

## Reflection

### Meeting God in Silence: Witnessing Holy Saturday

*Lamentations 3: 19-33; Psalm 61: 1-4; Luke 23: 48-56; Mark 16: 1*

**[SLIDE 1]** Throughout Lent and Holy Week, our services have emphasised the experience of meeting God in many different circumstances, following Jesus in his increasingly difficult downwards journey towards extreme suffering and violent death. Today, together with Jesus, we hit rock bottom, literally, as he lies in a rocky tomb in Jerusalem.

We gather on a day that the Church sometimes moves past quickly. Good Friday is heavy with the terror of the cross. Easter morning will ring with hallelujahs for the resurrection. But Holy Saturday sits quietly in between. This was the day when Jesus' body lay in the tomb. On Holy Saturday, Jesus truly experienced mortality and non-existence as part of his identification with human beings. On this day, silent grief fills the air and hope is gone.

Luke tells us that Joseph of Arimathea and the women who had accompanied Jesus took his body and laid it in a tomb. Then they rested on the Sabbath. There are no miracles today. No voices from heaven. Only some grief-stricken women waiting to anoint a dead body with burial spices, in silence.

For many of us, this space feels familiar, whether it be our own grief at the loss of a loved one, or whether we are seeking to support a dear friend going through loss or dealing with traumatic events or situations. Some of us know what it is like to live in this in-between time. Between death and life. Between appalling pain and life that just ... continues. Surviving. Enduring.

I know something of this, personally. Both my parents lived through the second world war in Poland. Both were soldiers in the

Polish resistance against the Nazis. Both fought through and survived the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 [SLIDE 2]. This photo was taken late in that year, after the destruction of over 90 percent of the city of Warsaw. At the ages of 31 and 22, my parents witnessed unspeakable things that no human being, young or old, should ever have to see [SLIDE 3]. This is a photo of my father with a fellow-soldier taken during the Uprising. And this is my mother at about the same time [SLIDE 4]. After the defeat of the Uprising, they became prisoners of war and later refugees. The things they witnessed during the war overwhelmed them ... and traumatised them profoundly. They lived with that trauma every day for the rest of their lives. As a child, I didn't understand this, but I vividly remember the impact upon them.

Some of you had loved ones who endured such horrors, like my parents. Some of you, some of your loved ones, have lived through terrifying violence, abuse, and tragic loss and grief, feeling like you, or they, are living on in the aftermath of death. Well, God has much to say about that. Let me start to open it up.

[SLIDE 5] Such experiences point to a middle space – a figurative site in which death and life are not neatly clearly distinct and mutually exclusive. And here is the significance of Holy Saturday for us today. In between the death of Jesus on Friday and his resurrection on Sunday is Holy Saturday: a liminal space in which the usual boundaries between death and life are blurred.

The partial, fragmented account in Scripture of Holy Saturday reflects that blurring. Just like for my parents, and for countless other people living with trauma, life continues for the disciples of Jesus ... but death still echoes. The cross is over ... but its impact remains. The tomb is closed and, for the disciples, grieving in silence, resurrection is simply inconceivable.

Scripture does not rush this. The gospel writers let it stand. In some churches and other faith communities, there is pressure to move quickly toward the hopeful, joyful triumph of resurrection. But Holy Saturday teaches us that grief, loss and trauma are *part* of the story of salvation. That silence is sometimes the only possible response. That grief is not a lack of faith. Jesus' closest friends are lost. All they can do on that Sabbath day is rest and mourn and keep breathing.

The author of Ecclesiastes reminds us: **[SLIDE 6]** *“There is a time to weep, and a time to mourn... a time to keep silence.”* (Ecclesiastes 3:4, 7)

Holy Saturday is that time. And it is **holy**. Trauma-informed faith invites us to move gently here. Not to force meaning. Not to demand healing. Not to rush people toward joy before their bodies and hearts and minds are ready.

It is in this middle space that we meet God in the silence. Here, we encounter the faithful and remaining presence of the Holy Spirit. The same Spirit who hovered over the waters in creation, is the Spirit that Jesus surrendered with his final breath. The Spirit of Jesus is witness to the fact that between death and new life, in that confused, painful, middle space of trauma, love remains. Not as dramatic rescue. But as the gentle presence that holds life together when everything is broken.

Paul writes, **[SLIDE 7]** *“The Spirit helps us in our weakness ... with sighs too deep for words.”* (Romans 8:26) Even when we cannot pray, when words fail, when grief overwhelms, the Spirit remains, breathing with us, holding us, witnessing our pain in ways that we and other people cannot. Holy Saturday is not the absence of God. It is the quiet presence, the silent companionship of God.

Holy Saturday reveals that God does not always shield creation from catastrophe and that divine presence can be hidden, silent, inscrutable, yet still deeply meaningful for faith.

Holy Saturday invites presence instead of pressure, silent witness, not solutions, accompaniment, not answers. We are invited to stay with God in our pain. To stay with others who are grieving, without words. To stay where God is quiet. And, remarkably, Scripture tells us that God does exactly that.

We often think of God's presence as powerful. But the Bible also speaks of God in stillness. When Elijah was desperate and afraid, fleeing the violence of Queen Jezebel and King Ahab, God was not in the earthquake or the fire — but in silence: **[SLIDE 8]** “*After the fire, a sound of sheer silence*” (1 Kings 19:12). God meets Elijah where he is. Not with correction. Not with demands. But with presence. Holy Saturday speaks to us of that kind of moment. God in the silence. God in the numbness. God in the tomb.

This can help our understanding of healing and salvation. Sometimes healing comes as a clear breakthrough, a dramatic change. Sometimes healing from trauma never comes. Sometimes the ability to function again comes slowly, in small steps, in safety, in a supportive, listening community, rebuilding trust, a community like this one.

Sometimes salvation feels like survival. Sometimes it feels like just getting through the day. Sometimes it feels like someone sitting beside you in the dark.

The prophet Isaiah speaks of God this way, **[SLIDE 9]** “*A bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench.*” (Isaiah 42:3) God does not crush what is fragile. God protects what is barely burning. God honours slowness in healing and recovery. On Holy Saturday, God remains.

Yes, tomorrow morning, Easter will come. Hope will rise. New life will break forth. But today matters too. So today, we hold space for Holy Saturday, the liminal space between death and life. For those who are grieving, inconsolably. For those who carry trauma in their bodies and their minds. For those whose prayers feel unanswered. For those who feel numb, tired, or lost. There is no pressure here to feel better. No demand to understand. No rush to resurrection. Only the promise of God's presence. Only the grace of remaining. Only the quiet truth: God is with you in this place.

**[SLIDE 10]** Holy Saturday proclaims: Even in the tomb, love remains. Even in silence, God is present. Even in brokenness, the Spirit is breathing.

May we rest in that breathing today. Amen.