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## *Holy Saturday, Liminal Space, Paschal Mystery*

Holy Saturday, April 7  
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I bring greetings to each of you, in this sacred space, and on this Holy Saturday. All around us is the hum of activity of preparation for Easter services, and I love this about being here on this day. And yet, the image that stands out for me in the text is that of Mary and Mary, sitting, waiting silently, opposite the grave.

The remarkable passages from the Gospel of Matthew appointed for today parallel those from John, from which Gospel our readings for most of this week have come. The text asks of us that we be willing to enter into a liminal, transitional time of uncertainty and ambiguity, and that along with the disciples, Joseph of Arimathea, and Mary Magdalene and the "other" Mary, we too now wait, in the midst of loss and grief, and in hope. Indeed, all week long, especially in the Gospel of John, we have witnessed the transitional movement from Jesus' earthly ministry and the loss of what many hoped that would become to the ministry of those who would remain, and who would become the church. This includes us, here, and now.

In preparing us for this transition, Jesus provides metaphors in the form of the Eucharist and the mandatum that accompanies it that we love one another as he has loved us. His kingdom is not that of a great army of the sword, but a servant ministry of foot-washing and a dying to the principalities and powers of this world. And now, he is gone, and we are left to sit, with the two Mary's, opposite the tomb where the great stone has been rolled to the door.

Like all boundary settings, Holy Saturday demarcates terrain that is easy to ignore because it is often ambiguous, seeming to belong nowhere in particular. Yet, our son Andrew, upon returning from the Duke marine lab in Beaufort, NC, noted of the liminal, transitional, marshy space of the inter-coastal waterway that he was drawn to it precisely because of its "in between" nature, and because it is the birthplace of so much life. Neither ocean nor land, these marshlands of the southeast coast are the estuaries of the ocean, giving birth in their fecund terrain to so much that is life giving. In literature, of course, such transitional space is often the pathway to transformation spaces like the wardrobe in Narnia, 9 3/4 Victoria Station in Harry Potter, the tesseract in Madeline L'Engle's wonderful "A Wrinkle in Time," and "middle earth," in Tolkein's work. In our own tradition we have such Liminal places as the foyer from the Latin focarium, meaning a hearth, hallway, threshold, or entrance way. Holy Saturday is a liturgical equivalent of this liminal, threshold space writ large in the chronos and kairos of our liturgical year.

In his elegiac and theologically persuasive text on Holy Saturday theologian Alan Lewis describes Holy Saturday as a "boundary" a liminal time a "day between days" which unites what first it separated, and allows us to understand the Good Friday story with the pre-knowledge of its sequel, and the Easter narrative in light of its preamble. This boundary day, he writes, is anonymous and ambiguous, easy to ignore and seeming to belong nowhere. Yet, like all such liminal spaces Holy Saturday exists to create identity and to assign belonging. Lewis asks what it might mean theologically, pastorally, personally, to "stand as intriguingly so few have done, at the ambiguous, invisible, apparently insignificant boundary between Good Friday and Easter." "Where better," he asks, "to find the wisdom which can unite cross and resurrection inextricably, and discover truth in such foolishness as presence-in-absence, powerful weakness, and life-giving death?"

As a pastoral theologian, counselor, and priest, I would suggest that this Holy Saturday context is precisely where much of our work in pastoral care occurs. Indeed, it may be where we spend much of our lives. Our erstwhile Diocesan and Cathedral colleague James Farwell has suggested that this is given expression both liturgically and theologically today, inasmuch as the Holy Saturday liturgy is rightly part of the Triduum, for which this spare, proper liturgy is provided. "The service is brief," Farwell writes, "almost conveying a sense of bafflement at what one should do with oneself in this liminal moment. Yet this liminality is close to the heart of the indivisible mystery of suffering and salvation, and at the same time nearly impermeable to theological explication." Moreover, he writes, "We live, stretched between suffering and salvation, living in the latter through hope, even in the midst of the former and its pain" "the very condition of humanity that we are in the process of identifying as the form of life sanctified by the Triduum liturgies as the arena for God's work. Holy Saturday is, in this sense, the truth of our lives, and the silence of this day points to the Paschal Mystery."

As I think about my clinical, pastoral, and educational work, I see so many instances of that time between something "or someone" having died, and a new life in the process of being born. We wait for the test results; we wait for the chemotherapy to take hold; we wait on the mourning bench of grief after someone has died and the new life that awaits us is unclear; we wait for the loved one to emerge from the drug and alcohol treatment center to begin the long, new life in recovery, one day at a time; we wait for a way to become clear out of no way. We live into the time between jobs, between relationships, between seasons, all before God, just as the two Mary's waited opposite the tomb. My colleague Jean Stairs has noted that we quip about skipping over the darkness of Good Friday in order to get to the alleluias of Easter Sunday as if our lighthearted confession is a preventative strategy for avoiding the reality of the losses of our own lives. Indeed, many denominations skip the Triduum altogether. Yet, entering the Holy Saturday places of death, loss, grief, and facing the depths of our pain, and that of others, is hard work.

We pastoral types have ironically been inhibited by our general reluctance to claim this middle, liminal phase of living as a central focus of our care-giving ministries. We focus instead on "crisis intervention," and "grief management." Moreover, this discomfort is often masked by our retreat to the triumph of the therapeutic "even at times to diagnostic categories such as depression. Last Tuesday the NY Times reported on a study in the Archives of General Psychiatry suggesting that as many as one in four people who appear to be depressed" and who have been given a diagnosis of clinical depression, are in fact struggling with the normal mental fallout from a recent emotional blow, such as a broken relationship, the loss of a job or loved one, or the discovery of an illness. The authors argue that the context of symptoms should be given greater emphasis. Indeed, I believe that this context is our terrain, when understood theologically. It is the terrain of Joseph of Arimathea, and the two Mary's, and each of us. And this is precisely where a pastoral theological understanding of human living can shed light on our rush to diagnose, as if giving a psychiatric label to this ambiguous and liminal time is sufficient. It is not. Indeed, there may be times when we ought to encourage those for whom we care, and ourselves, to have courage to enter into the time of ambiguity, chaos, contradiction and liminality even more deeply, naming and lamenting what has died, or needs to die. Instead, we so often want to practice a means of getting them out of a so called "crisis" and on with their lives as quickly as possible, as if grieving is the equivalent of the fast food window at McDonalds'. Rather, lament can be a communal pastoral methodology for encouraging an awakening of the soul. It is an opportunity to share in the deeper mysteries of Jesus' passion "the Paschal Mystery" as a means of personal transformation.

To provide Holy Saturday space for lamentation and suffering is to provide affirmation that suffering is a part of finitude, yet affirm finitude in spite of suffering. This is a harrowing day. Yet I do not mean this in the more culturally familiar sense of the term. When I was a young boy, my paternal grandfather owned a hardware store and lumber supply business in a small middle Georgia town. Among the farm implements he sold in this agricultural time and place was a disk harrow. It was a cylindrical blade, pulled behind a mule or tractor, designed to dig into and turn over the soil in preparation for planting. Used in late winter and early spring, the disk harrow turned over the detritus of the past year in anticipation of planting, new growth, and eventual harvest. Indeed, the word harrowing comes from the Latin root, *harve* "meaning harvest. In early Christian writings it is said that on this Holy Saturday Christ harrowed, literally harvested hell, for lost souls. These passages, all week long, have been harrowing indeed. Yet, this day is harrowing in the agricultural sense as well as the culturally familiar sense. We are preparing for new harvest.

A few days ago Vicky and I noticed a house finch couple busily building a nest under the eaves of our front porch. From time to time this has happened, only to have them abandon the nest because of the coming and going of our busy family. With our sons off at school, we decided this time to enter and leave through the garage, and the finches stayed. We have become attached to them, watching as she sits, with incredible patience, on the nest, and as he returns again and again to

feed her seed from our backyard feeders. We worried last night about the unseasonably cold temperatures and at first light this morning I looked out the window to find her sitting calmly on the nest. I am sure it was a harrowing night, in both senses of the term. We will await with anticipation the new life that is to come, borne of their steadfast, abiding patience and care. Like the two Marys, who abided, who sat patiently opposite the tomb, and like all those gathered here today, and like our house finch couple, we live into the uncertain ambiguity of Holy Saturday time, hopeful, expectant, and yet fully present here, and now, a community gathered in faith, waiting for the resurrection to come. Amen.

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