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Holy the Tending (John 19. 38-42)

Holy Saturday

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Each year we celebrate the Easter mystery, and each year a new facet of the story catches our attention. At least, that's my experience. In part, that's because of the inexhaustible meaning of these events, the inexhaustible depth of the Scripture. And in part, it's because of what we bring with us to these days, the struggles or questions or experiences that are shaping our listening and response.

Leading up to Easter this year, a series of terrible stories emerged about the gross violation of women in Australia's Parliament House: a young female staffer raped by a male colleague and the crime effectively brushed under the carpet by office and electoral politics; allegations of historical rape against a cabinet minister; revelations of endemic sexual harassment and a bloke-y government culture inhospitable to women's contribution and participation. For many women in many walks of life such revelations have triggered their own traumatic memories of domestic violence, sexual assault and workplace harassment. For many in our country – men as well as women – all this cries out for a reckoning with what's being called 'toxic masculinity' and its impact on us all – women, transfolk, children and men.

This is part of what I brought with me, to these days of Easter. And this background was amplified by a friend's comment about the effective invisibility of women in the passion narratives. What were the women doing, at the Last Supper, she wanted to know? What were they thinking as the blokes went about the business of betraying, denying and running away? And if we took their perspective seriously, what might that mean for the way we see and remember the events of Easter?

Well, I've found this a challenging but significant hinterland for my reflections this year. It's no use denying the stories we've received emerge from a patriarchal culture. At the Last Supper, in the garden, at Jesus' trial and crucifixion, overwhelmingly the actors are said to be men, and it's overwhelmingly the men's experience we hear of. Judas' and Peter's failures and remorse, Pilate's indecision, the soldiers' taunts and violence, the authorities' relentlessness. It's violent and scarring – a scene, you might say, of toxic masculinity.

Given this, what seems absolutely remarkable once you start to pay attention, is what *is* said of the women. In all four gospels, it's Jesus' female disciples – some of whom have come with him all the way from Galilee and supported him financially – who are said not to have run away. Mary Magdalene, and she alone, is named in all four gospels as having been first to the empty tomb, and in three of the four she's named as having been there at the cross. There's a cast of others too – Jesus' mother Mary, Mary the wife of Clopas, Mary the mother of James and Joses, Salome and Joanna, as well as many who are unnamed. And, as we heard on Maundy Thursday, it is a woman (sometimes identified as Mary of Bethany, sometimes assumed to be Mary Magdalene) who anoints Jesus in advance of his death – thereby being the first to recognise the meaning of his passion. And all this is particularly emphasised in the gospel of John, as I've been trying to show.

It might seem, however, that from a feminist perspective, this is cold comfort. *Of course*, it's the women hanging around in the background, offering support, picking up what pieces they could from the male-led debacle unfolding before them. But in the end, nothing seems to change. They're mostly identified by their relationship with men (mother of so-and so, wife of so-and so); they're always rendered peripheral to the action and their knowledge is discounted. Most significantly of all, their non-complicity in the violence against Jesus does not register theologically – such that in a patriarchal church, preaching has almost inevitably focused on the activity of the men, thereby generating a totalising and distorting account of human (which is to say, male) depravity.

These are weighty charges. Yet, for all this, there seems to be a surprising disruption of this pattern in the passage we just heard. In every other gospel, it's the women who come with spices to anoint Jesus' body – and this they do on resurrection morn, when there is in fact no body to anoint. In John, and John alone, it's two men, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, who do Jesus this service as they place him in the tomb. *Till* this moment, these two have been peripheral to the gospel story and at the centre of the patriarchal power structure of their community. They are rich and respected members of the ruling Council, who have followed Jesus in secret for fear of losing their positions. *From* this moment, however, their situation is reversed. By handling Jesus' corpse, they are ritually defiled and so by definition excluded from celebrating the Jewish Passover (the defining ritual of their old identity) on the next day. It's as if, by choosing this moment to 'come out' as Jesus' disciples, they are enacting their own Passover from the edge to the centre of faith, and thus from the centre to the edge of worldly power. And it causes me to wonder, could it be that there's something in all this about a transposition or reframing of gender as well?

Nicodemus, we're told, brings the spices, myrrh and aloes, a mixture weighing about a hundred pounds. Before Jesus' death, Mary had anointed him with one pound of pure nard. Writes one commentator, 'What Mary in Bethany had done [in advance of his death] ... Joseph and Nicodemus now complete. Instead of *one* liter ... they now spend a hundred liters. And when the aroma of the one liter of ointment filled the whole house, imagine how the hundred liters must have filled the grave! Like the immense amount of wine at the Cana wedding, the Feeding of the Five thousand, or the one hundred and fifty-three fish, so also is this mass of spices a sign of messianic fullness'.¹ And to my mind, this doesn't feel like male one-upmanship – my spice jar is bigger than yours. It's more like a profound affirmation of what Mary has done, an extravagant and equally costly recapitulation of her insight and love.

¹ Citing H. Thyen, Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2012), p.1136.

And I sense there's something happening here, something drawn out by Jesus' own love and self-giving, that overflows all bounds – the bounds of our reason as well as the bounds we draw between male and female, centre and edge, death and life.

I asked, what might it mean for the way we remember the events of Easter, if we took the perspective of the women seriously? How might it change our sense of what human beings are and may be?

For myself, I begin to hear their presence through the story like a ground note – a basso continuo, sometimes almost drowned out by the cacophony and confusion, but always there, the human constancy that joins to God's constancy, helping to draw us from before to after, by means of 'through'. And in John's rendering of Jesus' burial, I sense this almost hidden but immensely powerful note setting up a harmonic resonance, which evokes further constancy and creative participation in the new life that God in Christ is bringing to be in our midst. This is a participation that exposes, for all time, the non-necessity and futility of toxic masculinity, and liberates the whole human family for the tending of life.