

A Reflection for the Vigil of Easter

St Michael and All Angels Anglican Church – April 23, 2011

Matthew 27:57-66 | Job 14:1-14

God, it was awful.

I don't know if you were there, don't know if you care or how you'd react if you were. As for me, let me just say it again to be clear: it's nothing if not an awful, God-forsaken mess.

All I can feel – all any of us can feel – is the oppressive weight of death. How can you not feel it hanging? The air weighs a hundred tons.

A millstone around my neck. Dragging me under, crushing me, striking me down. Breathless, lungs screaming for air. Like I'm hanging on the cross next to him, fighting for breath. Fluid in my lungs, salty tears filling my eyes, I can almost feel the spear in my side. It's nothing, if not an awful, God-damned mess.

In my anguish, in these deep, wounded pain, words come to me from across the divide, across hundreds of years, and I find myself covered in ashes of mourning, echoing Job's lament:

Poor mortal, born of woman,
few of days and full of trouble.
Comes up like a flower, a fig tree, a mustard seed
flees like a shadow and does not last

Is there no hope for a tree cut down? Will new life sprout again? Will this dead grain of wheat bear fruit? I pray it will.

Doubt and fear haunt us now. Hope's a bitter pill. There's a lump in my throat and I don't have it in me to swallow. There's not much left, this night. I've got nothing left. There's nothing left to do except wait.

But for what?

Somewhere...somewhere far away from this dismal place, the festival has begun. Only three are left at the tomb - Mary Magdalene, the other Mary and me. And I'm on my way home.

We are all who are left. There's no-one to keep watch with us this night, unless you, you hiding in the shadows, would join us. I wonder, in the depths of my despair, in the midst of this unknowing, where the other disciples have gone. Have they given up? Have you given up, too?

I wonder, and I wonder again. But if they were here, what would we do? How will we make it through this damp cold night?

All our wondering and watching, waiting, and praying have done is land us here. Here at the mouth of a tomb. The stone rolled in front with a sense of foreboding. Heart's abrasive road rash like the grinding of stone against stone. In the end, the searing pain decisively punctuated by the hollow, aching thud of empty finality.

That's all I feel...if I feel anything at all.

Empty.

Broken.

Numb.

Behind that stone, he lies dead in my tomb. My tomb, not his. My death, not his. Behind that stone lies the one to whom we had pledged our faith, our hope, and our love. His broken body wrapped in clean linen cloth, with no time for embalment. This is not a proper burial. Not for a friend. A teacher. This is not the burial fit for a king, for the son of God.

In my empty, broken, numbness, I can't help but wonder: Was our hope in vain? Was our faith misplaced? Was our love misguided?

When he said those words, what did he mean? Is it all really over? As simple as that? Maybe it *is* over. He said it himself. His words still cause me to tremble and quake.

It Is Finished. Finished. Finished.

Passover's begun, and all I can taste are the bitter herbs of suffering. Off in the distance, I hear this song:

[Play Martyn Joseph's "There's Always Maybe"] - 4:22

In the face of the unknown. When paranoia strikes deep and easy answers are cheap, this is where faith begins. Certainty knocked out from under us, as fear begins to creep over hearts once brimming with love.

Tonight we are called to wait, to listen, to attend. To examine ourselves in this darkest of dark nights.

The Teacher, The Messiah, The King. He's dead.

Will we remain faithful?

Tonight there is no promise of safety. No guarantee of victory. No promise of salvation. Not so much as a hint of resurrection.

Will we remain faithful?

Will we, like Joseph and the two Mary's keep watch, or will we run like Peter into the night? Tonight is the night that faith begins. This is where our fidelity is tested. We followed Jesus in life. Who of us is prepared to drink from his cup? Who of us is prepared to follow him in death?

Who of us will take up this cross? Prepare his grave? Pick up his mantle and continue the mission?

Without promise of reward. Without certainty of victory, who of us will stay true to Jesus' call? There are no easy answers tonight.

But there is always maybe.