echo of the key dropping to the hard floor interrupted her horrified silence. Lila, having let go of the key as well as her hope, fled the bookshop in tears.

And Jacob returned to his books.

... ..

How disappointing... or tragic... it is... when life events crush our hopes and dreams. I am sure that we have all suffered our own times of such despair... having lost all sense of hope... not seeing any possible way for us to move forward. (None of us are immune to it.) ... Yet somehow... we slowly trudge on... de-spirited... empty... void of any real optimism... confidence... or buoyancy.

But here is what I hope to establish from our passage of study today in Matthew's Gospel. No matter what you may currently be going through... or might face in the near future - the gospel can restore our hope through Christ's ultimate victory.

There are two sections to our passage today... and both will uniquely highlight three principles... (the same three)... which are essential principles for us to cling to... when life events crush our hopes and dreams.

Here are the three principles that we'll see in both sections of our passage: **#1.** Faith requires courage **#2.** God uses unexpected resources (which we often never even knew existed) **#3.** Nothing is impossible with God. (In fact... He seems to delight in coming through when all hope seems to be lost.)

The two sections we will cover today are the final two paragraphs of Matthew's rather lengthy 27th chapter...

And so... the Lord of Life - **died**. ... He who had flung the stars into space... Who had made the worlds out of nothing... Who had stooped down to fashion man from clay... Who had breathed into his nostrils the breath of life - **was dead**. ... The Lord had suffered every indignity that mankind could devise. ... He had taken on the hosts of Hell. ... He had bowed beneath the load of the wrath (and curse) of God. ... Now He was dead and... being dead... required a tomb.

But who would step forward and bury Jesus' body? The women could not do it... and Jesus' disciples had fled in fear for their lives. Events had

developed too quickly for anyone to be prepared to carry out this legal mandate.

Jesus died at the ninth hour (around 3:00 in the afternoon.) The Sabbath would begin at 6:00... so when verse 57 uses the word "evening" ("*when it was evening...*")... this would indicate some time... perhaps as late as 5:00. ... Time was very short... taking into account what Mark's gospel informs his readers about the requirements of the Jewish traditions. According to Jewish law... it would be necessary to bury the dead before the Sabbath. If Jesus was to be buried on this day... it would have to happen quickly... or he would not have been buried until Sunday.

Another element of Mosaic law presented additional pressure for an immediate burial:

Deuteronomy 21:22-23 (ESV)

"And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God. You shall not defile your land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance.

Time was of the essence. The body of Jesus had to be buried. ... (And don't miss this)... The volunteer that stepped up - was a total surprise!

Matthew 27:57-60

Joseph... who lived in a village called Arimathea about twenty miles northwest of Jerusalem... was a member of the Sanhedrin. The Gospel of Luke tells us that Joseph disagreed with the Sanhedrin's decision to condemn Jesus to death:

Luke 23:50-51 (ESV)

Now there was a man named Joseph, from the Jewish town of Arimathea. He was a member of the council, a good and righteous man, who had not consented to their decision and action; and he was looking for the kingdom of God.

Both Mark's and Luke's gospels note that he was "waiting for the kingdom of God." This could have been said of any good Jew, which might be all we would think of Joseph were it not for the additional insight offered by the apostle John's account of this man:

John 19:38 (ESV)

After these things Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus...

We did not know that he was a disciple until this event. It is interesting to see that the very thing which caused the apostles to scatter seems to have drawn into the open others who... up to this time... would have been called secret disciples. Joseph of the town of Arimathea stepped out and declared his faith.

Joseph is a unique person in Matthew's narrative... an example of God's power to do seemingly unworkable things. ... Nothing is impossible with God. (In fact... He seems to delight in coming through when all hope seems to be lost.)

It is interesting that God had on hand a Joseph to provide protection for the Lord when He was born... and a Joseph to provide protection for Him when He was buried. One Joseph was a carpenter... the other was a counselor. One was poor... the other was prosperous. ... Both men were described as

"just" (Matthew 1:19; Luke 23:50). Both blazed for (simply) a **moment** on the sacred pages of Gospel narrative and then disappeared into obscurity.

After Jesus' courageous death... it appears that Joseph had a conversion from bashful to brave. ... This coward became courageous. ... We never know... what God is doing behind the curtains of our life – right now.

Joseph of Arimathea is the *only* male disciple of Jesus to step forward in chapter 27. All the apostles are absent.

It took great courage for a highly distinguished member of the Sanhedrin to go to Pilate in order to ask for the body of a convicted and crucified **criminal**. ... What would the other members of the Council think about this? ... Would they resent him? ... Would they kick him out of the club? ... And what would Pilate think of such a politically-charged request? ... Pilate could have said "no"... and ordered Jesus' body to remain on the cross to rot in the sun the next day... be picked apart by birds... and then torn apart by scavenger dogs. (That would be quite the warning to anyone aspiring to insurrection! - And that was done in those days.) ... Or he could have ordered that Jesus' body be thrown into a mass grave with other criminals and no names. ... Or Pilate could have charged Joseph with siding with the enemy. ... Joseph was very bold here.

In worldly terms... Joseph had more to lose than any of Jesus' disciples. Loss of position in the council would mean a loss of his status and possibly his wealth. ... Yet... despite these risks... Joseph had the courage to come before Pilate and ask for Jesus' body. ... Joseph of Arimathea... wealthy council member... would no longer be a follower of Jesus in secrecy.

With very little time... before the Sabbath... Joseph more than likely employed some of his servant's help. Being a wealthy man... he must have had many. Normally it was a job that required several hours. But working together... they would have been able to do the minimum... hastily wrapping the body of Jesus with some spices between the cloths... then laying it on a bed of spices... as was done to Asa in 2 Chronicles 16:14).

John's Gospel reveals that Joseph received help from Nicodemus... one of his colleagues in the Sanhedrin.

John 19:39-42 (ESV)

Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight. So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid. So because of the Jewish day of Preparation, since the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there.

Were it not for the intervention of Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus... the body of Jesus might not have had a decent burial. ... Joseph and Nicodemus had come to believe in Jesus... even though they had not openly testified of their faith. ... God kept them hidden... as it were... that they might care for the body of Jesus. ... Since Joseph was a rich man... and he prepared the new tomb... he helped in the fulfillment of prophecy...

Isaiah 53:9 (ESV)

And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.

Fittingly, this was the kindest treatment Jesus received since the unnamed woman anointed him for his burial... with a costly ointment back in chapter 26.

As the soldiers we saw last week at the foot of the cross... show us what Christian faith confesses... Joseph shows us how Christian faith works. Our faith is to be a courageous... loving... doing faith. Is your faith merely one that confesses... or does it work...?

Matthew 27:61

Huh...! I wonder why Matthew keeps mentioning that women were present... Why is that important... or what is the message that Matthew seems to be going out of his way to convey...?

Matthew 27:55-56

These women are in contrast with the twelve disciples... who were not there. It is especially interesting to note that the mother of two disciples was there... in contrast with her “sons of thunder” who had fled the scene.

I am not trying to sound politically correct here... by putting down the male gender... but it is hard for it to escape our notice... that women make the front page... for their heroic deeds. ... Faithful-till-the-end-on-the-hill-of-Golgotha faith... is better than hiding-under-the-table-in-the-upper-room faith.

They serve God as His witnesses to the crucifixion... burial... and resurrection. (LISTEN!)... they serve the church (and the world) as official eyewitnesses to the greatest events of history. ... I'll put it this strongly... in

case that last sentence wasn't strong enough: **without the women's witness... the church has no testimony.**

Stop and consider how women were not viewed as creditable witnesses in that culture! ... However God used them as His key witnesses. God uses unexpected resources! (We saw Him use Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus... which was unexpected... and here we see God use witnesses... who we would not expect from that culture. This fits Gospel logic!

Kent Hughes writes:

"I like to imagine, one day after Jesus' ascension, Matthew sitting down with Mary Magdalene and the other Mary and taking notes about the events of Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter. 'Now, Mary, tell me again about the tomb. It had a rolling stone? Really! And that bit about the angel after the stone was rolled away ... say that over again. I need to make sure that I get all this down'."

Without the women's witness... the church has no testimony.

Many of us are much like the eleven apostles. We are followers of Jesus... but our fear of others imprisons us in silence... huddled within our churches. We are afraid to leave the safe haven of our congregations to venture forth in a world that is hostile to the good news. We do not have the simple faith of Joseph... Nicodemus... and the women who simply performed their duty under the watchful eye of a hostile people. ... Thus... huddling in fear of ridicule... we simply stay put and our witness to the world convinces many that Jesus is still dead.

Let this never again be the case! ... May we... instead... rise with unabashed faith and demonstrate through our every word and action that we serve the risen Lord who has redeemed us and restored us!

We have seen... in the first section of today's passage: **#1**. Faith requires courage **#2**. God uses unexpected resources (sometimes of which we never even knew existed) **#3**. Nothing is impossible with God. (In fact... He seems to delight in coming through when all hope seems to be lost.) ... We'll see all three again in this second section...

Matthew 27:62-66

We wonder what the leaders of the Sanhedrin thought... when that strange darkness fell over the land... when the earthquake... like the crack of doom... heralded our Lord's departure from this life... when news came of the rending of the temple veil... to match the rending of the high priest's robe. ... We wonder what they thought when it was reported that... contrary to customary expectations of a slow death... Jesus had simply dismissed His spirit and died. ... If the soldiers had had to hasten His death by breaking His legs... He would have been proven to be a false Messiah (according to Exodus 12:46 and Numbers 9:12). But instead of breaking His legs... the Romans had pierced His side. ... We wonder what the leaders of the Sanhedrin thought... when they heard that pagan soldiers of Rome had confessed Jesus to be the Son of God. ... We wonder what they thought... when they were told that two of their number... the greatly respected Nicodemus... and the enormously rich Joseph of Arimathea... had boldly gone to Pilate... received from him the body of Jesus... and had given it an honorable burial.

Now it was the day following the preparation day. It was the first day of the feast... the high day... the fifteenth of Nisan... and a terrible thought belatedly gripped the leaders of the Sanhedrin: Jesus had said that He would rise again. ... It seems that none of Jesus' friends remembered that prophecy - but His enemies did. The irony here is that Jesus' enemies took Jesus' words about rising from the dead more seriously than did the disciples.

I think that it is entirely possible that the religious rulers were not really concerned about what the disciples might do. It is not out of the question to think that they were *more* worried about what Jesus might do.

Surely they noticed... just as we have... that the apostolic band hasn't played a tune lately. ... Where have God's terrific twelve gone? In Matthew 27 the Twelve's treasurer betrayed Jesus... the apostles' leader denied Him... and the rest fled.

I wonder if these evil rulers wondered what this wonder-worker Jesus can really do. They have seen... or at least heard about... His powers. He has cured leprosy. He has walked on water. He has raised Lazarus from the dead. And He has claimed that He would rise from the dead. ... If any of this are their worries... then isn't it ironic that they show more faith (at this point) than the disciples do?

(Faith requires courage... God uses unexpected resources... and nothing is impossible with God.)

The chief priests and the Pharisees were still worried about Jesus of Nazareth... even though they had witnessed His execution. They had

watched as the Roman soldier drove a spear into Jesus' side to make absolutely sure that he was dead (as John 19:34 tells us). Still disturbed by Jesus... even though they were sure He was dead... they assembled their judicial entourage and went to Pilate in full priestly garb... presenting themselves to him with all the authority that their position could muster.

So the sepulcher was made sure... by fixing the large stone to the entrance in such a way... that it could not be removed without detection. It was sealed. No one was going to tamper with that tomb. Their precautions render the subsequent resurrection of Christ all the more unassailable as historical fact.

Had all this been done by Jesus' *friends*... it might have been said that they only pretended to secure the tomb... and only pretended that He was dead. But He was judged to be dead *by the Jews themselves*. ... Pilate was satisfied that it was fact. Jesus was buried alone... The place of his sepulcher was made secure - *expressly to prevent his being removed*... and they placed around him a guard... in their own judgment... large enough to prevent His being taken away by force or strength. ... His very enemies... therefore... took every possible precaution to place Jesus' resurrection beyond the possibility of **suspicion**... of **fraud**... and **deception**... The enemies of Jesus... were the very means of furnishing the most striking proof that His death... burial... and resurrection were irrefutable realities.

(Faith requires courage... God uses unexpected resources... and nothing is impossible with God.)

The chapter concludes with apparent victory to the Sanhedrin. They have rid themselves of Jesus, they have silenced his disciples and they are in control of events. – But they have one weekend to enjoy their success!

So the world spun on... through space. ... People settled down to the daily routine of their lives. ... The Lord's disciples hid themselves. ... The women made preparations for completing the hastily-done embalming. ... The lifeless body of the Lord lay still and cold. ... The moments ebbed away.

It seemed that death was reigning supreme... but try as it might... death would not corrupt that immortal body of clay... lying wrapped in cloth... inside the inner darkness of the tomb. ... Heaven above... (and you know) Hell beneath... watched that sepulcher with baited breath... and angels gathered in the shadows... straining with all their might... to see what would happen next.

Next week we'll get to the ultimate victory. Today... it is for us to observe: Faith requires courage... God uses unexpected resources... and nothing is impossible with God. ... I don't know what impossible-looking circumstances you face right now... but I do know that these three principles are just as TRUE in light of your situation... as they were when Jesus died.

If life's events are crushing your hopes and dreams... trust this God Who uses unexpected resources... and with Whom nothing is impossible!

VIDEO (“It’s Friday... But Sunday’s Coming”)