

## Remember the Sabbath Day

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast*

*Olentangy Church*

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### **Luke 23:48-56**

*The journey from Palm Sunday to Good Friday was a short one. On Sunday Jesus was hailed as the coming king. On Friday he was executed as a pretender. Here's how that day ended.*

After seeing what took place, all the people who had gathered for this spectacle went away beating their breasts. All his friends, in particular the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance watching these things.

Now, a certain man, a member of the council who did not agree with their decision or with their action, a good and upright man named Joseph, who was from the Judean town of Arimathea and who was waiting for the kingdom of God — this man went to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body. After taking it down and wrapping it in linen, he laid him in a tomb cut into rock, where no one had been laid yet. It was the day of preparation, and the Sabbath was approaching.

Now, the women who had come with him from Galilee followed. They saw the tomb and how his body was laid. Then they went away and prepared spices and perfumed ointments. But they rested on the sabbath, according to the commandment.

### **Sermon**

Our celebration of Palm Sunday is over almost before it begins. We hear the story. The children wave palm branches. We sing our hosannas. And then we're into sin and misery and the cross. We feel cheated out of our celebration.

That structure to our liturgy is no accident, however. It mirrors the actual events. Because no sooner had the noise of the Palm Sunday parade died down than Jesus and his adversaries began to square off. It was a serious contest, one that would reach its climax in five short days with Jesus expiring on the cross.

So we move quickly toward Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. Those are the key days on the downside. The days of betrayal and misery. The days of sorrow and grief. Then we come quick as we can to Easter. Not just the key day on the upside, Easter is the upside. And we're always eager to get there.

But there is another day. There's also Saturday. And we should spend some time there.

**It's called "Holy Saturday" in some church traditions.** And a variety of beliefs and practices have grown up around it. I can't say much about those this morning. But I do want to wonder for a while about Saturday.

There's one main question to ponder. It's a question I had never thought to ask before, but it jumped out at me this time through Luke 23. There Luke tells us about Joseph from Arimathea. How he asked Pilate for Jesus' body. How he gave Jesus a quick burial. There Luke tells us something about the timing of what Joseph did. How he saw to it that Jesus was buried before the Sabbath began. There also Luke tells us about the women. He doesn't name them, but he tells us they had followed Jesus from Galilee. These are the women who had provided for Jesus and his apostles. And now they were providing spices and perfumed ointments for Jesus' body. In other words, they were seeing to a proper burial.

**It's no small matter, providing a decent burial for someone.** Hegel is reported to have said that burial is the first act of civilization.

In 1915 hundreds of thousands of ethnic Armenians were forced from their homes in Ottoman Turkey. They were marched across treacherous mountains toward exile and death in the Syrian desert. Tens of thousands were brutally slaughtered on the way. And, in a final act of dehumanization, these victims were denied burial. Denied a most basic act of civilization. Denied the religious rites that properly adorn death.

Jesus, however, was buried. And he would be buried properly. The women intended to see to that. But first, Luke tells us, they rested. They rested because it was the Sabbath. Which brings us to that one main question to ponder.

**How did Jesus spend the Sabbath?** Not the Sabbath in general, but the one particular Sabbath day that came after Good Friday?

On that Sabbath day, Jesus lay in his tomb. From sundown on Friday evening to sundown on Saturday evening (actually until some time early on Sunday morning, early enough that we might still call it Saturday night) — from Friday night to Saturday night, Jesus lay there in his tomb, lifeless. No breath filling his lungs. No blood flowing through his veins. No light glistening in his eyes.

Put another way, on the Sabbath Jesus rested. Rested from his wearying labors. Rested from witnessing both faith and un-faith. Rested from teaching his friends and challenging his adversaries. Rested from the constant need to respond to sickness and death. Rested from disappointment that everything he announced seemed so far off. Rested from the intense agony of a coming fate that he now had tasted.

It's clear enough that Jesus rested on the Sabbath, on that Sabbath. But did he, nevertheless, accomplish something that day? Accomplish something while he lay lifeless in the tomb? Accomplish something perhaps by lying lifeless in the tomb?

**A long-standing Christian tradition says that Jesus sanctified the grave for us.** In other words, he made the grave holy.

Now, we're not big in our tradition on holy objects and holy places. Bibles often are published with the label "Holy Bible" on them. But we don't go too far beyond that. We use tap water for baptism, not holy water. We pray that God will make the bread and wine of communion holy. But they don't start out that way or stay that way. They're holy while we're using them for what we use them for. That's all.

But if there is such a thing as holiness, a holiness attached to a place or to an object, it must come in certain ways. From the presence of the Spirit, let's say. Or from the touch of Jesus. So when Jesus is laid in the grave, his contact with that place of death makes it holy. And not just his grave, but the graves of all his people. The psalm says, "Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his faithful ones" (Ps. 116:15).

Moses was ordered to remove his filthy sandals when he stood before the burning bush, because he was on holy ground, ground touched in an extraordinary way by the presence of God. So we approach burial and the grave solemnly and with prayer. Because we are touching holy ground, ground Jesus hallowed by his presence.

**But there must be more, more to Jesus' time in the grave.** My friend Harry Winters pointed this one out to me. While Jesus lay in death — And remember, Jesus body was not a mere appendage. His body was as essential to him as our bodies are to us. We are embodied creatures. While Jesus lay in death, the Holy Trinity lay in ruins! The God-head was shattered. The Son was dead. The separation, the forsakenness, the hell lingered.

Armenians on death marches mourned and wailed. Their homes were destroyed. Their families were destroyed. Soon enough they themselves would be destroyed. And as far as they could tell, their existence as a people was reaching an end. The misery was nearly complete. Our Triune God knows this agony, this misery, this brokenness seemingly beyond recovery.

The book of Hebrews says that Jesus learned through what he suffered (Hb. 5:8). On Saturday, the Sabbath day, the Holy Trinity learned through suffering, as the Father and the Spirit, along with the Son, suffered somehow unimaginably apart from one another, suffered out of love for the world.

**And there's still more.** In his first letter, Peter gives us a hint. He says that Jesus was put to death in the body, but made alive in the spirit, and that he preached to spirits in prison from long ages ago. (1 Pt. 3:18-19). He also says that the gospel was proclaimed to the dead. (1 Pt. 4:6). These are hints, I think, about Saturday, about how Jesus spent the Sabbath.

Physically, in his body, Jesus rested in his tomb. But in his spirit, he went to Hades or Sheol, to the realm of the dead. The Bible doesn't talk about dead people going to heaven, certainly not before Jesus opened the

way. It talks about dead people going off to a shadowy existence in Sheol. On Saturday, that's where Jesus went, like any other person. There he brought light, unlike any other person. There he proclaimed rest, the eternal Sabbath. There he set all the children of God free.

That seems to be what Peter is hinting at. It's what much of the church has believed for hundreds, even thousands, of years. It's a question of Jesus' victory over death. A victory he achieves first by dying himself and then going all the way to the bottom of death. A victory he achieves not just for himself, but for all the children of God. A victory he announced to his faithful ones on Saturday, on the Sabbath, and invited them to witness on Sunday, on the first day of the week, the first day of the new creation.

“Remember the Sabbath day” — that's what the commandment says — “to keep it holy” (Exodus 20:8). Let's remember one Sabbath day in particular. Holy Saturday. The day Jesus spent in the grave. The day he went to Sheol to bring light and rest. The day on which he defeated death so far on his way to defeating death forever.