

Navigating the Unknown

Holy Saturday 2020

'There are nights
so dark
that the dawn is not merely distant
but beyond imagination.

Oh These are the hours
where grief lives,
where fear rules,
where truth lies exposed

like a wound.

Hope hides,
peace is for others.

The minutes extend,
repeating the distress
of the hours that went before

and every thought begins and ends in silence.'

©Call the midwife, Series 8, episode 8, opening words.

A prayer

Loving Father,
Today we stand on
Holy ground
We gather apart in our homes
Some alone
dispersed like Jesus's first disciples
On this threshold
Where hope is hidden
Death stings
Restless thoughts abound
Doubt rises
Sleep flees
Fear pounds
As we enter into Holy Saturday
Into the unknown
Holy Spirit be our guide, our comforter and our companion.

It strikes me that the whole of this period of time, since Covid-19 became the dominating factor in our global lives, particularly since lockdown began, feels like an extended Holy Saturday. Today is the day, which is often forgotten about, passed over in our rush to hurry out of the grief of yesterday, longing for the hope of resurrection and Easter eggs. Yet we are slowed down, pulled to a stop. On Holy Saturday, Jesus body lay dead. We cannot rush past that. What are we to make of it?

I believe that Holy Saturday is a gift, and never more so than this year. Holy Saturday honours and gives voice to the experience of so much of our lives, where we are on the threshold, we cannot go back yet we do not know what is around the corner. Theologians have written about Holy Saturday as being a liminal space. The word Liminal comes from the Latin word 'Limina' which means a threshold. It is the train ride between where you have come from and your arrival destination. It is the archway between what is known and safe and what is beyond the outside door. Richard Rohr writes in *Wondrous Encounters: Scripture for Lent*: 'Liminal space' is the crucial in-between time – when everything actually happened and yet nothing appears to be happening. Maybe there is something in this that we can relate to as we wait for the impact to be felt, of our contribution to the fight against the spread of Covid-19 by staying at home.

Holy Saturday is the place of being in the Unknown and Uncertainty between death and resurrection. The in-between. Where we are caught in the tension between death – on all levels; from the extreme tragic deaths of lives cut short due directly and indirectly from Covid-19, the deaths of livelihoods, the death of social and work activities, to the mini deaths of learning to live without the various items we have had previously taken for granted – and the resurrection hope of Easter Sunday. We see resurrections around us of community and neighbourly spirit and relational accountability and maybe we have even experienced our own mini resurrections of friendships sparked into life, beyond the annual Christmas card exchange.

Easter Sunday will come – but when it arrives tomorrow how should we celebrate it? How can we celebrate it when we globally are still existing in a state of Holy Saturday where we are marked by the trauma and death of Covid-19, waiting, hoping, praying for new life to come? For this to all be over. Will our Alleluia's ring hollow or even stick in our throats, seeming offensive and repugnant? As we are still caught up in the death, the screaming stillness punctuated for some by the regulating in-out of breathing apparatus.

I feel torn. I believe we need to hold onto that hope of Easter Sunday and mark it in some way that still cries out that there is yet hope, but in a way that does not refuse to acknowledge that we do this from a Holy Saturday place of pain where for some hope is dead, or at least seems to be.

This I believe is an authentic expression of worshipping in Spirit and Truth. We cannot deny our lived experiences which speak of death and loss, whilst grasping for hope. To do so would undermine our humanity and our belief in a God who knows us intimately. So we

might as well be honest, because he already knows our innermost thoughts and feelings. We might dupe others, but we cannot dupe God. We don't need to put on a brave face. We can proclaim that Christ *has* risen and *has* won the ultimate victory over death and pain and draw comfort from the fact that one day *he will* wipe away every tear from our eyes and death *will* lose its sting; but to proclaim that tomorrow, with cheeks stained with tears, knowing that death does sting now, is the strongest proclamation of faith, a faith that doesn't shrink from reality, but refuses against *all* evidence that might shout HOPE IS DEAD, to rasp out to God: 'My God, my God why have you forsaken me?' To refuse to let go of the rugged cross, when all else has been snatched from us, to stand outside the sealed tomb lost for words.

Confronting our own Holy Saturday

None of us can escape Holy Saturdays, particularly during this pandemic. Holy Saturdays can come in many forms throughout our lives, maybe a redundancy, ill health, a change in our relationship with God, the loss of a loved one. Suddenly everything has changed. Something has been lost. Things are not as they were. Yet we do not know yet what they will be. We cannot go backwards, but we cannot yet move forwards, hope seems lost. We do not know how long this will last. We are forced to wait in this season of unknown. Perhaps in this time, like no other that we have experienced in Hendon, we can more easily relate to the dispersed, physical distancing of the disciples, scattered after Jesus's arrest and death. If helpful, you may choose to read one of the reflections below focusing on one of the specific emotions that the disciples most likely felt.

Guilt and Shame

Jesus said "This very night, before the rooster crows up the dawn, you will deny me three times."

Peter protested, "Even if I had to die with you, I would never deny you." All the others said the same thing. (Matthew 26:34-35)

Peter: I am tormented by Jesus's words, ashamed by my cocky assertion that I of all people wouldn't deny Jesus. Yet I did. My best friend. I didn't even have the guts to stand beside him and nail my colours to the mast as he was led away...I followed at a safe distance behind as he was led away to be interrogated, so that nobody would assume I was a disciple of Jesus. And then while I watched the horrid charade play out by the fire, why couldn't I have stuck up for my friend? Why couldn't I have proudly said to the servant girl, yes I am a follower of Jesus?

Hardy fisherman? Huh! Pathetic coward I am more like! Everyone scattered after Jesus's arrest, but somehow we've found our way back to the fated room we all shared out last

meal together on Thursday. How can I look at the others in the eyes and tell them what happened? They'd never forgive me, this is your rotten, dark secret, and it'll eat me up! How could I have said I didn't know this man who I have given up my career for? I'm so angry at myself, I feel sick and disgusted by my behaviour. Nobody else knows, apart from maybe John, I can't bear for the others to find out, they'll never forgive me! Will John tell them if he saw?

Grief

My mattress is soaked, soggy with tears. The sockets of my eyes are black holes; nearly blind, I squint and grope. (Psalm 6:6-7)

I'm caught in a maze and can't find my way out, blinded by tears of pain and frustration. (Psalm 88:9)

John: The silence is deafening. Our friend and leader is dead. Judas our trusted friend and companion has killed himself. How? How could Judas have betrayed Jesus? And why? Life as we know it has come to an end. My body feels cold and numb yet I cannot shake this pain that sears through my core, as though a dagger has been plunged right through our heart. The pain is excruciating – too much, too much to live with. How can I go on? But I promised Jesus I would look after his mother – somehow I must be strong for her, but how?

Then Simeon[▫] blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

Mary, Jesus's mum: My mind keeps bringing me back to those words of Simeon spoken so long ago – when Jesus was only 8 days old. I was too excited by all the hopes we had for Jesus, I tried not to contemplate what he meant when he said ‘a sword will pierce your soul’. Now I know. As I stood at the foot of the cross, and in powerless horror watch my beloved son breathe his last, it was like I felt the thrust of the spear rupture my side when the soldier tore into my precious Son's side. I am in agony. I hurt so much. I cannot speak.

Doubt

After the two days, Jesus said to his disciples, “Let's go back to Judea.” His disciples replied: “Rabbi, you can't do that. The Jews are out to kill you, and you're going back?” Jesus replied “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep. I'm going to wake him up.” The disciples said, “Master, if he's gone to sleep, he'll get a good rest and wake up feeling fine.” Jesus was talking about death, while his disciples thought he was talking about taking a nap. Then Jesus became explicit: “Lazarus died. And I

am glad for your sakes that I wasn't there. You're about to be given new grounds for believing. Now let's go to him." That's when Thomas, the one called the Twin, said to his companions, "Come along. We might as well die with him." (John 11:8-16)

Thomas: I'm haunted by those words I spoke when Jesus set out to bring Lazarus back to life. I was so sure then, that Jesus was the real deal. That he was God. I mean, who else could bring someone back to life whose body had already started to decompose? Four days it had been in the tomb. I was prepared to die with Jesus, but now, I'm not so sure. Everything has fallen apart. Jesus claimed to be God, but maybe raising Lazarus was all a big hoax, after all, if Jesus was God he wouldn't be lying dead in a tomb. Was everything a lie? I gave up everything to follow Jesus, my livelihood, my job security, my family, my home, my religion, have the last three years been a complete waste of time and pointless?

Traumatized and Afraid

I shake with **fear**, I shudder from head to foot. "Who will give me wings," I ask— "wings like a dove?" Get me out of here on dove wings; I want some peace and quiet. I want a walk in the country, I want a cabin in the woods. I'm desperate for a change from rage and stormy weather. (Psalm 55:4-8)

We've heard the news, and we're as limp as wet dishrags. We're paralyzed with **fear**. Terror has a death grip on our throats. Don't dare go outdoors! Don't leave the house! Death is on the prowl. Danger everywhere! (Jeremiah 6:24-25).

John the Son of Zebedee: We're the fighters, me and my brother James. Yet I can't fight this inner terror. James snuffs the lamp out. I check the doors are locked for the twentieth time, I can't seem to control myself. We should be safe but I don't feel it. A few of the 11 disciples are locked in this dark room with me and James, but we don't speak, we've each found a space around the edge of the room, lost in our own thoughts. I've got my back pressed up against the wall – it feels safer that way. Every creak on the stairs, every un-expected sound sparks a jolt of fear shooting up my spine. My eyes burn wide with fright. My arm hair is raised and my skin feels cold with sweat. I can't seem to stop shivering. Each minute drags. Bartholomew places his cup too heavily on the floor and the thud triggers a flashback, suddenly I'm there again, hiding in the bushes, watching unable to stop it happening, gasping for breath – screaming to leave, but no sound comes out, suffocating silence. I wrap my arms around myself and try to rock myself to soothe this inner panic. My Heart is pounding so loud I am convinced the soldiers searching for us will hear it, and find us and arrest us and we will be killed too. I want to get up and run – but I can't move, I can only wait, wait for the inevitable.

Anger and Blame

The disciples came to a Samaritan village to make arrangements for Jesus's hospitality. But when the Samaritans learned that Jesus's destination was Jerusalem, they refused hospitality. When the disciples James and John learned of it, they said, "Master, do you want us to call a bolt of lightning down out of the sky and incinerate them?" Jesus turned on them: "Of course not!" And they travelled on to another village. (Luke 9:51-56)

James the Son of Zebedee: I'm seething. James has completely fallen apart – he's not living up to his Sons of Thunder nickname, he's a joke! Pathetic huddled in the dark corner. I snuff out the lamp because I can't bear to look at him. I just need some time to think – to make a plan. To rally the troops. Look where your soft touch approach has got us Jesus! If you'd let us train up some good blokes, we could have had a decent bunch of gorilla fighters, enough to stand a chance at taking on the Romans and setting you up as King over Israel. I can't think straight – I need to get some air. I can't unfurl my fists, I just need to punch something, anything. I've got to get out of here before I do something I'll regret! It's all Judas's fault – he messed everything up, if he hadn't of betrayed Jesus none of this would have happened and I could have talked Jesus around to my way of thinking. But now as it is – what have we got left. Nothing!

Confusion

Andrew: What are we supposed to do now? Jesus was the one who had the plan, we just followed. Maybe I should have just stuck with John the Baptist, but he got killed too. How could we have got it so wrong? The whole city is on lock-down, how are we going to get out of here back to our home towns? How are Peter and I going to get back to our mum in Bethsaida? As for Peter – I can't understand what's going on with him, he won't talk to me. We have always been so close growing up together. I was the one who first introduced him to Jesus, maybe he is blaming me for messing up his career and costing him three years of his life for following a messiah whose turned out to be no different from all the other crusaders. It's enough to have lost our friend and leader, I can't lose my brother too.

Isolated

The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid. ⁵⁶ Then they returned, and prepared spices and ointments.

On the sabbath they rested according to the commandment. (Luke 23:55-56)

Mary Magdalene: The other women have each gone home to their husbands but I'm here in my house alone. Tomorrow I'll take spices with the other women to anoint Jesus's body, but

today I must rest. But how can I rest? When Jesus is dead? He was the only man I'd ever met before who didn't treat me like dirt, like a deranged crazy woman, who set me free from the evil and darkness inside. He saw past my mistakes and gave me a sense of value and purpose. Now he's gone I'm totally lost. I try to sleep but each time I close my eyes I see flashbacks. The few times I have drifted off I have nightmares and wake screaming. I'm terrified these last couple of years have just been a dream and this is the awful reality. What words could take away the pain, what words could ever do justice to how I feel? I reach for the piece of broken pot lying on the floor from when my shaking hands dropped it as I mixed the spices yesterday afternoon. It takes all my will power to resist bringing it to scrap across my skin, to cut in, to bring some relief from this pain. No! I won't do it! That's the only thing I've got left of Jesus, his having freed me from my demons within. But why, why couldn't he have freed himself from death?

Hopeless

Passing along, Jesus saw a man at his work collecting taxes. His name was Matthew. Jesus said, "Come along with me." Matthew stood up and followed him.

Later when Jesus was eating supper at Matthew's house with his close followers, a lot of disreputable characters came and joined them. When the Pharisees saw him keeping this kind of company, they had a fit, and lit into Jesus' followers. "What kind of example is this from your Teacher, acting cozy with crooks and riffraff?"

Jesus, overhearing, shot back, "Who needs a doctor: the healthy or the sick? Go figure out what this Scripture means: 'I'm after mercy, not religion.' I'm here to invite outsiders, not coddle insiders."(Matthew 9:9-13)

Matthew: I usually have such a good appetite, but I can't swallow, bile shoots back up my throat. I keep thinking back to that first meal I had with Jesus as I stare at this stale crust of bread in my hand. Jesus sat in my house and feasted with me. The truest and goodest person I'd ever met, chose to associate with me and accept me?! I couldn't believe it at first, it felt too good to be true, to be given a chance at not being one of the most hated men by my own people, to not have to work for the Romans who ruthlessly exploit them, no longer having to subsidise my miserable income by taking a commission off of every tax return I processed. I gave all that up when I met Jesus. He turned my life around. For the first time in my life I had real friends. Best of all I had Jesus as my friend. Now he's gone, perhaps the others won't accept me anymore. Hope is dead. There is no coming back from this.