

Holy Saturday
April 20, 2019

All Saints Church (the Crypt)
Year C

Job 14:1-14
Psalm 31

1 Peter 4:1-8
John 19:38-42

“It is finished.”

Jesus’ last words.

He needs to be removed from the cross. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea accept the task. How did they decide to be the ones? They are disciples of Jesus, though secret ones. Maybe not as secret now, as Joseph must go to the palace to petition Pilate for permission to take Jesus’ body, and Nicodemus must go to the market to buy an exorbitant amount of myrrh and aloes, almost 100 pounds, too much, too conspicuous to hide.

They go to the cross, to Golgotha, the place of the Skull. They remember to bring a stepladder with them, so they can climb up the cross, to lovingly release the nails and the rope, so they can gently lower Jesus to the ground.

From the ground, they lift him, to carry the body to the tomb. I imagine Joseph holding Jesus’ feet and legs, with his other hand placed on the middle of his back. While Nicodemus supports Jesus’ back, shoulders and cradles his head. As the two men walk, their hands touch at the center of Jesus body, comforted by the trace that they are not alone.

They walk to the tomb, most likely stumbling, straddling their own Pieta’.

Unhinged, suffering, elsewhere and beyond, yet there, with no words, these two men act. Probably comforted that they have something to do; as being left alone with only their thoughts is too terrifying, too suffocating, too chilling.

Taking their hands which had just lifted Jesus off the cross and carried him, they now, in silence, swathe Jesus with oils, as they wrap him in burial linens and place him in the tomb. They are done.

It is finished.

Now what do they do?

They join us here, as they sit down in chairs in the back against the chapel wall. We make room for them.

They are here, with us, in a grief that knows no bounds, in this tomb. We all sit in this crypt, literally next to four sarcophagi, underground, held in by the dim candlelight and flickering shadows. A trace that we are not alone.

There is a silence in all the land, descending upon us, like a death march, relentless in its presence. Love is gone, maybe forever. Yet we remain.

It's like being asked to breathe underwater, or dig our own grave, or walk around a hole that is wider than the universe. And like black holes that distort all space, we are shut in, trapped. There is no way out. And all comfort has vanquished. Wailing is maybe the only response, yet there is no air. Remember, we just killed Love, nailed it to a cross and buried it deep underground.

And now we are in the middle of death; there is no order. We are lost.

And yet Jesus is not lost. Jesus is busy. He is descending to hell, into our hell, to release us from our own despair, self-destruction and denial. His first Resurrection Act: to make his descent to hell, and to the hells of our own making, to soothe our exorbitant pain.

Out of an authority created at the Beginning of Time, Jesus calls out in the depths of hell to all those sleeping:

“I did not create you to be held a prisoner in hell. Rise from the dead, for I am the life of the dead. Rise up, work of my hands, you who were created in my image. Rise, let us leave this place, for you are in me and I am in you; together we form only one person and we cannot be separated.”¹

Even when we are lost, in the dark, floundering to bury and be buried, Jesus is acting.

Where God seems most absent, God is nearest. He takes on our own suffering into his heart. There is no pain unknown to him, no loneliness unfelt, no despair he cannot bear. As bad as it gets, God gets it, even in his own body, pierced in the side, nailed through his nerves, smothered in his own breath.

He is coming to us, even in this tomb, reaching for our hands, offering us a way to the living, to a path of letting go, to a stripping, to a consoling, quieting the chatter, so we can be without shame and stand naked before the one who is naked before us.

“Awake, O sleeper and rise from the dead and Christ will give you light.”

We are the work of God's hands made in God's image and together “we form only one person and we cannot be separated.” Jesus is coming for us.

Today is silence.

Saturday is empty and the tomb is full. Soon we will be full, and the tomb will be empty.

¹ From an anonymous preacher, Greek, in the 4th century, who wrote a short homily entitled “He Descended into Hell.”