



Catalog No. 1986

Luke 23:56b

86th Message

Bernard Bell

March 29, 2015

# THE DAY IN BETWEEN

*SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE*

Today is Palm Sunday, and our service began as usual for this day and in common with many churches around the world. Our call to worship was from Psalm 118:

**Save us (*Hosanna*), we pray, O LORD...**

**Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD.**

(Ps 118:25-26)

Then our children entered waving palm fronds to lead us all in singing Hosanna. As they exited we sang an ancient Palm Sunday hymn written 1200 years ago:

All glory, laud and honor

To Thee, Redeemer, King,

To whom the lips of children

Made sweet hosannas ring.

Liturgically, we began today in the right place in concert with the rest of the church throughout time and throughout the world. But in our preaching series in Luke's gospel, it was six months ago that we covered Jesus' so-called triumphal entry into Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday. We have spent the past three months slowly working through the last 24 hours of Jesus' life, beginning with the preparations for the Last Supper. Last week John covered the death and burial of Jesus. But Easter Sunday is still a week away, when we will celebrate the resurrection and the empty tomb. "Oh, happy day," we have just sung, but that happy day is a week away. "The greatest day in history," but it was preceded by perhaps the strangest day in history. Between last week's topic and next week's, we have this day in between and an occupied tomb.

Some of us grew up saying the Creed, in which we affirm our belief in the triune God. In the Apostles' Creed we affirm Jesus Christ who "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead." In the Nicene Creed we affirm that he "was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried, And the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures." Both creeds affirm that Jesus was buried and that he lay in that tomb until the third day.

In his first sermon, on the Day of Pentecost, Peter proclaimed, "This Jesus...you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up" (Acts 2:23-24). At the heart of the gospel, proclaimed throughout the New Testament and affirmed in the creeds, lies this sobering truth: Jesus Christ was killed and sent to the grave by mankind, and raised up from the grave by God. In both these actions, Jesus was passive: he was put to death, he was raised up. But between these two actions, between humanity sending him to the grave and God raising him back up, there is a gap, a day in between during which his body lay in the grave.

We rarely think about this occupied tomb. Perhaps the artwork on the cover of the worship guide makes you uncomfortable (Hans Holbein, *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, 1521). It is disturbing to think of the body of Jesus lying in the tomb from Friday

evening, all through Saturday, and into Sunday morning. It is even more disturbing to think that it was the Son of God lying in the tomb. Down through the centuries many have been uncomfortable with this. Many have asked, "What was Christ doing while his body lay in the tomb?" He must have been doing something! He can't have just lain there inactive, can he?

The most sacred site of Christendom is the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, built around both Calvary and the tomb. Here is celebrated the *anastasis*, the resurrection. Here is the empty tomb, which one can now enter. It is the last of the fourteen stations of the cross for those walking the *via Dolorosa*. The visiting of tombs is an ancient practice, one we continue today. We visit the graves of departed family members. All these graves are occupied. We know that a dead body was laid into each grave, though in the case of those who died in the Lord, we are comforted in the knowledge that they are now with the Lord.

In the case of the Holy Sepulchre, that tomb was once occupied by none less than Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Today we will visit this occupied grave. We will visit it three times, looking at the occupied tomb from three perspectives: from the perspective of Good Friday, then of Holy Saturday, then of Easter Sunday; from the perspective of the day before, of the day in between, and of the day after; from the perspective of the day of death, of the day dead, and of the day of new life.

## I. Seen from Good Friday

Viewed from Good Friday the tomb contains the corpse of a man executed that day by the Romans. He died by crucifixion, the most shameful of deaths. He had been rejected by his own people, charged by the leadership with blasphemy and inciting rebellion against Rome. He had been crucified between two criminals, and in place of a murderous insurrectionist who had been set free. Mocked and treated with contempt by both his own religious leadership and the occupying Romans, he had suffered their blows and heard their scoffing. Yet he had prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). Of course, on one level they knew exactly what they were doing. The religious leaders were protecting their turf. The Romans were preserving the peace.

Jesus died abandoned and friendless. His own disciples had vanished into the crowd. Even Peter, who had promised to go with him both to prison and to death, had left. Though Jesus had several times warned his disciples on their journey to Jerusalem that he must suffer and be rejected and be killed (9:22; 17:25; 18:31-33), they understood none of these things (18:34). "Who do you say that I am?" he had asked them. "The Christ of God," replied Peter for all of them (9:20). They believed he was the Messiah, but this wasn't the way it was supposed to end: Messiah on a cross, and now in a tomb. Jesus wasn't the first Messiah to suffer this fate and he wouldn't be the last. It seemed the disciples had placed their hopes in the wrong person.

When he cried out on the cross, “I thirst” (John 19:28), maybe that’s all there was to him: just a man, dying of thirst.

Jesus had opportunities to come down off the cross. He was taunted to do so, but he did not. He did not save himself. Rather, he gave himself up. Nor did God save him. He did not intervene at the last minute as he had done with Abraham and his beloved son. Indeed, God gave him up. Jesus cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34). And so he died, forsaken by friend and God alike.

But he was not yet completely forsaken. Joseph of Aramathea, a good and righteous man, took his body, lovingly wrapped it in a burial shroud, and laid it in a nearby tomb. Despite the artistic depictions showing the women helping with the burial, the gospels record that Joseph alone buried Jesus, joined in John’s account by Nicodemus. It must have been a heartbreaking time for Joseph. His hopes were shattered. He had been looking ahead for the kingdom of God (23:51), just as Simeon had been looking ahead for the consolation of Israel (2:25), and Anna for the redemption of Jerusalem (2:38). Now the one who seemed to be the object of their hopes and longings lay in the tomb.

The women “followed and saw the tomb and how his body was laid” (23:55). Then they, too, left. They were the last to leave his body and would be the first to return, expecting to find his body among the dead. Now the body of Jesus lay still and alone, shut inside the tomb by a large stone. He was alone even in his burial. Since it was a tomb that had never been used before, there was no other body in there. It was a godless and godforsaken place. It seemed that God had abandoned him to Sheol, there to see corruption (Ps 16:10). Once the derelict on the cross, he was now the derelict in the tomb.

The grave had swallowed yet more innocent blood. Jesus had joined the faithful dead enumerated in Hebrews 11: Abel the first martyr, and all those “of whom the world was not worthy,” who “though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised” (Heb 11:38-39). “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints” (Ps 116:15), the Psalmist had written. How many more saints would have to die? “Today you will be with me in Paradise” (23:43), Jesus had promised the repentant criminal crucified beside him. But today he was in a tomb.

Viewed from Good Friday, the tomb speaks of failure and defeat, of shattered dreams and disappointed expectations, of weakness and powerlessness. Its occupant is alone and Godforsaken.

## 2. Seen from Holy Saturday

Looking now at the tomb from the perspective of Holy Saturday, this day in between was a Sabbath day, a day of rest. The women, after seeing Jesus’ body laid in the tomb, had returned and prepared spices and ointments (23:56a). Very early on the first day of the week they would return with the spices they had prepared (24:1). Luke notes what they did between these two actions,

**On the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment. (Luke 23:56b ESV)**

These women had followed Jesus all the way from Galilee (23:49, 55). They had provided for him and his disciples out of their own resources (8:2-3). They had seen him die on the cross, and seen him laid in the tomb. They had prepared spices and ointments to place around the body to mask the smell of rotting flesh. But evening had

come and the Sabbath had started. And so they rested. This is unique to Luke’s account, and it’s uniquely said of the women.

But not everyone was resting on that Sabbath day. The chief priests and the Pharisees should have been leading the people in religious observance of the Sabbath, but they were agitated. Gathering before Pilate, they expressed their concern that the disciples would steal Jesus’ body and announce that he had risen from the dead. Pilate gave them permission to secure the tomb, so they sealed the stone and set a guard (Matt 27:62-66). These religious leaders had a busy Sabbath.

What about Jesus on that Sabbath day? The Apostles’ Creed contains the line, “He descended into hell.” Originally this was synonymous with the previous phrase, “dead and buried.” In the Old Testament, the dead descended into *Sheol*. Hebrew *Sheol* or Greek *Hades* is the realm of the departed, where all the dead go. In the Old Testament *Sheol* is synonymous with the Grave or Death. This is the realm indicated by the Apostles’ Creed. “He descended into hell” is simply an alternative way of stating that Jesus was “dead and buried.”

Translating *Hades* as “hell” is confusing, though, for there are two other realms mentioned in the New Testament that are also translated as “hell.” Tartarus is the realm to which sinful angels have been sent, where they are bound in chains of gloomy darkness (2 Pet 2:4; Jude 6; 1 Pet 3:19?). Gehenna is the place of final judgment. Both Hades and Tartarus are holding places from which those imprisoned there will be released in order to go to Gehenna.

The original intent of the phrase “He descended into hell” was to confirm that Jesus was really dead. He wasn’t just “mostly dead. There’s a big difference between mostly dead and all dead.” Jesus was all dead. But did he stay all dead? Opinion on this has been heavily influenced by an obscure verse in 1 Peter 3 about Christ’s suffering:

**...being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared. (1 Pet 3:18-20)**

Verse 19 (“in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison”) is often called the most difficult verse in the New Testament. What is clear is that Jesus went somewhere and proclaimed something to someone. But concerning the details there is much disagreement. When and where did he go, and what and to whom did he proclaim? Many have assumed that Jesus made this journey from the tomb, between his crucifixion and resurrection, and that this journey was a descent into hell, though the text says nothing about such a descent. But if he descended into hell, which hell did he go to? Some say he went to Hades and proclaimed to the Old Testament saints, subsequently bringing them with him when he rose from the grave. This is the harrowing of hell included in so many artistic depictions of the resurrection. Or he preached the gospel to humans who had been disobedient in the days of Noah, giving them a second chance to repent. From this second chance were developed the concepts of limbo and purgatory. Some say Jesus went back in time and preached through the mouth of Noah to those who scoffed at his building of the ark. Others say Jesus went to Tartarus, and proclaimed to the imprisoned spirits, particularly the “sons of God” who cavorted with the daughters of men in the days of Noah (Gen 6:1-4). Others say Jesus descended all the way to Gehenna where he suffered unspeakable torment, so fully did he take upon himself our sin and its curse. There are still other interpretations, but these are five of the most common.

Though these views are widely divergent, they all share one thing in common: Jesus didn't stay "all dead." He had a very busy Sabbath, while his body lay in the tomb! Why can't we allow Jesus to have his Sabbath rest?

The majority view now among scholars about 1 Peter 3:19 is that "made alive in the spirit" refers to the resurrection, in which state Jesus proclaimed victory to the demonic powers of evil. The verse does not refer to a journey made on the day in between, the day between being put to death in the flesh and resurrected from the grave. Perhaps Jesus didn't have a busy Sabbath after all.

If we allow Jesus to be at rest all the time his body lay in the tomb, what was happening? Surely something was happening!

On the cross Jesus cried, "It is finished!" (John 19:30), and "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" (Luke 23:46). His work was done. He had been obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Entrusting himself into his Father's hands, he had expired. The ball was now in his Father's court. What would God do? God kept him waiting, through the remainder of that first day, all through the second day, and into the third day.

God kept the world waiting. In the realm of Death was now one, the only one, on whom Death had no claim. Could Death hold onto him? Mankind may have been oblivious, but the supernatural world would not have been. The demonic forces waited to see if Death could hold onto this Son of God. The heavenly world waited to see if Death's grip could be broken. What would God do? Meanwhile both Jesus and the women had their Sabbath rest.

This day in between was the day Jesus was dead—all day. It was a liminal day. Liminal space (Lat. *limen*, "threshold") is the interface, the boundary between two realms. I first came across the term in college in my geography studies: it refers to the boundary zone between marsh and dry land, or along the river bank. The term has now been picked up by those interested in spiritual formation. Liminal space is the uncomfortable zone between, the zone of waiting. Richard Rohr writes,

Liminal space...is a unique spiritual position where human beings hate to be but where the biblical God is always leading them. It is when you have left the "tried and true" but have not yet been able to replace it with anything else. It is when you are finally out of the way. It is when you are in between your old comfort zone and any possible new answer. It is no fun...

If you are not trained in how to hold anxiety, how to live with ambiguity, how to entrust and wait—you will run—or more likely you will "explain." Not necessarily a true explanation, but any explanation is better than scary liminal space. Anything to flee from this terrible "cloud of unknowing." Those of a more fear-based nature will run back to the old explanations. Those who love risk or hate thought will often quickly construct a new explanation where they can feel special and again in control. Few of us know how to stay on the threshold. You just feel stupid there.<sup>1</sup>

You may have never heard the term "liminal," but I'm sure we have all been there, in a liminal zone. I am sure there are some here who are in this uncomfortable zone today, this place of waiting, of not knowing, of being in between.

The most liminal of all days, the most in between of all days, was Holy Saturday, on the boundary between Yesterday and Tomorrow. Alan Lewis writes, "How is it possible for there to be a day in history which is both the day after the end of life *and* the day before the end

of death?"<sup>2</sup> I suspect it is partly our discomfort with liminality, of this being in between, that makes us keep Jesus busy on that day.

The women, uniquely, seem able to have spent this liminal day properly. On this liminal Sabbath they rested. But the word Luke uses for "rest" is not the usual verb for ceasing from work on the Sabbath day. He uses a word which implies peace and quietness, calm and stillness, an absence of agitation. Elsewhere it is translated "to live quietly" (1 Thess 4:11). The women, we can imagine, had plenty about which to be agitated. But they rested, in a state of peace and calm. The Greek verb is *hēsychazō*. It has given its name to a religious practice of the Eastern church called *hesychasm*, the practice of stilling oneself before God through prayer and meditation. Liminal space is where it can be most difficult for us to still ourselves before God, to heed the word of the Psalmist, "Be still and know that I am God" (Ps 46:10). The women were still. Jesus was still.

### 3. Seen from Easter Sunday

Finally we turn to look at the occupied tomb from the perspective of Easter Sunday, the day after. It wasn't until this third day that God raised Jesus from the grave. God vindicated the obedience of his beloved Son. He had not, after all, abandoned his Holy One to Sheol.

After a Sabbath rest this first day of the week was also the first day of a new creation. No one had ever made this journey through death before. God had previously raised people from the dead, through his prophets Elijah and Elisha, and through Jesus. They had been brought back up from Sheol or Hades, only to die again. But God brought Jesus through Death and out the other side into new life, into the new age.

Jesus "was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead" (Rom 1:4). Christian theology understands Jesus Christ to be fully God and fully human. If we look back on the day between from the day after, the day on which Jesus was declared to be the Son of God, we see that it was one who was fully God who lay in the tomb. "We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles" (1 Cor 1:23); this was part of our Scripture reading (1 Cor 1:18-31). Equally scandalous, equally foolish, is that God was pleased to have his Son lie in the tomb throughout this day at the middle of time, this Sabbath that lies at the very middle between death and life, between the first creation and the new creation.

"Christ Jesus...made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself" (Phil 2:5-8). How far did he humble himself? Luke gives the trajectory of his life: at birth he was wrapped in swaddling cloths and laid in a manger (2:7); at death he was wrapped in a linen cloth and laid in a tomb (23:53). How far did God come in entering into human history, into our story? God, in Christ, journeyed to the farthest reaches of the far country to seek his prodigal offspring.

Where was God as Jesus lay in the tomb? Since it was his own beloved Son, God the Son, who was lying there, then God was there, watching and waiting. Where was God when Abel's innocent blood was soaking into the ground? God was there, hearing that blood that was crying out? Where was God when from beneath the altar those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne cried out, "How long, O Lord?" He was there, as they were told to rest a little longer (Rev 6:9-11). Where was God when the blood of the recent Coptic martyrs was spilled into the Mediter-

ranean? He was there. Where is God in the depths of human history, of suffering, of violence, of weakness, of foolishness, of scandal? God is there.

Taking this three-fold look at the occupied grave, we have this three-fold perspective on this day in between, this day between the ages, between the old and the new. Viewed from Good Friday it is a day of shattered dreams, of disappointment. Viewed from Holy Saturday it is a day of waiting, of being still before God. Viewed from Easter Sunday it is a day of realizing how far God came in entering into human history.

Now he sends us out into the world. The Church is now the body of Christ, his ongoing presence in the world. Living in the world as the body of Christ, we are to remember that the One whose body we are is the one whose body was crucified, dead and buried; that the Lion has conquered by being the slain Lamb; that what we have to offer the world is weakness and foolishness and scandal. But this is the wisdom of God and the power of God. Through the cross and the tomb God has shown his great power and has confounded the wisdom of this age. Our boast in the Lord is of the one who was crucified, dead and buried.

*Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen. (Heb 13:20-21)*

1. Richard Rohr, "Grieving as Sacred Space," *Sojourners* (Jan-Feb 2002), [sojo.net/print/magazine/2002/01/grieving-sacred-space](http://sojo.net/print/magazine/2002/01/grieving-sacred-space).

2. Alan E. Lewis, *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 66. My indebtedness to this remarkable book for its contribution to my thinking on Holy Saturday in general, and to this message in particular, extends far beyond this single quote.

© 2015 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino