

Friday

John 18:1-19:42

Today is the first day of God's long weekend. God's holy-day weekend. The Holy Triduum: Good Friday, Holy Saturday, Easter Sunday. Friday marks the beginning of this three day pilgrimage. Good Friday begins at sunset on Maundy Thursday. It begins with a last supper in an upper room - broken bread, wine poured, new covenant made, sin forgiven. It moves to a garden and an arrest, then to a courtyard and a cock that crows twice at sunrise. Reading this long dramatic story last evening at the Tenebrae service of darkening and then continuing it this morning we are confronted by the haunting memory of a traumatized community. The painful wounds are deep and lasting. Their holiday Passover begins as a festive celebration. But soon everything turns sideways and the night turns into a morning filled with devastation, horror, terror, disaster. In common with all who are traumatized they recall every detail. The failure of nerve and the denials. The crowd so over-confident in its righteousness. The injustice at every turn. The beating. The degradation. The indignities. The spitting and the mocking. The humiliation. Then the gallows. No quick hanging. No snap of the rope. To die nailed to a cross is to suffer the most cruel and grotesque of deaths. This is the Empire's terrible threat to those who would threaten its security. Raised on the cross at nine in the morning the condemned are left to slowly suffocate through the long, hot the day. They are fortunate to die by three in the afternoon.

This awful story leads the church into a double edged temptation. On the one hand, it can be tempted to a kind of sentimental, maudlin fascination with the blood and the pain. The church can find itself morbidly revelling in the crucifixion. To be fair, this is not a temptation that the church we inhabit finds seductive. But, on the other hand, the church is tempted to rush by the crucifixion as if it never happened. We recognize this temptation. This is the temptation to ignore, to forget, to deny that the cross is central to our life and message. Notice how much that is spoken and sung in the United Church these days carefully avoids the cross. And we are not alone in a theology of avoidance. After all, the cross is a hard sell. Try telling your neighbour that the spiritual path for those overwhelmed by the frenetic pace of life in a hectic world of consumption is to focus attention on human suffering as it is embodied in Jesus dying on a cross. Little wonder that the church regularly tells a message other than the cross of Christ.

So see how the church catholic - the church universal - intends to keep us from either temptation by naming this day Good Friday. It is not named Bad Friday, Awful Friday or Horrible Friday. It is Good Friday. First, it is Friday not Sunday. We cannot get to Sunday without Friday. Avoidance will not solve anything. The long weekend that is at the crux of our life begins with this terrible Friday trauma. The church can never forget the horror that it witnessed in its infancy. But, second, the church is able to remember the trauma because there has been healing. Goodness has since broken out. We do not remember Friday in order to needlessly stir up pain or to generate false crocodile tears. We remember because we now live out of the healing that has followed. Friday is named "Good" because there is a Holy Saturday and an Easter Sunday to live and to tell as well.

John testifies that the last words on Jesus' lips are: "*It is finished.*" On Friday it sounds like Jesus is saying that the suffering is finally over. No more struggle. No more time. It is ended. He is mortal, not immortal. At the heart of the gospel is the black hole of Good Friday. To know this kind of darkness, to face disaster, horror, terror is to be living within the good news of Jesus Christ. This is what the old spiritual means to remind us when it teaches the church to sing: "Nobody knows the trouble we've seen, nobody knows but Jesus." A people who know that the gospel carries us through the cross do not turn away when confronted by catastrophe on the news, deep trouble with the neighbour or dark nights of the soul. To our surprise the good news inevitably takes the church to the places of bad news, terrible news, horrible news. This Friday is good because, paradoxically, it confronts us with God's own first hand knowledge of the trouble we've seen and known and still carry in our bodies and hearts and souls.

On Sunday in the light of the resurrection "*It is finished*" will sound more like "*It is accomplished.*" Then the church will look back and see in the place of disastrous tragedy the handiwork of God. Then there will be plan and purpose to a death that today seems so unplanned and a life dream so ruined. On Sunday the chaos of Friday will be re-ordered by God's power to make life when there is only death. Then we will see the evidence of a God who is able to create "ex nihilo" - out of nothing. Then the texts from Isaiah that tell of God's suffering servant will finally make sense of what now seems so nonsensical. Then Jesus' peculiar predictions of trouble and death ahead will come back to the church's memory. Then we will begin to grasp the cosmic implications of the earthly tragedy that we witness on Good Friday. Then we will find a voice to sing the wonders of God's inexplicable love.

But not on Friday. On Friday the church stands side by side with all who are confronted by devastating news. Here at the cross of Jesus Christ we are brought face to face with the hard good news that there is no way to the life eternal that bypasses tragedy, disaster, grief and great loss. There can be no resurrection without a grave. There is no unbelievable good news on Sunday without first, the terribly unexpected and unwelcome word on Friday: He has been arrested, beaten, mocked, crucified. He has died. It is finished.

Saturday

John 19:38 - 20:18; Romans 6:3-11

Tonight we stand at the hinge between darkness and light, between death and new life, between our end and our beginning. I confess to being a newcomer to the Easter Vigil. This is my sixteenth celebration of this ancient liturgy. In other words I lived for forty-one years without gathering on Holy Saturday evening to keep vigil for the resurrection of Jesus Christ. I am not alone. Most in the United Church have never experienced the Easter Vigil. This is a problem for us. It is a problem because there is much about this night that goes to the heart of the Christian faith and life. So what we do and sing and say and pray here tonight is more important than we may realize. There is something about this night that needs to be tended, learned, remembered for our children's children's children. Perhaps they will understand in ways that we cannot comprehend what it is that we receive and celebrate this night.

This is not to say that we do not have some understanding, some inkling, some grasp on the thick gospel that we re-discover on this night. The first thing that we know is that we gather on Saturday. Not Good Friday. Not Easter Sunday. Holy Saturday. Odd Saturday. Set apart for God Saturday. The gospels say much about what takes place on Friday. They speak dramatically about the events of Sunday. But when it comes to Saturday they are silent. They say nothing. Not a single verse. So we have been tempted to forget about Saturday. We have skipped past it as if it were a brief intermission between the tragedy of crucifixion and the triumph of resurrection. Yet Saturday will not be forgotten. The Easter Vigil will not let us forget. Saturday is the day of rest. For Jesus and his disciples Saturday is the Sabbath day. It is the day to do nothing but rely upon God's promises. No "to do" lists on Saturday. This is the rule of the Sabbath. No productivity. No profit making. No duties. No chores. Only resting in God. Have you tried going twenty-four hours every week without accomplishing anything that needs to be done? In a culture of such busy-ness it seems an impossibility. But on this Saturday we discover that even all of our busy-ness cannot accomplish the rescue that we so desperately long for. This Saturday comes hard on the heels of our worst nightmare. This Holy Saturday finds Jesus dead and buried. Mortal, not immortal. According to the Apostles' Creed "He descended to the dead". That is because he is dead. On this Saturday there is no evidence that God is fixing things, saving us, redeeming the story. On Holy Saturday the world waits. It does not know the ending of the story. On Saturday life is lived in the absence of an answer. In this in-between time our lives are gambled on the future. If we bet that God will not deliver then we inevitably live out of our despair with lives marked by anxiety, desperation and the compulsive need to treat the pain with narcotics. The narcotics are anything that dulls the pain so that we can maintain a veneer of normalcy. Shopping. Alcohol. Food. Sex. All of these and more are connected by the common thread of avoidance - avoidance of the deep pain that we are betting cannot be healed. But if we gamble that God will deliver then we find ourselves living out of a surprising hope with lives marked by trust, courage and openness to one another's deep ache. To be a Christian community is to be a people who are betting our lives and life together on God's power to deliver.

Which brings us to the second thing that we know about Saturday. The first things we know is that it is the Sabbath day of silence that lies between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. The second thing that we know about Saturday is announced every time we gather on this night. The Epistle lesson is always from Romans. Paul says: "*Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life*" (Romans 6:3-4). Today we lie in the grave with Jesus. In baptism we become participants in Jesus' death. We are not bystanders. We have not fled. Our life - with all its successes and missteps, with all its accomplishments and its shame - is over. Past. Finished. Crucified. Death has had its way with us. The good news in this is that we have nothing more to lose because we have already lost everything. So we gather here at the hinge between Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday waiting and hoping like expectant parents for labour to begin so that we, too, might walk with Christ in newness of life on the other side of the grave.

There is one more thing that we know about Saturday. Well, perhaps you know more than these three things. But after sixteen years I have learned this much. First, that Saturday is the day of resting in God's promises between Friday and Sunday. Second, that it is the day when we join Jesus in his death. And, third, the Easter Vigil teaches us that the resurrection does not happen at sunrise when the birds come out to sing and when the bunnies scamper past. This Holy Vigil reminds the church that God's awesome show of power takes place in the deepest darkness. God raises Jesus from the dead in the dead of night. There are no witnesses of the event. There are only witnesses after the fact. I don't fully understand what this means. I only know that we cannot easily march out proofs of the resurrection - be they butterflies from cocoons or lilies from bulbs or rainbows from storms. The almighty power of God to create life where there is only death is hidden from our view. But this does not mean that God's creative power is not very real. Far from it. In fact, this means that we rightly gather in the dark to join the witnesses who have gone before and those who will come after to tell the gospel truth that while it is still dark Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb and sees that the stone has been removed. While it is still dark new life is born from above. While it is still dark newness enters the world, enters the church, enters your soul. This is the gospel of Jesus Christ at the hinge between Saturday and Sunday. Thank God.

Sunday

Matthew 28:1-10

The third day. Easter Sunday. This is the final day in God's long holy weekend. It begins on Friday. Good Friday which is a terrible Friday marked by devastation, terror, panic, disaster. We tell this story over and over because it is still so surprising to us that the good news of God's great love begins in such terrible trouble. We expect that a story about God's power will go from strength to strength, wonder to wonder, miracle to miracle. Instead the gospel of Jesus Christ takes us into the depth of human weakness, suffering and loss. The Christian gospel says that we are ready to understand God's love when we are ready to enter our own story of weakness, suffering and loss. This is where the God we meet in Jesus waits to give new life. But this new life does not come easily. That is what we learn on Saturday, the second day. On Holy Saturday nothing happens. Holy Saturday is the long Sabbath day between the crucifixion and the resurrection. It is the day lived between the traumatic pain of yesterday's grief and the unknown future of tomorrow's unpredictability. To live on Holy Saturday is to be faced with a crucial choice. In the aftermath of Good Friday loss we may despair at the impossibility of ever being healed, being raised, being made new. Or, given this same terrible history, we may somehow discover astonishing reserves of trust and hope in the power of God to raise the dead and to resurrect the hopeless.

Which brings us to Sunday. This is the first day of the work week in ancient Israel. It is not on the weekend. It is not a holy day. Sunday is just another day. The men have gone to work. Peter and John and James are back in Galilee fishing. They are not expecting newness. They plan to live out their grief back in the same world that they had known before their hopes had been raised and then dashed. It is two women, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, whose grief takes them to the tomb. Perhaps they are carrying flowers to place there in the way that mourners place flowers on the side of the road where the fatality occurred. They don't go to the tomb because it is Easter Sunday and they are looking for a miracle. They go because their grief takes them there to weep.

Then there is an earthquake. Really? Yes. Matthew testifies that there is an earthquake. Mark, Luke and John do not tell us that the earth shakes on Easter Sunday. But Matthew says that "*suddenly there was a great earthquake: for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it.*" This is the second earthquake that Matthew has recounted in three days. First on Friday, at the moment of Jesus' death, he reports the earth shaking and tombs opened with saints coming to life. Now on Sunday, when the resurrection is announced, the earth again trembles, trembles, trembles. The power of God to bring new life out of death is a massive force of God's nature. To come close to the God who is at work restoring life to creation, to the world, to humankind, to you is to draw near to an awesome mystery and a frightening presence. Whatever Easter Sunday is about it is not about the regular return of the seasons. Perhaps one needs to experience Easter in the Southern Hemisphere to grasp that the gospel of Jesus Christ is not best told with springtime bonnets and coloured eggs. The resurrection is not inevitable. The resurrection is a miracle. It breaks in upon the women when their grief is surely impenetrable. It interrupts the arrival of winter in their souls. It is a shocking and destabilizing and terrifying theological earthquake.

The women do not shout for joy at the discovery of the empty tomb. Their first response to the announcement of new life on the other side of death is not a chorus of hallelujahs but cold, clammy, shivering shock. This is the reason that the first words out of the mouth of God's angelic messenger is "*Do not be afraid.*" To draw near to God's power to make new, to heal, to lead you into a new world is find yourself trembling, fearful of what is happening and of what lies ahead. When you find yourself standing at the empty tomb, staring in wonder at a once closed future that has suddenly burst open you will recognize God's messenger. She will be the one who says to you: "*Do not be afraid. He is going ahead of you. There you will see him.*" This is the message that God speaks today to this little church that finds itself staring into a condition that we have labelled chronic, inevitable, palliative, terminal. All the evidence, all the statistics, all the experts point to a church declining into death. Yet we are met here and now by one who announces that the future we are being led into on the other side of our impending death is named "Empty Tomb" and "Eternal Life with Jesus Christ."

The women leave the tomb "*with fear and great joy*" and they run to tell the others. This is the shape of Christian life that lives in and through and out of God's long weekend. A people who know great grief and who have lived through great loss now find themselves caught up by a God who gives life on the other side of cataclysmic trouble. There is fear because we have never lived in this new world on the other side of forgiveness and healing, of sobriety and redemption before. Released from the prison of the past we are no longer protected by the confines of our familiar cell. Now everything is new. It is at once terrifying and exhilarating. Easter marks a new day, a new time, a new era. It is the reason that the early Christians renamed Sunday. No longer is it the first day of yet another work week. Now Sunday is the Lord's Day, Easter Day, the Eighth Day of Creation. Every Sunday is now a proclamation that in the resurrection God has begun again. Begun again with creation. Begun again with humankind. Begun again with you and with me. Christ is risen. Christ is risen, indeed. Hallelujah.