

Justus

He disappeared among the crowd of 120 believers. The inner circle was surrounding Matthias, the winner of the lottery, patting him on the back, congratulating him. Matthias was the new “Benjamin” of the 12, the youngest of the tribe. Joseph aka Barsabbas wasn’t at all surprised when he drew the short straw, or stick. He was used to being the runner-up. It was his lot in life. He remembered what it was like growing up, playing games with his peers. He was always the last to be chosen.

When he was a young man, he heard Rabbi Jesus’s voice calling him. “Will you follow me?” And he did. Like the others, the chosen, the elect, he left everything behind to follow him.

But then there was the day when Jesus came down from the mountain to choose those who were special. He listened closely, hoping against hope that his name would be called. Peter, James, John, Andrew, Thomas, James, Jude Thaddeus, Judas, Simon, Bartholomew, Matthew. He listened intently for his name. But Joseph, aka Barsabbas did not hear his name. Once again, he had not made the cut. He had not been good enough. He was just an ordinary “joe.” Yes, he continued to follow the Rabbi, continued to be moved by his teaching, the miracles, but he always found himself on the margins, never really close enough to feel that he made a difference to the one from Nazareth, Rabbi Jesus.

And then, one day, everything disintegrated. Jesus was put to death. Joseph had been a witness to his death but had come to believe that Jesus was risen. He even told the others that he had seen the Risen Jesus with his own eyes and heard his voice. But he had not. He made up the story. He so wanted to belong. He thought if the others saw him as “someone” in the eyes of the Lord, that he might be called to join the chosen ones, the inner circle. Was this the reason that his lot was not chosen? He wanted to put on a cheerful face, pretend that it didn’t matter that he was the loser, but the disappointment was so great that he couldn’t pretend. Better just to slip away into the crowd, disappear. “No one will miss me.”

Then he heard a voice call his name, “Justus.” He knew at once who was calling him. It was his older sister Miriam. It was she who gave him the name, Justus when they were growing up in Magdala. They spent so much time together alone

that she would so often say “It’s just us.” Justus worshipped his older sister, even if it was forbidden by the first commandment. He loved her imagination, the games she would create. She would play at being “rabbi” and he would sit at the feet of Rabbi Miriam and learn from her. It was from her that he learned the psalms by heart. And her favorite passages from the prophet Isaiah.

“Fear not, O Israel. I have redeemed you. I have called you by your name. you are mine. You are precious and honored and I love you.

The troubles began for Miriam when she began saying that God was calling her to be a Rabbi, a teacher of the law. “You are a woman! God would not call a woman for a man’s work!” Then the rumors began that she was “possessed by demons.” Not just one but 7. Everyone shunned her, called her names. No one wanted to be seen with Miriam, except Justus, her faithful brother and friend.

It was he, years later, who had asked the Rabbi, Jesus, if he would come to their house and speak with Miriam. Something strange and wonderful happened in that visit. Miriam also began to follow the Rabbi. And whenever Justus would see her in the presence of Jesus, he knew she was deeply in love with him, although she somehow knew he didn’t belong to her but to the whole universe. Justus knew this since he and Miriam had spent so many nights stargazing, speaking of God and believing that this universe was an expression of an eternal Love. Justus remembered how she would say, “Justus, can you imagine if the Lord of All who loves us so much became one of us? Yes, I know that sounds like blasphemy, but who would have ever thought there would be a sun and moon and stars and life in the first place?”

“Justus,” Miriam said. “I know you better than anyone, and I know you are deeply disappointed that you were not chosen. I know that you doubt yourself and think that somehow, you’re not good enough in Jesus’s eyes. I remember a conversation I had with Jesus. Actually, it was an argument. I was so hurt and angry with him that he didn’t call me to be “one of the twelve.” I shouted at him, “I’m smarter than Peter, more lovable than John, better at numbers than Matthew, more trusting than Thomas, more astute than Philip, much, much more faithful than Judas. So why am I passed over?” And don’t you dare say “It’s always been this way. It’s our tradition!”

He smiled and, dare I say, looked at me with love. Then he said,

“I know. I know the worlds’ wounds. And this is one of the greatest. Each and every one is created in love and for love. Each of us is loved, indiscriminately by our Abba. It is we who exclude the other. We are all both sheep and goats. In our Abba’s eyes, there is no difference between male and female, Jew or Greek.”

Miriam said, “It wasn’t the answer I wanted but I for the moment, it calmed me. But, Justus, I have an idea. Go back to the Upper Room, the Cenacle. Wait there as we were told to do. I’m sure it will be worth the wait.

So, Justus made his way to the Upper Room wondering if it would be worth the wait as Miriam promised. He must have been very tired from the events of the day and the realization, once again, that he wasn’t very special. Certainly not one of the chosen. He found himself nodding off to sleep as he sat on the floor propped up against the wall. And then, he was startled awake as his head banged against the wall. Or was it the voice he heard that startled him. A familiar voice. “Justus, he heard. It’s just us, you and me. You can’t see me the way I appeared right after my rising. Yet, you can hear my voice. Justus, what can I do to help you believe in yourself? You look to others, thinking that they are the ones who make you special. Look within yourself. Believe that you are enough as you are.

“I used to believe in myself. I learned that from my sister, Rabbi Miriam. She taught me the words of the prophet Isaiah. ‘I have called you by name. You are mine. You are precious and honored and I love you.’

“Your sister, Miriam is a very wise woman.”

“Yes,” Justus said. “But then the losses, the rejections, the failures, my sins.(I never could keep the 613 commandments of the law), I always felt I had something to prove. I was never good enough.”

“You are more than enough for me. Justus. Win or lose. You are who you are, and I love you as you are. It’s just -us.”

At that moment, Justus heard voices coming up the stairs to the upper room. It was the newly minted 12 with Magdalene, Mary the mother of Jesus, Johanna and others. It was Peter who spoke up, “Justus, what are you doing here? You are not one of the chosen.”

Justus smiled and said, “To quote the Master, “the first shall be last and the last shall be first.”

And his sister, Miriam of Magdala, embraced him. “You have learned to love yourself.”

“Yes, thanks to you, Rabbi Miriam!”

And they waited in the upper room, with Mary the mother of Jesus, the women and the other disciples.