

Jesus Changes Everything

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After Jesus died, we're told the Roman soldier standing beneath the cross was "*filled with awe and said, 'Truly this was the Son of God!'*" (27:54) Now why would he, of all people, respond to the death of a criminal by declaring him divine, Son of God? He's seen hundreds of crucifixions, is a master of torture, a devotee of the Roman state. He has no reason to believe Jesus is unique. In fact, he has reasons *not* to believe. It put his job in jeopardy, his life, calling into question his allegiance to the *Roman* Son of God, a title Caesar used for himself. Yet he *believes*: "*Truly this was the Son of God!*" A hardened soldier *melting* before the crucified Christ. Why? This passage shows us, through three groups of people, how Jesus changes lives up to the claim, how Jesus changes everything: a group of women, a rich man, and the first witnesses of the resurrection.

Marginalized Women

As Jesus hung on the cross: *There were also many women there, looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him, among whom were Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph and the mother of the sons of Zebedee*" (55-56). Many women. This would have raised an eyebrow—using women as witnesses, and by name? Everyone knew then women weren't to be relied upon for eyewitness testimony; it wasn't even admissible in court. But Matthew tells us, to his own shame, that it was *the women* who were there when Jesus needed them most. Three are mentioned in particular, all Marys, each one described in a particular way. Certain details are deliberately left out. Take **Mary Magdalene**, demon-possessed before she met Jesus, and possibly a harlot. She probably had many names—crazy Mary, Mary the harlot—but Jesus gives her a new name and new vocation, Mary Magdalene minister to Jesus. There's Mary mother of **James and Joseph**, who was also the mother of Jesus, but here she's seen as inherently valuable mother. Then there's Mary, mother of the sons of **Zebedee** aka the sons of thunder, but here she is simply Mary. He knows you by name. The changes in detail are deliberate. Matthew knows it's scandalous to give them prominence, but he does it to demonstrate something. Jesus gives women dignity in a culture that doesn't. Women are not left out of the account, nor are they simply included; they are elevated, given prominence. Why? *Because they associated with Jesus*. How does Jesus change things? **Jesus changes status**. A woman once shared with me she had been in a loveless marriage for over 25 years. Her husband emotionally abused her, demeaned her with his speech, stood over her to correct the tiniest things, abandoned her while she recovered from surgery, and refused to sleep with her saying awful things. As she recounted this journey to me with such kindness and peace, I had to ask: How did you get through it? She said simply, Jesus gave me the strength; he has always been there, holding me up. Jesus gave her dignity when her husband failed to; he lifted her up, gave her unmatched status as a woman whom he loves, whom he died for. Jesus changes status.

A Rich Man

The Marys are placed right next to a *rich man*, Joseph of Arimathea. Although he was part of the Jewish council that condemned Jesus, he'd taken a dissenting position choosing to follow Christ. Like the centurion, he risked a lot to follow Jesus, and unlike the Marys, he was a

man of *considerable status*. We know this, not only because he was rich, but also because only a prominent person could have secured an audience with Pilate after official public hours to request Jesus' body. When he does this, he throws his status to the wind. Instead of clinging to social comfort, he chooses to identify with the despised messianic pretender, a criminal of the state, and embraces a typical role for women—preparing the corpse for burial. He spends his hard-earned money on expensive linen and spices and, then, gives up his *tomb*. Now at the time owning your own tomb was a privilege. Often families were buried together, but Joseph owns his own plot. Why give it up? Imagine giving up your own grave. It's your last statement, your final mark, your resting place. It's the way you will be remembered. And Joseph lets it go: *as though he's found something else to live for*. While Jesus grants status to women who lack it, those who have status give it up, divest themselves of wealth, comfort—things we naturally seek to accrue. He's no longer climbing the ladder: social, vocational, religious. He's not trying to prove himself. Why? He's found the meaning of life—everything—but to get it he gives up finding life in everything else. In the film about Olympic ice-skater Tonya Harding, she faces trial for conspiracy in the attack on Nancy Kerrigan. When the judge passes the verdict, she bans Tonya from US Figure Skating Association for life, all events, no skating, no coaching, nothing. Demoralized she begs the judge to send her to jail instead, so she could still skate. *Your honor, its all I know. It's like you're giving me a life sentence. If I don't have skating, I don't have anything*. What's the thing you'd say, if I don't have this, I don't have anything? Before a holy God, we all deserve to be stripped of the things we love, but instead Jesus gives us something better to live for. And to get it we have to give up the thing we think we can't live without. The thing we'd say, if I don't have this, I don't have anything. And when you do, everything changes. Joseph shows us **Jesus changes what we live for**. The Pharisees try to deny this claim. They come to Pilate too, but not because they've thrown status to the wind, but they desperately want to retain status, so they ask for military power to guard the tomb. Turns out those who claim to be religious are, in fact, the furthest from Jesus. Where women and a rich man are examples of faith, the religious are parodies of faith, all show no substance. They lack belief, the awe of the centurion. Has Jesus changed what you live for or are you, too, a parody of faith? Christian in name only?

The First Witnesses

Jesus changes *status*—moving those in the margins to the center of his love. Jesus changes *what we live for*—not living for status but for *him*. Radical changes by any account. Social, existential, spiritual—*all while Jesus is dead!* Which brings us to the third group of people, the first witnesses of the resurrection. Toward the dawn of the day, at first light, the Marys make their way to the tomb. Who arrives to the tomb first? The women. The earth quakes as an angel descends from heaven and rolls away the stone in front of Jesus' tomb, and sits on it, as if to say, Death, pshha! The angel announces, “He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay” Even in Greek the cadence exudes confidence: He. Is. Not. Here. He, has, risen! As, he, said. **Jesus changes death**. Overturns it, as he gains life, the guards are struck as dead. Death leaves Christ but clings to the guards. Living men, the life sucked right out of them. But to all who hope in Jesus, he promises everlasting *life*. He topples sin, death, and hell, and **fear changes too**. The guards tremble with fear, for the women fear is taken away: “Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified” (5). The fearless are struck with fear, and the fearful are filled with confidence:

Do you believe? Don't be afraid. If you don't believe, be afraid. You see, belief in Christianity is more than mere knowledge; it's *adoration*. The centurion awestruck by Jesus; the women attending to Jesus; the rich man saying If I don't have You, I have nothing! Jesus changes everything, and he **also changes emotion**. We're told the women **departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy** (28:8). Two unlikely emotions joined together—fear and joy. Typically we think of these as opposites. My worst nightmare is a thief of joy. If I contemplate losing a child, joylessness floods in. But with Jesus fear and joy unite to produce great joy, exhilaration. Like when we hear the click-clack of a roller-coaster ascending the hill just before it's drop. You're filled with fear and joy. Why? *We've encountered something truly great*. It unites polar emotions producing great joy. During Spring Break we visited the Grand Canyon, and I saw a ledge I couldn't resist. I climbed down the canyon about forty feet, and then made my way out on an anvil-shaped cliff, where I stood on the edge of the grand canyon. My legs wobbled with fear, but my arms shot up in utter delight [[pic](#)]. Encountering *true* greatness. All the disciples eventually converge on the risen Christ, and Matthew puts it like this: **And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him but some doubted**" (Mt 28:9). See, faith isn't ultimately a matter of sight. Seeing isn't believing. Believing is seeing, seeing what's truly great, awestruck with Jesus. Ultimately, **Jesus changes what we choose to worship**. We all adore something, but is yours deserving of worship? Why did the hardened centurion melt before Christ? Jesus changes status; Jesus changes what we live for; Jesus changes death, fear, joy. Because Jesus changes *everything*.