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**Dead and Buried (Matthew 27: 57-66)**

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Our Benedictus theology reading group is currently immersed in a study of the Apostles' Creed.<sup>1</sup> It is (as I keep having to explain to people) more interesting than it sounds! But one of the things we've noticed is that the middle section of the creed, the section dealing with Jesus' death, seems rather laboured. I believe, the Creed asks us to say, 'in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord' who 'suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell'. If you're familiar with these words, they roll off the tongue. But when you start to think about them, they sound almost tautologous. Wouldn't it have been enough to say he was crucified to infer that he had died? Enough to say he'd died to infer he was buried? Enough to say he was buried to infer that he 'descended' to the depths of the earth? But it's as if the Creed really wants us to know that not only was Jesus crucified but that he died, and not only did he die but he was buried, and not only was he buried but he descended to hell. Why this insistence? What's so important about how dead he got?

It's an insistence that suffuses also the gospel accounts of what happened to Jesus' body, on the evening of his crucifixion. According to Matthew, Joseph of Arimathea, a disciple of Jesus, went to Pilate and asked for the body. Pilate ordered it be given him and Joseph wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his own new tomb. And thereafter, it's as if the 'tomb' itself exerts a kind of magnetic fascination in the text. Joseph is said to roll a great stone to the door of the tomb, while Mary Magdalene and the other Mary take up their vigil opposite the tomb. The next day, the chief priests and Pharisees go to Pilate, worried about the possibility that Jesus' disciples might fake a resurrection by stealing the body. They ask him to command

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<sup>1</sup> Ben Myers, *The Apostles' Creed: A Guide to the Ancient Catechism* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018).

'the tomb to be made secure', and Pilate gives them a guard for the purpose. 'So they went', Matthew writes, 'and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone'. In ten verses, the word 'tomb' occurs five times; Jesus is truly dead and truly buried, in a tomb guarded by soldiers and definitively sealed. Can't get much deader than that. And the point is?

Well, theologically speaking, our tradition has drawn two key understandings from Jesus' deadness on this day. The first involves the confirmation that Jesus has entered fully into our human condition. To be born into mortal life means you will one day die. Jesus does not shirk this feature of our humanity. In fact, he enters into our mortality so deeply that, in theologian Ben Myers' words, he 'takes hold of us there. He [the Son of God] embraces our humanity at the point of its total collapse into nonbeing'.<sup>2</sup> Eastern Orthodox icons of the resurrection show Jesus standing over the broken doors of hell where the dead have been held captive. In these icons, an old man and woman are depicted. 'They are Adam and Eve. Christ has seized them by the wrists and raised them up from the shadowy underworld'.<sup>3</sup> The understanding here is that, by sharing our death, Christ has broken the power of death from the inside; he is rendering death no longer something to be feared, for now the living and the dead are alike touched by the presence of God, reconciled and made alive in Christ.

The second theological insight drawn from Jesus' having died and been buried concerns the nature and power of God. On this day of all days Jesus is utterly handed over, utterly yielded. He can no longer do anything to help himself. Any next move must come from elsewhere. To say that God raised Jesus from the dead is to affirm the power and the will of God to bring life where there is no life, to create from nothing. This is a point Matthew seems particularly concerned with. Ostensibly, in his account, the chief priests and Pharisees are sealing the tomb so that Jesus' disciples cannot fake his having risen. But in fact it's Matthew who wants there to be no

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<sup>2</sup> Myers, *The Apostles' Creed*, pp.81-82.

<sup>3</sup> Myers, *The Apostles' Creed*, p.81.

question of inauthenticity in the proclamation of resurrection. If he can convince us that the tomb was secured and sealed, then the raising of Jesus, the empty tomb must be recognised as an act of God, an event that can be accounted for in no other way.

So – transforming the meaning of death; affirming the power of God to bring life from death. Theologically, these are important reasons to insist – as the gospels and creeds all do – that Jesus really died and was buried, and that he descended as far as into death anyone ever goes. I ‘get it’. But ... still, somehow, all this feels kind of abstract, theoretical. And as though it keeps me away from the lived truth of this day, and so from the real ‘work’ of this day. A day, experienced by the women sitting opposite the tomb as a desolation, an emptiness, the sheer impenetrable absence of a beloved friend and teacher, and the collapse of hope. An extinguishing experienced by Jesus as – what ...? As something – waiting, suffering? Or simply a blank, nothing at all?

Whatever our faith has come say about the significance of Jesus’ having died and been buried, tonight we’re invited simply to be with the brute fact of it, to undergo its impact. In the words of our opening prayer, to be here at

The ever-narrowing gate  
intersection  
when the world of time and space  
yields up its measured form.

Here in the needle’s eye  
dark upon dark.  
The aching, echoing void  
of the hollowed heart  
suspended  
at the point of change.<sup>4</sup>

Here all consolation is gone – and there is simply bareness, suspension over nothing. On Holy Saturday we contend with the ‘absence’ of God. Jesus is dead, Jesus is

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<sup>4</sup> May Crowther, ‘The Place of Prayer’, in Jim Cotter, *Prayer at Night: A Book for the Darkness* (Sheffield: Cairns Publications, 1983), p.75.

buried, and if we pause, we feel the weight of it. We remember loved ones who have died and those who are suffering life as ‘death’. And this undergoing the weight of death in earthly life, feeling its power to make our lives seem empty, knowing our helplessness in the face of it – this is what it means to be with Christ this day and in the place of prayer. ‘Bearing the unknown to the mystery’, feeling our way in the dark, yet sensing, against all reason, that here the world’s salvation is being wrought – that this tomb is the gateway to life.