

## Resurrection: The Gift of Shabbat

By Vítor Westhelle

No cock crowed and no birds chirped, only the scent of the new day. The women made their way to the tomb wondering aloud who would roll the stone away so that they could honor and revere the body of their beloved with their labor of love, with the spices and ointment they had prepared. Their steps quickened as their hearts swelled up with tenderness for the one who had loved them unreservedly. And lo! The stone was rolled away and the tomb was empty. Fear fraught their minds and tears welled up in their eyes, but through the tears they saw what they could not conceive: He was alive! If apostles are those who are witnesses to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, these women were the first apostles. This account is seen in all the four gospels amongst which variations are few. All speak of women being at the foot of the cross, witnessing the body being laid in the tomb and being the first to witness the emptied tomb and the presence of the resurrected. This is a story that flows like a mournful dance, a ritual, a liturgy, or discipline on how to be a witness to the unexpected. A practice of resurrection is what describes this best.

Precious little do we know about the events that took place between that Good Friday and Easter Sunday. From the apostles we hear nothing, except the story about two disciples who left Jerusalem and the tragedy of the crucifixion behind and moved on to Emmaus, only to return to the scene of suffering and death after the resurrected one revealed himself to them in the breaking of the bread. For those two disciples, before they *converted* and returned to Jerusalem, life had to go on. What had happened had happened and nothing could be done about it.

But different was the story of those women. For them the past was not closed. There was still something to do; a response needed to be given, accountability was required, even if it was to a dead body that could not reciprocate. It is the story of those women, the story of a labor of love and mourning, which alone poignantly joins the event of the crucifixion and the experience of the resurrection. In the itinerary that led them from Friday to Sunday they left for us a lesson on the practice of resurrection.

Let us recall some of the stations of this itinerary those women went through. The Galilean women who were his disciples, among them primarily Mary Magdalene, and maybe also the mother of Jesus and James, come to Jerusalem and are witnesses of the last events that culminate in the execution of the beloved one. They are reported to have been there at the foot of the cross. They watched the torture and death by execution of the one they loved immeasurably as a friend, a son and a teacher. Then they followed the mournful procession to the tomb and witnessed his body being laid to its final rest. After that, they went home. It was the day of preparation for the Shabbat. And as soon as the sun went down on that horrible Friday and the Shabbat began, they rested from all their chores and remained in silent prayer “according to the commandment.” They kept the Shabbat. Nothing else is said, except that they follow the commandment of a God who had allowed all of this to happen and abandoned Jesus. What transpired in their minds and prayers is not known to us except this: For them Jesus was not done with quite yet. What could they do amidst the stillness that swallowed the day? The events of the past days were too complicated for them to comprehend and they did not even try to simplify it. They witnessed a gruesome death yet they did not look away. They did not forget the cry of abandonment. Instead

they chose to remember. In silence they remembered his walk and talk or they may have talked among each other. For them it was a time to find serenity and peace, in the memories amidst sadness and turmoil. That quiet day was filled with remembrance and one must imagine that in the midst of lament, of grieving the lost, the words and deeds, the memories of the gentleness and the outcry of indignation against hypocrites populated that empty space where they were in that Shabbat. On that day no words were uttered, no spirit was blowing in that time of desolation. Yet, there was an aroma in the air that filled that ghastly atmosphere.

Those women who had been spared in the midst of what Paul called the apocalypse of Jesus Christ had gone to buy spices and oil to prepare a balm to anoint a body, which by that time should be putrescent, undergoing its natural decomposition. This was their labor of love and mourning: to anoint a body that would no longer be with them, to give without any expectation of receiving back even the simplest gesture of thankfulness. As in the words of Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard: “The work of love in remembering one who is dead is a work of the most unselfish love.”

Those women remember and in this memory they would not let go of their responsibility toward Jesus. There was still the need to be present and to respond. The cross was for them not a closure, as it was for the disciples on their way to Emmaus. In the midst of the odor of death they responded with the aroma of life, of a hope that they would not even have dared to articulate, a hope, as Paul said, against all hope, a hope that would only allow them to say to themselves: “even if all that is left is a decomposing carcass, we will still be there for you, we still respond to the mute call of your tortured and inert body. You smiled and talked to us of nothing and everything and we know now that for this we had been waiting long.” The care for the dead is homework for astonishment; it is itself the practice of resurrection. The surprise is there when a labor of love and mourning is carried out, for no gesture of love is ever lost.

Yet nothing would happen without that Shabbat of silent grief and lament that stretches throughout and brings together the most terrifying experience of God’s own death and the affirmation of life and empowerment on Easter morning. Without that Shabbat that prepared those women to rise early in the morning next day and journey to the tomb where the body of the beloved had been laid, nothing of the Christian faith could be the same. Without those tears shed, the prayers said, the silence kept, the Easter experience is void and empty as were all the stories of bodies resurrecting on those days. And there were plenty of them. Wendell Berry describes this practice of resurrection remarkably well in a poem entitled “The Way of Pain.”

I read of Christ crucified  
the only begotten son  
sacrificed to flesh and time  
and all our woe. He died  
and rose, but who does not tremble  
for his pain, his loneliness,  
and the darkness of the sixth hour?  
Unless we grieve like Mary  
at his grave, giving him up  
as lost, no Easter morning comes.

It was through tears, and only through tears, that Mary could see a new day. The postulation of the resurrection, without which the Christian faith, as Paul said, would be in vain, is itself vain if it does not go through the grieving Shabbat, which leads one from the Good Fridays of our lives through the Easters of our hopes. Only for those who join the same labor of love and mourning a surprise beyond measure waits. In the Gospel of Mark the surprise is such that, some ancient manuscripts ended it with verse 8 of chapter 16: "So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." But why this "terror," why this "fright" when those women were the first to experience the most daring affirmation of the Christian faith? Why not sheer jubilation and shouts of Alleluia? By registering the fact that the women who came to anoint the body of the beloved were afraid in face of the unexpected fact that they witnessed, the evangelist was emphasizing that what they experienced was not at all what they expected. They had grieved the loss of their beloved and now coming to the tomb with balm was their decisive gesture of love before they would be able to have a closure. Up to that point, they were in control of the process; they even knew how to administer grief. The empty tomb and the resurrected body takes us to a place and experience where we are no longer in control and we are terrified of what awaits us; and so are we scared by the prospect of not having a closure when grief is our companion. Resurrection is a disturbing, uncanny, amazing opening in the banal maze of our existence.

The experience of the resurrection, of life abundant, takes place only when we go to the depths of a labor of love and mourning, ready to give up all as lost, being there to the bitter end, with only love that is totally self-giving as our companion. Only when you do the unthinkable, the ridiculous, of anointing a decaying body, only then can we in fear and trembling inhale the fragrance of life, only then are we welcomed with the sunshine of a day unlike any, but which can be any given day. "Unless we grieve like Mary at his grave, giving him up as lost, no Easter morning comes." But it came and it does come every time there is an aroma in the air that counters the odor of death and brings a balm of love to places and bodies under the domain of suffering and death. The story of those women comes to us as the promise of new life. Because of their faith and trust that no gesture of love will ever be lost, wasted as it might seem, we indeed have hope, we indeed have the promise of resurrection. The promise is that in solidarity with the passion of the world, moved by those who are shaken, loving without expecting anything in return, we will see a new morn wrapping the gift of life abundant waiting to burst through. Looking through tears, as those women, we too shall see, like sunshine amidst showers, the gift of Shabbat: resurrection.