

A garden tomb: Mark 15.40-47



Then Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Marry the mother of Joses saw where the body was laid.

**Low in the grave he lay, Jesus my Saviour:
Waiting the coming day, Jesus my Lord.**

So Jesus' body is given back to his friends, broken and lifeless: but those who have followed him so far will not abandon him now. In the end, it's *the women who have followed him from Galilee all the way up to Jerusalem* (vv.40-41) who stay by him to the end, watching by the cross and taking note of where the body was laid (v.47).

Birth and death, in most traditional societies, are women's business: it's the women who wash the body and lay it out, giving it the final rituals of care and dignity. Just by the entrance of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, there's a flat stone in the floor, six feet long, worn smooth by centuries of washing and tears. This is where tradition has it that Jesus' body was taken down from the cross and tenderly washed and lamented.

But the women are powerless in this brutal world of soldiers and military governors. Even in his death, Jesus finds an unexpected ally in the corridors of power. Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Council who hadn't dared speak out when Jesus was

condemned, finally finds the courage to follow his heart and asks Pilate for permission to take down the body. So the people's champion, the prophet from Galilee, finds his final resting-place *with the rich in his death*, as foretold by the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 53.9).

Just outside the modern city wall is the site of the Garden Tomb, which Colonel Gordon (of Khartoum fame) identified as a possible site for the tomb of Jesus. It's an abandoned quarry, with a craggy rock-face which might possibly look like a skull. The original Golgotha was more likely to have been at the site now covered by the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, but the Garden Tomb gives a much better idea of what Jesus' resting-place would have looked like then.

Today it's a quiet, prayerful garden with an ancient tomb hollowed out of the rock face. There are many such tombs cut into the rocky hills around Jerusalem, and they make it easier for us to imagine what Joseph's tomb would have looked like. Pilgrims meet there to pray and sing, queuing to look inside and kneel down in the empty tomb, a last resting-place carved out of the living rock, with a groove in front where the massive stone slab would have been rolled across the opening. A place of rest.

Just as he has shared our pain, Jesus shares our death. Dying is what happens to bodies when they wear out — or when they're damaged beyond repair. Easter Eve (Holy Saturday), when we remember Jesus' body laid in the tomb, is a time for rest — for quiet thankfulness for a life lived with God, for thankfulness that even in the valley of the shadow of death, we know that God is with us, because Jesus has been there before us.

*If I ascend to heaven, you are there:
If I make the grave my bed, you are there too.
If I say, "Surely the darkness will cover me,
and the night around me turn to night,"
even the darkness is not dark to you,
for night is as bright as the day.
Darkness and night to you are both alike. (Psalm 139.8-12)*

Except of course Good Friday isn't the end of the story. Easter (as Tolkien said once) is the great "eucatastrophe", the ultimate "happy ending" which gives us hope even in our darkest hours. I like these lines by (of all people!) D.H.Lawrence, from a poem called *Shadows*:

And if tonight my soul may find her peace

In sleep, and sink in good oblivion,
And in the morning wake like a new-opened flower,
Then I have been dipped again in God, and new-created

And if in the changing phases of man's life
I fall in sickness and in misery
My wrists seem broken and my heart seems dead
And strength is gone, and my life
Is only the leavings of a life:

And still among it all, snatches of lovely oblivion,
And snatches of renewal,
Odd wintry flowers upon the withered stem, yet new, strange flowers
Such as my life has not brought forth before, new blossoms of me:

Then I must know that still
I am in the hands of the unknown God,
He is breaking e down to his own oblivion,
To send me forth on a new morning, a new man.

God bless,
Loveday

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