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Waiting Expectantly: Holy Saturday (Mark 15: 42-47)

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It's a strange time to come forward – when all seems lost, when there's no difference to be made. The corpse hangs heavily on the cross; the bold words are revealed to have been empty; the deeds, in the end, signifying nothing – or so it seems. And yet Joseph of Arimathea chooses this moment to declare his allegiance.

He's almost got away with it. Up to this point he's been, as Mark says, a 'respected member of the council'. John's gospel says he's been a disciple of Jesus, but a secret one for fear of the authorities. So he could have faded into the woodwork, his dangerous flirtation with this dangerous new teacher quietly abandoned, his respectability kept in tact.

So why declare himself now? Not only declare himself but, by handling the corpse, render himself unclean and so unable to celebrate the Sabbath – for by now it's late on the Day of Preparation. What's happened for him, this day? What's risen up in him that he can go so boldly to Pilate to ask for the body of Jesus, and so recklessly give up the security of his previous belonging?

The gospels don't spell it out for us. Maybe there's something in the uncompromisingness of Jesus' self-giving that's called forth an answering wholeheartedness in him; maybe he's seen with new eyes the implicit violence of the righteous, and can no longer be part of them, even if they seem to have won. Maybe he's glimpsed something in Jesus that, despite everything that's happened, still speaks to him of truth, of God. Whatever it is, he's finally laid his cards on the table – he is granted the body by Pilate; he takes it down, wraps it in the linen cloth he's bought, and lays it in a tomb hewn out of rock. And there it stays – Friday night, all through the Sabbath day – entombed behind the great stone.

Holy Saturday – this Sabbath day in the Easter journey – is often seen as a day of waiting. But waiting for what? The church waits for Resurrection – we know, at least we think we know, what’s yet to come. We wait in the key of hope. But for Joseph and Mary Magdalene and the women preparing spices it wasn’t like that. Their waiting was only for the Sabbath to be over, so they could anoint the body, perform their service to the dead. They waited in the key of despair, in the dreary certainty only of more of the same. Or did they?

Joseph does not seem a despairing figure. He’s not avoiding the reality of defeat and death – him least of all. But, as Mark has told us, he has been ‘waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God’. Has he just given that up? Or does he, even now, retain some stubborn sense of expectancy, some indomitable sense of possibility?

More and more it seems to me that what matters in the life of faith is not just *what* we wait for, but *how* we wait. When we focus solely on the ‘what’, then often we clog the space with fixed demands or the arrogant assumption that we know already what fulfilment will look like or could be. But when we focus on the *way* we wait, on the ‘how’, then we’re more likely to leave the space open – to be vulnerable, humble and simply receptive. Joseph could have had no clear conception of what he had been and was still waiting for. But *the way* he waited seems to have been different to those around him. When others on the Jewish council, who were also waiting for God’s promised kingdom, saw only a trouble-maker, he was able to glimpse in Jesus an intimation of God’s promised fulfilment; and then (when most of Jesus’ declared disciples had fallen away) he was able to continue waiting faithfully through what seemed hope’s definitive extinction.

We too are waiting at the tomb – the tomb of Jesus, the tombs of our battered hopes and unrealised longings. We too are waiting for Resurrection and God’s promised fulfilment and life. But what that will look like, what it means for each of us and for our world – we cannot fully know in advance. Tonight, as we

remain as faithfully as we can in the space between what is now and what we hope may be, let us pray that our practise of expectant waiting will prepare us to recognise and participate in the new life even now being wrought through Christ at the heart of creation.