

Three Days!

sermon digest

Easter, 4-4-10

Matthew 12:38-45; John 2:18-22

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Alan Lewis was teaching theology at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary as he wrote *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday*. Although this is a scholarly work, it is far more than an academic exercise or an ego trip for the author. The son of a Presbyterian pastor, Lewis was committed to pastoral ministry and the real struggle of real people with the real issues of life and death, but he was also dealing with a personal battle with cancer. He acknowledged that at the time of his diagnosis in 1986 the book was already in progress, but it became more autobiographical as the disease progressed, and Lewis died in 1994. Alan Lewis did something that Christians have been reluctant to do through the ages; he peered into the tomb to inquire about the message of Holy Saturday intended in the Gospels. Could this be the message?—the direction of our gaze. We do not need blinders to protect us from the horrors of the cross and our fear of the tomb.

The Triduum is three-days. Occupying hostile ground in the Roman Empire, early Christians were limited in expression of their faith to one event. They celebrated Advent-Christmas-Lent-Easter, the whole life of Christ from conception to resurrection as one event. Under Constantine, Christianity became the preferred religion of the Empire and Christians began to distinguish events in the life of Christ and to expand the Christian year. At first, the distinct celebration of Easter was the Triduum, the three days from the Passover feast on Thursday evening to the discovery of the empty tomb on Sunday morning. In the Triduum, the risen Christ was also the crucified. The suffering and death of the human Jesus was an essential, inseparable part of the glorified Christ.

The Apostles Creed, recited in the liturgy of many churches today, contains a line that has been excised by some, “He descended into hell.” The Creed refers to Hades, the realm of the dead rather than a place of eternal punishment; but Christians have always had some embarrassment with the crucifixion of Christ and the necessity of death as well as the unfortunate translation that assigned Jesus to hell. Easter is a triumphal celebration, and the joyful hymns certainly are appropriate. It is one thing to proclaim the triumph over death and quite another to deny or ignore the reality of death itself. We sometimes forget that Easter begins in the Gospels at the entrance of a tomb in a cemetery. Like the first visitors at the tomb, we are reluctant to look inside or to ask, “what does this mean?”

The earliest statement of the gospel we proclaim today is in 1 Corinthians 15: “For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scripture.” Paul’s summary of the Christ event, his *kerygma* -“preaching,” focuses on the events of three days—death, burial, and resurrection. In the Gospel tradition, Jesus was crucified on Friday, his body was claimed by Joseph of Arimathea on late Friday afternoon about the beginning of Sabbath. Attended by the women, Jesus was placed in a tomb until sometime Sunday morning. Two evidences for his resurrection emerge from early Christians: the empty tomb near Jerusalem and the appearances of the risen Christ to people known and available to the church.

In Matthew-Mark-Luke, the Synoptics, Jesus repeatedly announced the three-day formula to the disciples tied to the necessity of going to Jerusalem. Matthew cites Jonah’s three-days in the belly of a fish as a symbol of the three days of the Son of Man in the heart of the earth. According to Matthew, the sign of Jonah is the only sign to be given, but in John the demand of a sign is answered with another symbol: “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” In the trial, Jesus is accused of claiming the power to raise up the Temple of Herod in three days, and on the cross he is taunted by the claim. Only John affirms the accusation with an account of the audacious claim of power to rebuild the temple in three days on the lips of Jesus.

Saturday is a day of silence. Only Matthew takes note of movement in Jerusalem on the Sabbath, the day in the tomb. According to Matthew, the chief priests and Pharisees approach Pilate on Saturday. They advise Pilate to secure the tomb; for “the imposter” had claimed, “After three days I will rise again.” In Luke the two disciples encounter the risen Christ on the Emmaus Road and note, “now it is the third day.” As the life of Jesus folds into the life of the church, Peter’s sermon before Cornelius in Acts 10 repeats the formula: “God raised him on the third day.” Three days in the fish, three days to rebuild the Temple, three days from death to resurrection—what is going on here?

It does not take a genius to calculate that the time between Friday afternoon and early Sunday morning is short of three days and nights, the sign of Jonah. In the Hebrew mind any part of a day is considered to include the whole, so it is about more than counting days. Raymond Brown in *The Death of the Messiah* (pp.11-12) explains the repetition of threes in the Gospel narratives as “the rule of three.” According to Brown, stories often revolve around three moments, three characters, or three places. Peter, James, and John stand apart from the Twelve as the inner-circle, witnesses to the most significant moments in the life of Christ. The number

three appears in narratives throughout the Gospels that can be easily explained as nothing more than a story device.

In the passion narratives, however, something more seems to be involved. Peter's thrice-repeated denial of Jesus is a prophecy fulfilled. In Matthew and Mark, Jesus prays in Gethsemane and returns three times to find the disciples sleeping. In Mark the crucifixion scene involves the third, sixth, and ninth hours of the day; and Jesus is mocked three times on the cross. Jesus was crucified between two criminal-revolutionaries—three crosses. John identifies three groups of witnesses.

Like seven, the number three in the Old Testament is connected to sacred matters. The ancient image of the universe had three parts, gods often were grouped in triads, and the family was pictured as father-mother-child. Certain sacrificial animals had to be three years old. Three fasts structured the Jewish year, and ritual baths were required on the third and seventh days of the week. Three daughters and seven sons were the perfectly proportioned family. In Genesis 1, God blesses the creation three times; and in all three constructions the Jerusalem temple had three divisions—Court, Holy Place, Holy of Holies. The benediction of Aaron (Numbers 6:24-26) repeats the divine name three times associated with three blessings. In Isaiah's vision in the temple (6:3) the word of the heavenly beings was, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts."

The three days assigned to the passion-resurrection event in the Gospels was not a measurement of time so much as a statement of the sacred nature of this time. We cannot ignore the word from the cross in Mark and affirmed by Matthew, the prayer of the godforsaken one. It is a quotation from Psalm 22 that may be a hint of the affirming faith in God's sustaining presence, but it also is a statement that has erupted from the dark night of the soul of every believer who has experienced a cross. The three days speak of a divine presence for certain, but they also address a divine involvement. God is not the author of the suffering of Christ, but God dwells at the core of the darkest moment of the deepest pain.

The light shines through the darkness. Every Easter morning my memories drift to my high school years. We began rehearsals in early February for a community choir to sing at the sunrise service at Forest Park Cemetery in Houston. I was up at 4:00 AM, dressed and on my way to the far end of the big city. As the sun came up, and it nearly always did, we could see a large gathering of folks directly in front of the pavilion where we sang; but I was always aware of the forest of gravestones as far as the eye could see. Only in later years did I realize that most of those folks were not there to hear the choir or the preacher of the day. They were people who had been there before standing beside the grave of a parent, a spouse, a child, a friend. The dark night of the soul had brought them again to that place in quest of the concern of Job 14:14, "If mortals die, will they live again?"

Alan Lewis was both curious and awed by the silence in the Gospels and in church history about the day in the tomb, the theology of Holy Saturday. The Triduum, Holy Thursday through Easter Sunday, has been revived in Christian practice; and some churches have reached behind the traditional sunrise service to the Easter Vigil. They who have experienced darkness value the light. Lewis ends his story:

We conclude in silence—which is where we started and where, in a sense, we have been all along. We began by listening—to a story, scriptural and creedal, which itself told of silence. For our narrative described a day of emptiness and speechlessness, of waiting (for what?) And of termination: the end of God's Son and the end, therefore, of God, and so of everything including hope and possibility. Yet in the story's own silence we also heard language, a word of promise, of new beginnings and of life, divine and therefore human. Beyond the death of God, said the story, there is still God, resurrecting and creative; beyond the void, out of the nothing, comes new existence, where despair makes way for joy and defeat for victory. (p 463)

The message of Sunday morning had a name other than Jesus—in this case, Alan Lewis; and Sunday was not complete without facing the Sabbath in the tomb. For you, the message this day has a name in addition to the name of Jesus.