

Holy Saturday

Sermon by Bob Arbogast

Celebration Fellowship, Ionia, Michigan

April 8, 9, & 15, 2019

Scripture: Mark 15:42-47

Sermon

A long, long time ago, the church lived in a world that was full of gods and goddesses, full of idols and temples, full of priests and animal sacrifices. But when the members of the church stood up together to recite the Apostles' Creed, they said, "I believe in God, the Father almighty." They said, "I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord." And they said, "I believe in the Holy Spirit."

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In a world of multiples, the church said one God, one Lord, one Spirit—one Holy Trinity.

WHEN THE CHURCH STOOD TO RECITE THE CREED, they said that Jesus "suffered under Pontius Pilate"; that he "was crucified, died, and was buried"; that he "descended to hell"; and that he "rose again from the dead." Tonight, I want to focus on one of those things that the church said about Jesus. They said he "was buried."

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You know the story. It goes like this. Before the sun set on Friday, Jesus' body was wrapped up and placed in the earth. Then, before the sun rose on Sunday, Jesus' body was no longer in his grave. That's the story.

But that's not the whole story. There's more to it than that. You see, between that Friday sunset and that Sunday sunrise, Jesus was in the earth. For 36 hours, a grave was his home. But we hardly ever think about that, do we?

I'VE BEEN A PASTOR FOR A LONG TIME. And this time of year, it's always the same. The focus is on Friday, and then the focus is on Sunday. It's Good Friday, and it's Easter. And I get it. Those are the big days. Those are the days when the important things happen. Jesus dies on Friday. Jesus rises on Sunday. There's no way Saturday can compete. Because nothing happens on Saturday.

Saturday was the Sabbath. So on Saturday, the women rested. And the disciples? They scattered on Thursday night. Who knows where they were by Saturday? Who knows what they were doing?

IN THE CHURCH, IT'S ALWAYS ABOUT FRIDAY AND ABOUT SUNDAY. In the church, there is no Saturday. In the church, even Saturday is all about Sunday, all about Easter.

We don't rest on Saturday like the women did. No; on Saturday, we get ready for Sunday. The decorating committee arranges the Easter lilies. The musicians practice their Sunday morning parts. And the pastor puts the finishing touches on an Easter sermon.

But Jesus is not busy on Saturday. On Saturday, Jesus is in the grave.

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I wonder if churches can reclaim Saturday. I wonder if we can stop for that one day, the day between Good Friday and Easter. I wonder if we can find a way to be still, to be as still as Jesus in the grave. And I wonder if we can find a holy rest and peace by meditating on our Savior's stay in the earth—not on the earth, in the earth!

Think of it. The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us, lived on the earth, full of grace and truth. And that same Word in the same flesh also lived for a while in the earth, lived for a while among the dead.

HAVE YOU EVER STOOD BY AN OPEN GRAVE? A funeral can be sad: the prayers, the songs, the promises, and the memories. Tears start to flow. But stand by an open grave, and the tears come in a flood.

Have you ever watched a casket get lowered into the ground? Your loved one is gone. Have you ever grabbed a handful of damp earth and dropped it on top of a casket? That's when you know it's over.

Soon the grass will be growing on top of the grave. And there will no sign of the person you loved so much. Maybe a brave granite marker will stand guard, announcing who lies beneath the sod waiting for the last day. But that's it. He's gone. She's gone.

YET JESUS HAS BEEN THERE. Jesus knows the grave. That's what Saturday is about. Jesus was dead. His lifeless body was wrapped up and placed on a shelf. And a large stone sealed the opening while Jesus did time, did time in the grave.

How much time? You tell me. With the Lord, a day is like a thousand years. So enough time. Enough time to know death all the way. Enough time to know the final part of being human. Enough time to know how the human journey ends.



Now, I know, we all expect Jesus to rise from the grave. And we can hardly wait for it. So we don't have a whole lot of patience for Saturday. We want to get to the good stuff.

When the song is "In Christ Alone," we sing: "There in the ground his body lay." That's Jesus in the flesh, in the earth. "There in the ground his body lay, light of the world by darkness slain." Now that's a great image, the light of the world slain by darkness. But already we've moved on from dead Jesus with his body in the earth. Half a line of that is all we can stand. Half a line, that's all we can stand.

We want to get to the good stuff. "Then, bursting forth in glorious day, up from the grave he rose again!" There. That's it. We want to get to Sunday, to Easter. And we can hardly wait. Because that's what we want for our loved ones. And that's what we want when it comes to our own death.

WE KNOW THAT DEATH IS NOT THE END OF ANY OF US. We know that a resurrection is coming for all of us. Until then, we don't want to think about lingering in the grave. And we don't want to think about our loved ones being under the earth.

But I buried my mom twenty-five years ago. And her body—what's left of it—is still in the ground. I buried my dad three years later. His body is still next to hers. And all around them in that cemetery—I look around, and I know all the names. I remember all the faces. It's like a reunion of family and friends.

But all of them are in the grave. All of them are underground: for a month, for twenty-five years, for fifty years. And it's good for me to spend Saturday thinking about that. To think about how they joined Jesus in the grave. To think about how the earth that welcomed them is holy because Jesus did time there.

SO IT WOULD BE A GOOD THING, if you ask me, for the church to reclaim Saturday, Holy Saturday, the day between Good Friday and Easter, the day Jesus spent in the grave.

How did Jesus spend that time? Was Jesus in a hurry? Could he maybe not wait for Sunday to come? I don't know. There are passages in the Bible that suggest Jesus was busy on Saturday. But I don't know. I sort of imagine Jesus resting. I sort of imagine Jesus at peace.



On the cross Jesus said, "It is finished." I don't think he meant just that his suffering was finished, that at last it was time to die, time for him to be dead. No; it was more

than that. By his suffering and death, Jesus was laying the foundation for God's new creation. And now that work was done.

So I can imagine Jesus, like his Father, resting on the seventh day. I can imagine Jesus spending that Saturday in peace, waiting in faith for the new creation to be born, doing nothing, because the Father has everything in hand.

For the same reason, we can rest on Holy Saturday, waiting for Jesus to be raised. And we can rest alongside every grave, even our own, because the Father has everything in hand.

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Glory and thanks be to God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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