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Expect the Unexpected !

Mark 15:42-16

It was the 16th of the month of Nisan. Springtime. The Friday before what you folks celebrate as Easter. The trees had begun to bud and bloom yet this Friday I saw no trees I did not stop to look at flowers. My stomach was twisted by my own miserable loss and failure. Earlier in the morning when the sun had not yet come over the mountains I'd failed to stick up for my very good friend when he needed a friend in the worst way. I kept my mouth shut when all the others were yelling at Him and hitting him. I said nothing. I was scared. I didn't want to lose my status. I didn't want the other guys to think nasty thoughts about me. I didn't want to be expelled from the Judgeship, the ruling body.

I'm sorry. Please forgive me. I get so caught up in my thoughts I have failed to introduce myself. My name is Joseph. I am sometimes confused with being the father of our Lord Jesus Christ. But I am not. I come from a small town 20 miles north of Jerusalem named Arimathia. They call me Joseph of Arimathia. I am...I was a member of the Jewish ruling body. The Sanhedrin. I held the respect of all who knew me. I was the pride of my small hometown Arimathia. I enjoyed the material benefits of being a member of the Sanhedrin. I enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle, always invited to the best parties and banquets. It was safe, secure. Yet, even in the midst of all that fame and power and prestige...I felt something was missing. Something in my heart was empty and unsatisfied.

It's funny, but here I was as a leader in Religion. But I felt like I was being drowned by it. Suffocated by the lack of life, real life. We in the Sanhedrin prided ourselves in keeping the law and debating the finest minutia of what list of do's and don't we thought God wanted us to keep. Then we came up with more laws to make sure we didn't break those laws. Addicted to religiosity where creativity is stifled. Probing questions slapped down. Fresh insights into God's most holy word are squelched in order to uphold the highest virtue....tradition. The way

things have always been. Maybe some of you have been there? In the cave of religion where there is a slavery to lists of rules. The signs of good intentions become pitfalls of discouragement, death and disappointment. People in the cave are anemic for lack of spiritual nourishment. They are longing to get out into the light, to draw into their lungs fresh air filled with real spirituality. But they remain chained to religion. I too was in that cave. I know what it feels like. But I now know the delight of breaking free from religion and nurturing a relationship with Jesus that is personal and vital and powerful. And it's all because of an empty tomb. Ah...But I'm getting ahead of the story.

Friday. The most miserable failure of my life...and yet a pivotal day where failure and fear dropped away and boldness came that surprised even me. Sometimes in crisis, sometimes starring in the face of death. People you never expect, do the unexpected.

Early that Friday morning, Jesus of Nazareth who had been condemned to death by our circle of judges, was brought before the Roman Procurator Pontius Pilate. I did not think Pilate would go through and condemn Jesus to death. I was sure Pilate believed Jesus peculiar but could never be convicted of leading an insurrection against Rome. Yet, I misjudged the power and influence of certain members of my group the Sanhedrin. I misjudged their ability to sway the people. After last weeks victory parade for Jesus as he entered the gates of Jerusalem I thought sure the people would stand by Him. I was counting on all the others to stand by Him...I didn't want to have to stick my neck out. You can imagine my horror as I watched the crowd stirred into a rage crying out to "crucify Him! crucify Him!"

I could do nothing at that point...I knew all my efforts would be hopeless. I ran to my good friend Nickodemus house. He and I had been closet believers in Jesus, that he was indeed the Messiah we had all been waiting for. We wept together feeling the weight of failure. The weight of passive treason. Failure to stand with Jesus when he needed a friend the most. Have you ever felt failure to stand up for Jesus when others are maligning His name. Ever, failed to stand up for Him when His words and truth are thrown in the dirt and stepped on. I was so ashamed.

About noon that Friday, the sky mysteriously darkened. Earthquakes and thunder shattered the deafening silence. It was near the 9th hour, 3:00 in the afternoon your time, that I received a message. A terrible event occurred at the temple. The veil separating the holy of holies had been ripped in two from top to bottom. In my deep sadness I knew the truths and words of this young prophet, Jesus, had been the very words of God. I had known He spoke the truth but kept my mouth shut because I didn't want to lose my position. I didn't want to be ridiculed and rejected....But now I didn't care what the others thought. I knew the truth. I knew what I needed to do. I didn't care about the risk. Isn't it interesting how the insignificant stuff like status and privilege and wealth and power, all fall to the ground as insignificant when they are swept aside by the broom of death. It is that broom of death that allows us a glimpse of the eternal. Nothing sharpens our perspective of what is truly important more than death.

I walked to the hill called Golgatha, the place of the skull just outside of town. I saw what I knew had already happened. He was dead. Not wanting my Lord to be tossed cruelly into a paupers pit or left on the cross to rot, I decided to stop hiding in the closet and start boldly identifying with Jesus. I went to Pilate's palace...asked for an audience and it was quickly granted. I was shaking as I asked Him for the body of Jesus. Pilate seemed very surprised. He expressed surprise that Jesus had died so quickly. Pilate could not understand why me, member of the great Sanhedrin, the group who had condemned an innocent man to death would want to bury the body of a man accused of treason. Only relatives ever did that. Why would this religious leader want to handle a dead corpse and risk ritual defilement just before the Sabbath? Why would I be willing to suffer the ridicule and rejection by the other members of the Sanhedrin? Why take the risk for a man that's dead. Why take the risk for a dream that's dead? Pilate was surprised. This was a most unexpected action...yet with this Jesus case, Pilate had come to expect the unexpected.

After confirming with the centurion He was indeed dead. Pilate granted the body of Jesus to my care. My friend Nicodemus and I went back up to the execution hill. There hung Jesus, his head slumped to his chest. The two others still hanging on either side were still groaning

from pain and gasping for air...in slow suffocation. I noticed a different, kinder look in the centurions eye as he ordered his soldiers to carefully unbind the ropes that held the cross piece. "Be careful!" he said as they pried the 5 inch spikes from his hands and feet. One of the soldiers tossed the pry bar in his leather pouch and told me, "He all yours".

I knelt down and began to gently wipe the blood and sweat from His face with a damp cloth. Nickodemus touched some aloe on his face as I began to wrap him in strips of linen cloth. Here in my arms was the lifeless body, the shell of the King of the Universe. My tears mixed with the spices.....Isn't it ironic, the two that bury Jesus were represented in the group that condemned Him to death. People you would never expect do the unexpected. The centurion who exclaimed that Jesus was the Son of God. The Thief who expressed belief in Jesus while hanging on the cross. A couple of wealthy prominent members of the Sanhedrin hovering over to prepare His body for burial. God seems to take the most unexpected people to do the unexpected. You may never expect God to use you?

We worked quickly. We only had a couple of hours before it would be 6:00pm and the Sabbath would begin. I took Him to my own personal family tomb near a garden. It had never been used...a virgin tomb for a man born from a virgin womb. Fitting I thought. The great prophet Isaiah wrote about the Messiahs death in 53:9 "His grave was assigned with wicked men, Yet He was with a rich man in His death, Because He had done no violence and no deceit in His mouth." I remembered that verse as I laid him in the tomb and released the large flat circular stone to roll down the incline grove to shut over the covering. Some of the women were off in a distance watching. Watching and weeping. As I walked away I thought, "He was destined for a paupers grave, but with a rich man in His death" Could it be that Isaiah was writing about me so many years ago? I have read that passage many times but I never thought it might have my name on it. Amazing! I wish I could have put it altogether that Friday night...but I didn't.

The next day Saturday was the Sabbath. It was a very sad and very lonely day. I couldn't be alone, so I went over to Nickodemus house. He told me about the great sermons and incredible teaching times he remembered about Jesus. He recalled the time he went to talk with

Jesus late in the night, when no one else was around to recognize him. Jesus had spoken so simply, so plain. "Jesus told my friend that He must be reborn. Not physically but spiritually into God's family. And just like Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness so that all who looked at the serpent might be healed from a terminal illness. So the Son of Man. That was Jesus cryptic title for Himself as a Messiah. The Son of Man must be lifted up...to die so that whoever believes in Him may in Him have eternal life. Then Jesus said the most incredible words I've ever heard. He said to my good friend. "For God so loved the world that he gave His one and only Son that Whoever believes in him should not die but have life forever." Wow! He had to die! He had to die.

That next morning early those same women, the ones watching at the cross the ones watching at the tomb. They decided to get up early in the morning while it was still dark and stop watching and start doing. They weren't thinking or hoping that Jesus had raised from the dead. They hadn't heard about the guards that had been placed at the tomb and that the entrance had an imperial seal on the stone. They were tired of watching and wanted to do something. They certainly weren't expecting Jesus to be alive and gone. They thought they would add some perfume and spices to His body. They were wondering who would help them move that heavy tomb stone. They were thinking practically not supernaturally. They weren't looking for God to work in an amazing way. You might think they would hope that just like Lazarus raised from the grave maybe Jesus would too. You would think that these who were closest to Jesus would begin to expect the unexpected. You would think that the disciples would be waiting eagerly for his return, just like He told them he would. You would think they would be filled with hope and remember His promised return and be acting like it.....but they were not expecting it were they. We have a tough time hoping for His return as well.

The grave however could not possibly contain our Lord. Death was no match for the creator of all the Universe. The women entered the tomb. Again surprised. Literally Ektasis. You get your word ecstasy from it. They were out of their minds with bewilderment. Amazed. The angel knew they needed the facts. They hadn't slept much that weekend and needed to know this was not a dream. Yes. Your in the right place,

you are looking for the right person. The death really did happen. Jesus of Nazareth was crucified but he's not here. He is risen. Amen? Ah yes. There is the power. The resurrection declares Him to be the Son of God. The resurrection proves His work was acceptable to His father.

Let me tell you my fellow Sanhedrin members were scrambling to cover this very embarrassing event. They did the usual bribe to the soldiers who were supposed to be guarding the tomb to say that the disciples came and stole his body to propagate the myth. Where was His body? The Jewish leader's certainly didn't have it they would have produced it in a minute. Did Jesus faint and then was revived in the coldness of the tomb? No, the death was confirmed by the Roman coroner. His whole body was wrapped and buried I did that. His body was cold. He was dead. Did the disciples actually steal it to propagate a huge myth? Some even accused Nicodemus and I. Let me assure you I did nothing of the sort. I ask you. How tough is it to keep a secret. A big secret between two people? How about between 12 people? Would twelve disciples all desire to cover their lie enough to die for that lie? Eleven of the twelve disciples were killed for their faith. They believed in the resurrection. It is true. And there is where we can rest in the power for us. Power for righteous living.

It doesn't matter how good you are or how bad you are. You may have terribly blown it. But the empty tomb, has power and hope for you. It had hope for Peter. In the early dark hours of Friday he had denied He knew Jesus. Three times in a row. But look at verse 7 in chapter 16 of this gospel of our brother Mark. The angel gives a task to the women to go and tell what has happened. Tell the disciples, ...and by the way, don't forget Peter. Don't miss that. It's a choice nugget. It's as if all of heaven wanted to be the first to tell Peter that he was wanted back in the game...that he could step to the plate and hit again. He blew it bad...but..make sure and tell Peter too.

Some people you would never expect God to use, do some incredibly risky things for Him. Sometimes the people you would expect to go for God fail. The disciples were not around. Here the women have been watching, watching wanting to do something. They try to anoint the body and the Angel tells them the great news about Jesus and gives them a task. Go and tell. Yet what do they do. Look at the end of verse

8. They said nothing to anyone. All through Mark when Jesus performs an incredible miracle the people are dying to run through the streets and tell someone. Chapter 1 the Leper is cleansed. Jesus must say "Shhh don't tell" In chapter 5 Jairus daughter is healed. Strict orders "Shhh don't tell." Chapter 7 the deaf and dumb can hear and speak. "Shhh don't tell. Chapter 8 Peter makes the great declaration "Thou art the Christ the Son of God. Jesus says, "Shhh don't tell." And now...finally the greatest miracle ever performed. Jesus is raised from the dead. Messengers from heaven say. "Go tell everyone about the great news!" They are fearfully silent.

I know how easy it is to allow fear to silence us. Fear kept my belief in silence at one time. Will fear keep you in silence? What will your response be to the empty tomb? With God expect the unexpected.