



BENEDICTUS
contemplative church

8 April 2023

Holy Saturday - He was not there (Matthew 27: 57-66)

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A rich follower of Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea, went to Pilate to ask for Jesus' body. Pretty brave don't you think, but what harm is there, after all, Jesus is dead, isn't he? He took the body, heavy, wrapped it tenderly and laid it in his own new tomb. Such a poignant part of the story. Such a tender moment, with the women looking on. Then, an afterthought, an agitated worried hierarchy go to Pilate to make sure the Jesus' threat is neutralised. They don't want any rumours, and definitely no stealing the body. Seal the tomb, leave guards near by. Take no risks. Matthew goes to great lengths to tell us all this, so we'll know it really is true, it's a surprise if something happens, a miracle since all hope is squashed. Where are Jesus' friends anyway? Only Mary Magdalene and the other Mary at the tomb watching. It is a grave situation. It seems so hopeless.

This is Holy Saturday.

It is sinking in. There is no miracle. He's dead. It is unreal. What can we do? waiting, waiting, waiting.

This is liminal space, a space between, space between land and ocean, space between life and death, space between beginning and end. The dash. It's how we live this space that's important. Sure, there are things to be done, clean out the room, organise a funeral, tell people, organise the photos and the order of service, the time between death and the funeral. The time between life and death. The dash. The empty space.

Waiting, numbness sinking in. Images of death, violence, stillness, exhaustion. Lack of sleep. Cling together. It's over. Relief. Fear. Planning. Now what? Where is the joy, the healing? The excitement even, the rhythm of the journey, crowds, needy, tired.

All gone. What am I now? Was it all a mirage.

Torn. Broken. Empty. Hope buried.

Unknowing.

Waiting the sabbath out, wait for the dawning of a new day. Wait to see the unfolding. Comfort each other. Who knew there could be so many tears. Waiting. You can't rush it. It's only yesterday after all. Tidying up. Planning. So surreal. Unreal. Emptiness, stretching into the future.

Need to sit still a moment, to hand over these few years, to honour him, to remember, regroup, give thanks. Sounds so hollow in the enormity of the past few days. This transformation journey is

only just beginning. There were days before when we thought we'd got it. Though we were almost there, we weren't, we aren't, we've got so far to go.

Emptiness, uncertainty, anxiety, grey, bleak, black.

Why did he have to die like this?

So ignominious. We will be a laughingstock.

Can't worry about that now. At least he was true to the end – forgiving the bastards, and us.

And befriended that bloke up there with him. How can that be?

Now he's gone and I am bereft.

Here we are, waiting again. It has a different feel from Thursday night. Stuff has happened. He has been arrested, tried and murdered. He is in the tomb and we are lost.

We are empty and shocked, and can't believe it.

Where do we go from here?

It's been such a journey, we had such hopes, watched him heal so many, watched him speak from his heart, transform lives of so many men and women, of course and children, he was so lovely with children.

Now what? How do we go along? What is next?

What does it all mean these past three years, when I've left everything and hoped so much and now he's dead, he's dead. So many memories go through my mind: the day he said "come follow me", enthusiasm, life, hard life, sleeping out sleeping at other people's places, dodging the authorities, but we were caught up in it.

It meant so much to change my life, but now he's dead. He talked about something more, something beyond death, but I just don't know. I just don't know. I can't believe it, who will be next? I'm frightened. I've never been so afraid in my life without his strength his calm. Peter said, 'Maybe we just go back to fishing?'

We hear from the Iona Community again.¹

It was on a Saturday

It was on the Saturday that he was not there.

Those who don't like corpses can't stay away from graveyards, unless there's some prohibition to stop them revisiting the dead end of their hopes and their dreams.

It's as if they think that should the voice speak again, it will speak there or a sunbeam will dance or a flower will shoot

and give a sign of misinterpreted life.

But close the cemetery,

or confine, through custom or constraint, the wailing ones to the house and it looms larger .. the loss, the lostness, the losers.

Men shiver in an upstairs room, warm though the day is.

Women weep in an uncharmed circle.

Memory is forced on memory.

¹ WGRG P176

The mind's eye tries to trace the profile and the face, the smile,
the gentle twitching of the nose... and fails.
And a panic sets in
because it seems he can't be remembered.
Was he ever known?
It was on the Saturday that he was not there.

John V. Taylor, reflects:

A God who cannot set a limit to his self-giving, who cannot ensure himself against suffering, who cannot be wholly in control of the relationships he initiates what strange God is this? (2 Cor. 12:7-10)

Some months ago, he says, I was asked by a friend to visit a young couple whose two-year old daughter had been found dead in her cot. They were still stunned and haunted by the old question Why?, and sometimes, Why her?

I said to them that their child's death was a tragic accident, an unforeseeable failure in the functioning of the little body: that, so far from being willed or planned by God, it was for God a disaster and a frustration of God's will for life and fulfilment, just as it was for them, that God shared their pain and loss and was with them in it. I went on to say that God is not a potentate ordering this or that to happen, but that the world is full of chance and accident and God has let it be so because that is the only sort of world in which freedom, development, responsibility and love could come into being, but that God was committed to this kind of world in love and to each person in it, and was with them in this tragedy, giving Godself to them in fortitude and healing and faith to help them through. And their child was held in that same caring, suffering love.

Such an approach to the problem lays a greater responsibility on us as human beings, and this is in keeping with the gospel. We see the element of human responsibility and cooperation with God most clearly in Jesus himself. He did not expect life to work out to his advantage. He worked not a single miracle for himself.²

Was he ever known?

It was on the Saturday that he was not there.

Esther de Waal in her book, *Lost in Wonder* says

This is the choice: to walk forward courageously or to look back and cling to what is no longer there.

Do we need a poet to tell us that we can never return to the past?

Of course there is a deep longing to return to Eden. But Edwin Muir, born into the paradise of an Orkney island where men and women and children were at one, and then forced because of poverty to leave, reminds us in his poem 'One Foot in Eden' that Eden has to go. But in its place come 'strange blessings' as blackened trees give way to new blossoms, not innocence restored but something new and different:

"But famished field and blackened tree
Bear flowers in Eden never known.
Blossoms of grief and charity
Bloom in those darkened fields alone."

² *Weep not for me meditations on the cross and the resurrection.* John, V Taylor. 1986 world Council of churches, Geneva, Switzerland, p11-12

So this day ends not with any easy answers but with the confidence of the poet who tells us that from the darkened fields will come new flowers, blossoms that we could never have imagined.³

War artist, George Gittoes says,

*People always ask me about how I can keep facing and witnessing war and death. I've come up with hundreds of answers- all with some truth- but really it is because of my certainty that death is just a transition and not the end.*⁴

And Michael Leunig also writes hopefully:

*Love is born
With a dark and troubled face.
When hope is dead
And in the most unlikely place
Love is born.
Love is always born*⁵.

Was he ever known?

It was on the Saturday that he was not there⁶.

³ Esther de Waal *Lost in Wonder* p113

⁴ George Gittoes *I witness*
Hazelhurst Regional Gallery and Arts Centre

⁵ <https://www.leunig.com.au/works/prayers> accessed 23 March 2023

⁶ Iona Community