

Holy Saturday (Ps.31; Matthew 27.57-66)

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‘There is one particular day in Western history about which neither historical record nor myth nor Scripture make report. It is a Saturday. And it has become the longest of days’.

These words of the Jewish writer, George Steiner, point to a profound paradox inscribed deep in the New Testament. On the one hand, Saturday, the day after Jesus’ crucifixion and before his resurrection, is effectively invisible in the gospel accounts. It is not narrated, almost nothing of it is reported. It is a day so short in three of the gospels, that it is passed over in the breath between sentences: on Friday Jesus dies and is buried; on Sunday, after the Sabbath, the women go to the tomb. Of Saturday, there is seemingly nothing to say. Only in Matthew’s gospel, do we hear of the religious authorities’ concern that the disciples might ‘stage’ a fake resurrection and so of their Saturday expedition to make the tomb secure.

Yet on the other hand, Saturday (says Steiner) has become the longest of days, on which is lived most of human life. We live in the wake and in the midst of death and endings, suffering and waste. We have known many forms of Friday. But we also live, many of us, in the persistent and stubborn hope that more is possible, that meaninglessness and death are not the final truth of human life. We hear rumours of angels, and glimpse the mysterious, overwhelming and healing power of love. But we are not fully there yet, not truly home – and so we live on Saturday – a day generated by the suffering, waste and collapse of Friday, and infused with the scent and promise of Sunday. In the New Testament, this is the time of the church, eschatological time, the

time before the end. And from this side of the eschaton, this experience of 'in-between' Saturday time is never quite dispelled. 'There is one particular day in Western history about which neither historical record nor myth nor Scripture make report. It is a Saturday. And it has become the longest of days'.

If this is so, then the question of how to live on Saturday – remaining true to the experience of Friday and open to the possibility of Sunday – is for us an urgent matter, and one strangely neglected in the Easter liturgies.

What then does Saturday ask of us? It asks, first, that we acknowledge a death, an ending. In the chaos and confusion of crisis and acute suffering, our energies go simply to surviving; often it is only in the aftermath that we begin to face what we have lost. In the gospels, Saturday is synonymous with the image of the tomb and its mute finality. In Matthew's account, the *word* 'tomb' sounds five times in seven verses and the tomb is doubly shut – first when Joseph of Arimathea rolls a great stone against its door, and second when the chief priests and Pharisees and guard of soldiers make it secure by *sealing* the stone. Death is really death. Those who are faithful witness to it, like Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, sitting opposite the tomb. Whatever happens next cannot be continuous with what was before – and whether Friday's death is of a loved one or an image of ourselves, of an ecosystem or an expectation – there is no question now of simple reversal or rehabilitation. On Saturday we watch at the tomb.

What next does Saturday ask? It asks that we remain faithful to what we can. For Joseph and for the women, this means caring for Jesus' body – burying him, preparing the spices. It means grieving, staying true to their experience. This is the practice of patience (remembering that patience comes from same root as 'suffering' and 'undergoing'). This patience is inseparable from hope, because hope, on Saturday, arises not from the expectation that things are going to get better – how can they? Jesus is dead and buried. What is there left to pray for? No, hope now is somehow connected to

discovering their own continued lives and need. Jesus has died, but they are alive, and they are still in need of what Jesus offered them, love, acceptance, truth and vocation. Rowan Williams has written movingly of Mary Magdalene's vigil at the tomb as it is recounted in John's gospel, a vigil which involves her returning twice to the empty grave and then turning again and again seeking after him in her conversation with the 'gardener'.

'[I]f hope, mortally wounded, is still capable of turning back to the abandoned body, there is still a discovery to be made', he writes. 'Jesus is "lost" by our betrayal, or simply "lost" as we are carried away from him in the violent turmoil of the human world; ... But the conversion, the turning of ... repentance of which the New Testament speaks, is the refusal to accept that lostness is the final human truth. Like a growing thing beneath the earth, we protest at the darkness and push blindly up in search of light, truth, *home* – the place, the relation where we are not lost, where we can live from deep roots in assurance. Mary goes blindly back to the tomb, and finds her self, her home, her name; her protest, her dissatisfaction with dissatisfaction, is decisively vindicated'.

Williams goes on to say that Mary's 'conversion is the event of recognition that occurs when her protest is met with response. And ... her growth in converted life, will have to do with the *daily* refusal to accept that lost, "deprived" humanity can simply be lived with or shrugged off. Growth is in the passionate constancy of returning to what seems a grave, a void, to the dim recollection of a possibility of love, in the hope of hearing one's name spoken out of the emptiness'.¹ Saturday requires that we remain faithful to what we can, which includes being faithful to the truth of our own and the world's need, not betraying it by pretending that it doesn't matter or foreclosing

¹ Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*, second revised edition (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2002), pp.40-41.

possibility by 'the dead acceptance of loss'. On Saturday we suffer, we undergo our need and we learn what it means to hope.

What finally does Saturday ask? It asks, I think, as we watch at the tomb and suffer our need, that we keep our hearts open enough that we may recognise the dawning of possibility, the gift of new life. While we are waiting and hoping against hope, there is no assurance that there will be such a gift – Mary has no inkling of Sunday. *If* there is to be a gift, what it is, what it will make possible – all this is God's doing. We do not manufacture it, we cannot force or possess it. We can only receive it, accept the invitation to participate in it, gradually recognise it – as the disciples did on Easter morning, as little by little the indefeasible energy of God's love and life, the sun that was hidden from them by night, warmed their desolation and lightened their darkness.

How do we keep our hearts open to receive? How do we not, on Saturday, foreclose the possibility of resurrection? Ultimately, I think, trust is the key. Trust is not some glib confidence that everything will turn out, but the costly and vulnerable choice to entrust my life (despite everything) to the goodness of God, trusting even in the face of the tomb that God is for us and not against us, believing – as all the resurrection stories insist – in God's ancient promises to liberate and heal and reconcile. Choosing to trust in this way puts God, not me, at the centre of my life ('fix your eyes on the things that are above'). Trust is the dynamic that displaces my tendency to self-pity or self-dramatisation. It is what creates enough space within me, enough peace in my heart, that I may recognise the presence of the One who is utterly Other – who, though answering my deepest need, cannot be reduced to my schemes of meaning or domesticated to fit my agenda and self-image. This is the risen Christ, who comes always to draw us further from self-absorption and self-justification into the life of God, making of us agents and bearers of resurrection life. On Saturday, we entrust ourselves,

without safety net, to God – we consent to be displaced from the centre of our own lives.

And this Saturday, so uncelebrated in our Easter liturgies, so unremarked, is the space of much of human life – the time of unresolvedness, with its unsettling mixture of grief, suffering and stubborn, patient hope. That's our experience. But the *reality*, which becomes clearly visible on Easter morning, is that Saturday is also *Holy Saturday*, the day on which God is at work hiddenly, transforming humanity's violence and betrayal and lostness from deep within. The God of Easter Sunday is transfiguring all our Saturdays – making of even this time a gift to us, and healing for the world. So may we, watching and waiting, needing and hoping, and entrusting ourselves to the promise, live faithful to the tasks of this day so that with Mary Magdalene and the other disciples we too may awake with the dawn to recognise the risen Christ.