

The Empty Day

Holy Saturday

A time to grieve and remember



Rosemary Power

wild goose
publications



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In memory of Peter Macdonald (1958-2020),
former Leader of the Iona Community

This liturgy, for group use, is intended as a way of using Holy Saturday within the context of Passion liturgy, by pausing, and reflecting on a world without God, and on our own human losses.

The women who kept the Sabbath, and Passover, speak in turn, on life with Jesus, remembering good times, reflecting on loss. There are pauses for stories from scripture, and for those present to add something from their own stories.

The women are:

Susanna;

Salome, who is here taken to be the mother of James and John and the wife of Zebedee;

Mary from Magdala;

Joanna;

Mary Clopas, the mother of 'the other James' and Joses;

Mary from Nazareth, the mother of Jesus.

Scripture: Luke 23:56b (NIV)

On the Sabbath they rested, according to the commandment.

Opening reflection:

The empty day

On the empty day the women kept
the Law and customs
of the people.

There was no hope
that Sabbath, no angel marked
the day with cloud or fire.
Stories started, wandered,
withered into silence,
bereft of laughter.

From that day
of rest with no rest,
of tepid meals because the body must
hunger for life longer than the will,
came evening and
the planning of the funeral rites
the day delayed,
the preparation, of the words,
of spice and sweetness that must honour
the one we loved and lost.

Susanna

Let us rest, as God commanded. The God who was faithful down the years.

Who seems so far away today.

Let us remember. How our lives touched his, and he touched us. And how our tales touched him, and we found his stories were our stories. And in his words and actions we found ourselves.

Let us look at the worlds we come from, of family life, small farms and trades, politics and business, the worlds of intellectual and explorer, and of the priests.

My namesake was falsely accused.

But a Daniel rose to defend her.

He was a Daniel for others.

For him, no Daniel came in time.

I followed him on the road. But my story is silent.

The story that ended yesterday is vast. That tumble into fumbling horror, the swift beat of feet on pavements rattling with bets, chaotic crowds shouting the latest fake news, the thud of our hearts as we learnt the deeds of the dark, our hope betrayed and God silent. The power of State to overcome the still small voice of calm. The pain no longer the private agony of mind but a public wail of anguish, unabated by any opiate of the people or the medical few. 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani' was yelled to the impenetrable dark, as his flesh fought for hours, and his blood fell on the wasteland.

Pause for stories from scripture ...

We travelled with him from Galilee, worked with him in ministry and contributed to the common purse. We remained here together that night, while the men went to sleep under stars. We witnessed his death, his burial. Now we spend this long, numb Sabbath, God's rest day, with flat Passover bread, the remains of that last, shared meal, and the remnants of story we gather from memory and love.

This day is not holy rest for all: soldiers might burst in, arrest and torture us, or we might have warning to break the Sabbath and flee. But, though fear lies here, let us hold each other in the moment, of memory and grief.

Is this the day God left us alone? The God who often seems absent? Who has left us bleak with duty but no joy?

Is this the Passover when evil won? When God was smitten from this earth? Does God no longer listen to our prayers?

Yet there is still goodness, here in this group, among our friends and companions, among the occupying army, among the leaders of the people.

Pause for our own stories ...

Susanna: Then let us rest this Sabbath, according to the commandment, and in the mystery of grief.

Salome/mother of James and John

My heart is in the home, but I followed him on the road. He knew children, their games, their sorrows, their powerlessness against the great. He knew childhood suffering.

A mother does not forget, though mine were fully grown, out on life's high-way, leaving behind my husband and the hired men with the boat. Where are my boys now, in this city, in hiding? Are they afraid, of Pilate, of priests, of women who did not run away? I prayed they might share his glory – he offered them his lot.

He loved, forgave. As a mother's heart can do, as a father may wait for his children, watching for them on the road. He knew of brothers at odds, in the vineyard, splitting the inheritance. He told of the waster who returned, and the father who found a place for him. The angry brother he went out to meet. The ways he taught us to be reconciled, taking the first step, listening to neighbour and soldier.

Let us tell them again, and see where his story is our story. How he cared for families, Jewish and Gentile, spoke to them, respected them. Let us recall that love.

Pause for stories from scripture ...

Through him we know that God loves laughter that binds us in joy. That God wants a place of safety, a hearth where children are raised, old people praised, work brings satisfaction, meals unite, and the door is opened to the stranger. But on this day of darkness we are close to those who have no families, those abandoned by families, parted from loved ones, homeless or avoided. We know there are damaged families, divided families, loveless families, and corrupt families where the young struggle to grow straight. And grieving families where the wanderers did not come home – and we did not love them in time. Somewhere in this city, Simon Iscariot is weeping for his son.

Pause for our own stories ...

Salome: Then let us rest this Sabbath, according to the commandment, and try like him to forgive.

Mary from Magdala

I speak for those whose nature is to be explorers, voyagers, artists and thinkers. Those healed from the wounds of illness, rejection, depression, and those released from bars on using their creative gifts for the healing of the world.

Jesus saw me, knew my strengths, and gave me hope and healing. Seven demons left me, taking anger, pride, pain, and more. I had been like the rich man hoarding his gifts in a barn: all gifts are empty if there is no will to share. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden: these gifts are God-given beacons for the journey. He spoke of the prophets of old, of men who wrote, of women whose words were rarely recorded. Were they less in the sight of God? Is our work less godly when it ends in silence? As his has done.

Our hearts grieve for Jesus, dying young, his potential unfulfilled. His tales should have lasted for all time, to be heard again and again, from every angle, for they touch the core of our lives.

He said pray for his oppressors, for the priests who condemned him, for the powerful who banished him, for the soldiers who obeyed orders. For Pilate's wife, who saw further than her husband, but whose voice remained unheard.

But who do we pray to when God has been banished from this world, cursed by his own creation?

So, let us recall his actions. The feeding of all people equally, so they are filled. The giving of his time to the woman who haemorrhaged blood and had no one to speak for her. And how he also served the urgent Jairus, and restored his child to him.

Pause to recall the actions of Jesus ...

Let us recall all those whose voices are stifled. Those with the courage of youth, who stand out against injustice, and risk death.

Those who work under oppressive regimes, and seek to make art which rejoices our souls and feeds our communities.

Those who write the songs or think the thoughts that nourish our minds and emotions.

Those who are healers. Those who serve in the daily grind, through their weariness; and those who live at the forefront, in danger zones and battle-lines.

Pause for our own stories ...

Mary from Magdala: Then let us rest this Sabbath, according to the commandment, and let the creativity of artist and activist be restored to us.

Joanna

I come from the world of public life, from the palace of the playboy fox of Galilee, Herod Antipas, with his hot-spring baths, his incest and his building works. With my husband, Chuza, we were stewards, housekeepers, business people, but Jesus called me by name from my counting-house. I gave to the common purse from our marriage purse. Security, good clothes, money for inns, so much of the good stuff of life had come my way: Jesus showed that people matter more.

He told of the rich man, with the poor man at his gate. Or the ruler who felt he could seed-fund his servants, and make them make money for him.

Money, money, money, then how to use it well, to make sure it wasn't our idol.

That wealth is a tool for the welfare of all, not an end, that its pursuit is addictive and destroys our humanity. He told us of the steward who put people before profit. And what to give to God and what the powers of this world could take, that wealth is a passing thing, like power.

Pause for stories from scripture ...

We walked in the corridors of power, and we were called to serve those who cleaned the corridors of power. We were a political couple, yet Jesus told us how to use power to aid the overlooked, not bolster the bloated.

Matthew the tax-collector, once the type we would use and despise, was now our brother, a little man mired in corruption but seeking the stars. Zacchaeus showed that even within the system you could be decent.

Today, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob seems far away. Can we find in those stories the hidden God who brought our people out of bondage, who stayed with Job in his distress?

We know of those caught in the trap of power, in the love of money, those chasing imaginary goals. And of the rich sages from afar who once followed a guiding star to where true riches lay.

Pause for our own stories ...

Joanna: Then let us rest this Sabbath, according to the commandment, leaving the passing work of business, politics and power, to look again, and listen.

Mary Clopas

I knew Jesus, Joshua, 'God saves', from his childhood. We do not expect the young to die before us. We live with violence but think our own immune. We hope to spare them agony of body and mind.

I am kin to his mother, mother of the James and Josés who played with him, worked beside him, then followed him. I am of the priestly family of Elizabeth my cousin and Zechariah her husband. I am of the priestly caste who killed him.

He read in the synagogue and preached on the Word. When he came back, they were ready to hear him – until he spoke. That was just in the village. We had to rescue him. But from the chief priests we couldn't rescue him.

Let us talk of the tales he told to Pharisees, guardians of the law for ordinary folk. Of the time when the woman of ill repute drew him to herself, and he let her, shocking the men he ate with. And that was before he spoke.

This was our village Jesus, our local lad, who saw the image of God in women as in men, in the poor, in the disabled, in children and the widow, in women forced to sleep with strange men to feed their children. This was the Jesus who gave away his cloak, who listened to soldier and sinner. Who knew how a woman takes yeast to raise bread, how vines are harvested.

Pause for stories from scripture ...

We know of those who have made their life in religion, and find it crumbling away. We know those who are losing the comfort of the well-known building, the community of those they have journeyed with, who bewail the absence of young folk, yet close the doors against them. Who long for a future based on an imagined past. Who see the poor of today as wasters, not holders of hidden worth. For them we grieve.

We think of friends who have gone before us, those whom we miss.

Pause for our own stories ...

Mary Clopas: Then let us rest this Sabbath, according to the commandment, and let the small things of life that bring us to love, be acknowledged in us.

Mary from Nazareth

I recall meeting the greeting of an angel with the courage of youth. I bore the price of wonder beneath my belt.

I swaddled him to make his bones grow straight, taught him to walk, to speak, to work, to rest, and yesterday lost him to malice. I knew his love, his tolerance for failings, his openness to all.

Where was the Father in heaven he spoke of, who was silent? Where was the healing power that flowed through him, but did not heal him?

For his friends, for Lazarus, there was a return. But he has walked into death, his eyes open, his body naked, twisted, his mind in pain beyond imagining. He saved them, he would not save himself.

Let us recall the stories he told. Of the man battered on his way from Jerusalem down to ancient Jericho. How the unexpected person helped him. Not the powerful ones of the Temple. The woman who lost her coin, then found it, and called others to share her joy. How the songs I sang in my youth became the song of Lazarus welcomed into the arms of Abraham. While those who had gorged on the good things in life found they needed the compassion of the poor, as a gift not entitlement, for the rich must travel the longest road.

Pause for stories from scripture ...

Where do we take our anger with God? How do we express it, channel it to justice that does not flare out to burn the weak? Where do we take our pain with God, our sense that God abandoned us? Where do we take our grief? How can we live with this gap in the soul?

Today we know this: that God is acquainted with grief. God suffers. God's plans are thwarted. God will not destroy us, will not take vengeance on a flawed creation.

Let us grieve with God.

Let us remember those we have loved and lost, by illness, by accident, by violence.

For all our pain, was yesterday the day when evil lost, though it often seems loose in our world?

When we cannot meet God in our heart, let our lips say, as his lips said, the words of the prayers that join us to all people who yearn for God. Let us sing the psalms of our people, repeat the words of his prayer:

Lord's Prayer said together ...

Pause for our own stories ...

Mary from Nazareth: Then let us rest this Sabbath, according to the commandment, that we may pause at the gates of mystery, of grief, of death, and of the plans of God.

Susanna

Let us steel ourselves to obey God's commands, to live our lives as he showed us, to be his eyes and ears and hands and feet in the world, now he is bound by death. Let us learn to live in a world where Jesus is absent, where we have cast him from the world. Yet let us live by the echoes of his love. Let us still follow him, in how he spoke of God's plan for each of us. Let us believe that God renews and reveals, even today, as we rest, and wait, and grieve.

We are six women, who were with Jesus at the end. The seventh, present but silent, is the Sabbath itself, God's Wisdom, rest and stillness that was with him always, even at the end.

Let us rest this Sabbath, according to the commandment.

Music may be played as people leave, or folk stay to share their stories more fully.

Scripture references

The women named as with Jesus on the road are found in Luke 8:2–3. They are at the cross, at the tomb, and there on the first morning, in Matthew 27:55–56, 61 and 28:1–10; Mark 15:40–41, 47 and 16:1–11; Luke 23:49, 55–56 and 24:1–10; and John 19:25–27, 20:1–2 and 11–18. They are unnamed but present at cross and tomb in Matthew and Mark. Only Susanna and Mary from Nazareth (Jesus' mother) are not named among witnesses of the Resurrection.

Susanna: Named with others as on the road with Jesus. I have linked her with the apocryphal end of the Book of Daniel (chapter 13), where a Susanna is unjustly accused of adultery by old men whose demands she resists; and is restored to dignity by the youthful prophet Daniel. This account, which is known in Greek but not Hebrew, is likely to have been well-known in the time of Jesus.

Salome: Named only in Mark as one of the women witnesses on Easter morning, she may be the same as the otherwise unnamed wife of Zebedee and mother of the disciples James and John. In Matthew, she asks that her sons sit on either side of Jesus in heaven.

Mary from Magdala: Named in all the gospels as witness to the Resurrection, she was on the road with Jesus. Magdala was a town in Galilee. She is said, in Luke 8:2, to have had seven demons cast out of her.

Joanna: Also named as on the road with Jesus. The text reads as if her husband had not disowned her. She may be linked to knowledge of the death of John the Baptist, the account in the Passion of Jesus before Herod Antipas, and may have aided the growth of the faith of Manaen, an Elder at Antioch who is mentioned in Acts 13:1, and who had been brought up with Herod.

Mary Clopas: ‘the other Mary’, a close relative of Jesus, perhaps his aunt, and mother to two other followers of his, James ‘the less’ and Josés. The James mentioned may be the second James of that name listed as one of the Twelve, while his brother was also important enough in the early church to be named as well.

Mary of Nazareth: named, or referred to, in all the Gospels, and in John accompanies her son to the cross. She is also in Acts 1:14 along with other women present in the upper room where they experienced Pentecost.

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