

“Between Death and Resurrection”

Mark 15:42-47

Mark 15:46

And Joseph of Arimathea brought a linen shroud, and taking Jesus down, wrapped him in the linen shroud, and laid him in a tomb which had been hewn out of the rock; and he rolled a stone against the door of the tomb.

Joseph has unrolled a linen cloth and laid it on the ground. It is close woven and white. It is longer than the human frame and twice as wide. It is a shroud.

He has leaned a ladder to the back of the cross.

He has climbed the ladder.

Now he draws ropes around the chest, beneath the shoulders of our Lord and over the cross beam of wood. He throws the loose ends down to the centurion who is standing below to help him. With a sudden force— and with anguish that there must be force—Joseph wrenches the spikes from the cross bar. The left one: the body of Jesus swings wide away and hangs from one arm. The right: the body slumps. The ropes go taut. The centurion has one in each hand. Joseph whispers, "Wait," and then he descends. He stands below the slouching corpse, below the rain of the dead man's hair. He applies himself to the spike through the heels. The legs drop.

"Now," he whispers.

With his left arm he is hugging Jesus at the knees.

"Lower him," he says.

By sad degrees as the Roman centurion pays out rope, the body of Jesus sinks, shoulders hunched to the ears, Jesus resistless. Joseph receives the torso on his right arm. The head falls back, the mouth opens, the eyes are lidded, blind. The hair rains at Joseph's elbow. Jesus is gaunt. As light as an empty pouch. The body without the sounding breath is light and so pitifully little. Joseph kneels and lays him on the shroud and begins to wind the linen around him for burial.

Somewhere a woman delivers a long, soft, terrible sigh to the world. Who is that?

The door to the tomb is a hole in stone no higher than a human waist. Joseph enters backward, bent down, bearing the shoulders of Jesus. The centurion, on his knees, keeps the legs from dragging dirt.

"Thank you," says Joseph. His voice echoes in the hollow rock. "Thank you," he says. "This is enough."

Joseph disposes the body alone then and emerges into the darker part of the evening. The sun has set. The sky is empty. The air is absolutely still.

There is a descending groove in the stone ledge below the sepulchre's door. Joseph rolls a flat stone down this groove. A single slow revolution will bring it flush to the hole. No animals will desecrate this body.

There are two sounds in the dusk: the grinding of stone in stone—and once more the soft sigh, a low, compulsive, wordless sigh. Who is that?

Then the door is closed. The deed is done. It is finished.

Mark 15:47 - Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where he was laid.

Stone cold. And the stone is closed. Where do I go from here? Nowhere. Back to the city.

Which is nowhere now. The Master isn't there. The Master is not. Everywhere is nowhere.

There is nowhere to go.

What do I do? I don't know what to do. Nothing. The Sabbath has started. So what? So, if I pray, I'll be mouthing the sounds. And if I pray a vain repetition, what then? Will Heaven be offended? *Well, Heaven has offended me!*

Joseph's stone is like the period that stops the sentence. Boom!—the story is done. And when the story is over, the very air is empty. No place for me, No home for my soul. Silence. Why do I keep standing here? It's dark. It's midnight. Everyone's gone home. Except me. Abandoned. Nothing.

Why can't I leave the tombs?

Because the whole world is a graveyard now. Because this is the one that has my Lord.

Jesus! Jesus, without you I am a nothing in a nowhere!

You are dead.

My world is annihilated.

And still—I love you.

Mary, do this:

Even in your despair, observe the rituals. It is the Sabbath; then let it be the Sabbath after all. Pray your prayers. However hollow and unsatisfying they may feel, God can fill them. God is God, who made the world from nothing—and God as God can still astonish you.

He can make of your mouthings a prayer—and of your groanings a hymn. Observe the ritual. Prepare your spices. Return on Sunday, even to this scene of your sorrow, expecting nothing but a corpse, planning nothing but to sigh once more and to pay respects. Return on Sunday.

One story is done indeed, my Magdalene. You're right. You've entered the dark night of the soul.

But another story—one you cannot conceive of (it's God who conceives it)—another story starts at sunrise. And the empty time between, while sadly you prepare the spices, is in fact preparing you. Soon you will change. Soon you, Mary, will become that holy conundrum which must baffle and antagonize the world: a saint. Saint Mary Magdalene. "As dying, and behold we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor; yet making many rich; as having nothing and yet possessing all things— that host of contradictions, the beauty of Spirit, the puzzle of all who know him not, is the character of saints.

Come again on Sunday, my Mary, and see how it is that God makes saints.

And now we are prepared, dear people. Sunday is coming. We will remember this whole Passion narrative again. We think on Maundy Thursday of Jesus' Last Supper. On Good Friday we thought once more through his suffering and through the death that happened in the middle of the afternoon. But Sunday is coming! Wait, in good hope and faith, always confessing our sin, recognizing our desperate need of it. Wait until we rejoice with the rising of the sun because it is, indeed, the rising of the glorious Son of God!

Prayer

Almighty God, over this entire event you spread your arms. You planned it. In the deep of your heart, in that place we can scarcely see, you planned an act that would frighten the world—but change it completely. You planned by a death to grant us life. You planned by solitude and darkness to lift us into holy communion and brilliant light for us. We believe in you, through your Son Jesus. And by our faith we already stand with one leg in Heaven and one leg yet on earth. Be with us when Sunday comes, give our tongues the ability to sing praise as beautiful as the angels, because our hearts feel that love and that gratitude to you. We do praise you, our Lord. We do give you unutterable praise. AMEN

And now, as you go your way through tonight and next unto the Resurrection Sunday, may Christ go with you. May he go before you to show you through this dark and desperate way; may he go behind you to encourage you, saying there is light and love in the future; and beside you to be your friend; and above you; and even this week within you to grant you peace!

#803 – When I Survey the Wondrous Cross