

HOLY SATURDAY, MARCH 31

THE WORLD WAITS (JOHN 19:38-42)

“Taking Jesus’s body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen,” (John 19:40a). If you have ever lost a loved one, you know a little of what Joseph and Nicodemus were feeling here—the deep love for the person you lost, a reverence for the body that had moved with and near you just moments before, and the pressure of timing and realization that, for many, life was moving on even while for some of us, it seemed like it might never do so.

There is a silence that covers the Saturday of Holy Week. Sometimes, these days, that silence is used as a way to bustle around and prepare for the celebration of Easter. But for our ancestors living at the time of Jesus’s death, the silence was deeper, the kind that sinks into your bones like a cold bitter wind or stifles a thousand pound pack placed over your shoulders. It was the kind that takes your breath away and that feels like you might never get it back. Where do we find holiness in moments of grief so deep? As ministers know so well, moments of loss where the line between life and death is thin are soaked with the sacred.

Joseph and Nicodemus demonstrate the plain and simple holiness of the body with the great care they offer in preparing Jesus’s body for burial. They carry it gently and reverently. They wrap it in spices and cloth with care and love, steeped in the care for all of creation that their Jewish culture and religion had formed in them. And in this care, they demonstrate the holiness of life itself and the sacredness of life’s beginning and life’s ending. Yet, some endings make it easier to recognize this sacredness than others. Joseph and Nicodemus were wrapping tear-soaked cloths out of the feelings of injustice that this life had ended too soon. There must have been a deep-throated “why” gurgling up from their souls, perhaps even their mouths, as they cared for Jesus’s body. Many of us have felt that same “why.”

Some cries seem never to be answered. We know that the community of Jesus’s disciples will find their way to an answer. However, for Jesus’s friends and disciples on this day, those cries echoed back in that cave with no answer on the horizon. And for us, Holy Saturday does not have to be a blip of insignificance between Friday and Sunday, but this can be a day of recognizing the holiness of waiting, of sitting in the “what if” and “what now” and “how long” that so many in our world experience. This can be a moment of mourning with those who mourn and cannot see a light. Those who have lost their homes and livelihoods in natural disasters or war, those who have experienced abuse and harm, these are neighbors

who know what the waiting of Holy Saturday feels like. These are neighbors who can teach us the holiness of these moments even as we enact the holiness of removing some of their aloneness by letting their stories be told to ears that will hear them.

And, while Jesus's friends and families waited in their grief, their unknowing, their devastation, some stories of the church say that Jesus was rescuing people from hell on that day. The stories say that Jesus was emptying hell while we felt like we were living in it. The man who ate with sinners (Luke 15:1-7) was springing sinners back up to the feast table. This, too, is the holiness of Saturday.