

HOLY SATURDAY

Meditation

JOHN ANDREW GALLERY

It is Holy Saturday, 2014, the day between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, the day on which nothing happens. For me, this day has always been the most important day of the year. It is a day on which, far more than any of the others, faith is tested. Jesus is dead; what happens next is unknown and uncertain.

The Catholic churches I used to attend would strip the altar of all the flowers, vestments, candles, and other paraphernalia right after the 3 p.m. Good Friday service. The door to the tabernacle would be left open to show that it was empty, that nothing was there. No candles would be lit. The churches I remember best had gray stone columns and walls so that the few lights left on cast a dull gray light throughout the interior. The atmosphere suggested death, absence, a certain barrenness that I found more comforting than were the churches when fully illuminated and filled with colorful robes and ornaments. I used to go to these churches late on Friday or Saturday night, when the dull gray light was more in keeping with the darkness outside, and ponder the open tabernacle, much as I imagine those who came on that Sunday morning might have pondered the open tomb. Was he a man or was he the Son of God? Did he just die or was he indeed resurrected? These were the questions I asked. I did not have answers then; I do not have answers now. My intellectual side has prevented me from making the leap of faith even though in my heart I might want to.

There are no services on Holy Saturday because, as I said, it is a day on which nothing happens. I have often wondered what the disciples did on that day. The gospels tell us that most ran away after Jesus was arrested in the garden, fearing that they too might be the subject of arrest. Only Peter and John tried to follow Jesus to see what would become of him. Peter goes to the palace of the high priest to see what is going on. He tries to hide himself among the servants, but he is discovered, accused, and denies three times his knowledge of the man

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he said he loved. He wanders away in despair not to be heard of again until the third day. Judas, the betrayer, drifts away, eventually to his death.

John, we are told, is able to infiltrate himself among the temple priests and witness the trial before Pilate and the crucifixion, something none of the others can know about because they have disappeared and presumably gone into hiding. I can imagine the first one making his way in the early morning light out to Bethany on the outskirts of Jerusalem, the place where they had been staying, and sneaking stealthily into a barn. Here he hides, waiting. When he hears someone else entering, he is cautious, as is the man entering, both afraid of being caught by the Roman soldiers they imagine are searching for them. But then, recognizing one another, they embrace in relief and share their fear and their lack of knowledge. Slowly, throughout the day the other eight show up, one by one. Having found their separate hiding places in the night, they now return to where they think the others might return also. What happened to him? they ask one another. I don't know each says. I heard the shouting of the crowds; that's all I know.

When John arrives he tells his story, without recriminations for their abandoning Jesus, without knowing of Peter's denials until he shares that, sorrowfully, with the group. John tells of the public portions of the trial, of Jesus's demeanor, of the priests' accusations and Pilate's judgment. He tells of the journey to Calvary, finding Mary Magdalene and the other Mary along the way, the time on the Cross and the last words, the anguished "O God, why hast thou forsaken me?" He is shaken by the experience; his story interrupted by periods of crying in which the others join. He tells of the final moments, of lifting the body down from the Cross, carrying it to a nearby cave, wrapping it in a shroud, and rolling a stone in front of the cave to seal the entrance until a proper place of burial can be found.

Perhaps there are some who remind the others that he said he would rise from the dead. Perhaps there are some who do not believe this, who do not know what to believe and doubt, much like Thomas, and will need hard evidence to be convinced. Perhaps they debate the issue and, in spite of their fear and the feeling that they should



New Orleans Church After Katrina, by Wyatt Gallery © 2006

leave the city as quickly as possible, decide to stay and see what happens. What other choice do they have? They are lost; all seems lost and the way forward is unclear, if there is a way forward at all.

The day wears on. Finally the women who returned with John come bringing food and drink from the house. They share their story; they share their sorrow. They hear the disciples' uncertainty and share it. Let us at least go to the tomb tomorrow morning, they say, and anoint his body properly, and then we can try to move it to a more suitable burial place. But, one disciple says, he raised Lazarus from the dead; why could he not raise himself? Silence follows. The question remains unanswered.

At night they pile together in groups of two or three in different corners of the room and sleep. It is a restless sleep, a sleep disturbed by the uncertainty of their safety as well as the uncertainty of their future.

In the morning, Peter and John are awoken by the cries of one of the women. "Come," she shouts. "He is risen." They get up quickly; others join them, awoken by the commotion, and as a group they rush out the door to follow the woman back to the tomb. Only one remains, Philip perhaps, so deep in sleep that he is undisturbed by the cries or commotion. After the others have left, leaving the barn door flung open, he wakes. He turns beneath his blanket and looks around at the empty room, wondering what has happened and where everyone has gone. He gets up and wanders aimlessly around

the room while stretching his body, naked except for the loose loincloth around his waist. The early morning sunlight streams through the open door and across the floor. He walks into it. He feels the sun on his naked skin, feels its warmth, and he senses in that moment what it is to be truly alive. He lifts himself on his toes, arms extended upward, fists clenched as if in triumph, and shouts a passionate, "Yes!"

There is no need to know what happens at the tomb. There is no need to know whether there was a resurrection or not. There is no need to see the risen man, no need to place your hand in the wound in his side, no need to meet him on the road. The true resurrection, as Philip will later tell us, happens in a different way for those who hear his words and follow them.

Those who say that the Lord died and then was resurrected are wrong;
for he was first resurrected and then died.
If someone has not first been resurrected they can only die.

But if they have already been resurrected they are Alive as God is Alive.

You must awaken while in this body, for everything exists in it.

You must resurrect while in this life.

Adapted from the Gospel of Philip, Jean-Yves Leloup translation. □

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