*They Rested On the Sabbath*

Luke23:1-56

Here is what happened shortly after Jesus’ triumphant entrance into Jerusalem: Jesus gathered his disciples together for the Passover meal. During the meal he took the cup and broke the bread with his disciples, thus instituting the first sacrament of communion. Then Jesus warns them that one of them would betray him, one of them would deny him and that he would suffer. Then Jesus leads his disciples to the Mount of Olives, leaves them to keep watch and goes a little ways away and prays earnestly that the cup he is about to face be passed from him. While he is speaking to his disciples a little later, the soldiers come to arrest Jesus identified by a kiss from Judas. Jesus is arrested and taken to the High Priests house. In the meantime, Peter is busy denying that he knew Jesus. Jesus is then taken to the council and questioned, determined to be guilty and taken to Pilate to stand trial of sorts. Now here is what happened next. I will read selections from the story:

The whole assembly got up and led Jesus to Pilate and began to accuse him. They said, “We have found this man misleading our people, opposing the payment of taxes to Caesar, and claiming that he is the Christ, a king.” Pilate asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?” Jesus replied, “That’s what you say.” Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowd, “I find no legal basis for action against this man.”…When Herod learned that Jesus was from Herod’s district, Pilate sent him to Herod…Herod and his soldiers treated Jesus with contempt. Herod mocked him…and sent him back to Pilate.

Then Pilate called together the chief priests, the rulers and the people…Herod said, “I have found nothing in this man’s conduct that provides a legal basis for the charges you have brought against him. Neither did Herod, because Herod returned him to us. He’s done nothing that deserves death. Therefore I will have him whipped, then let him go.”…The crowd was adamant, shouting their demand that Jesus be crucified. Their voices won out. Pilate issued a decision to grant their request…He handed Jesus over to their will…they led Jesus away…When they arrived at the place called the Skull. They crucified him, along with the criminals, one on his right hand and the other on his left. Jesus said, “Father, forgive them for they don’t know what they are doing.”…It was about noon, and darkness covered the whole earth until about three o’clock, while the sun stopped shining. Then the curtain in the sanctuary tore down the middle. Crying in a loud voice, Jesus said, “Father into your hand I entrust my life.” After this he breathed for the last time.

Now there was a man named Joseph who was a member of the council. He was a good and righteous man. He hadn’t agreed with the plan and actions of the council. He was from the Jewish city of Arimathea and eagerly anticipated God’s kingdom. This man went to Pilate and asked for Jesus’ body. Taking it down, he wrapped it in a linen cloth and laid it in a tomb carved out of the rock, in which no one had ever been buried. It was the Preparation Day for the Sabbath and the Sabbath was quickly approaching. The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph. They saw the tomb and how Jesus’ body was laid in it, then they went away and prepared fragrant spices and perfumed oils. They rested on the Sabbath, in keeping with the commandment.

Jesus was a good man. Yet he was accused and convicted just as a felon would be in our times. He was accused wrongly, treated unjustly, mocked and scorned for reasons that were contrary to what he came for. And yet we have this little story of Jesus’ burial. Joseph of Arimathea was a good man with a great sense of justice. He knew that Jesus was innocent, but his protestations went unheeded as the council met and decided Jesus’ fate. So it was a good, clean in the eyes of God man who handled Jesus’ body at the end. Not only that but Jesus was laid in a clean tomb, one that had not been violated with the death of any other. In Jewish law it was considered unclean to touch a dead body or any place that had contained a dead body. The women, who had followed Jesus from Galilee actually witnessed the burial place and the way that Jesus was laid in the tomb, not anointed, as was Jewish custom. They could have broken the law by anointing him on the Sabbath but that is not what they did. They kept the law and rested on the Sabbath prepared to go back and anoint his body. It was a perfect burial for a good man, for a perfect man.

How many times in life have we wanted things to be perfect: a first date, a dinner engagement, an elegant gathering, our steaks grilled to perfection. I remember a time when the whole huge family gathered at my grandmother’s house. My grandfather and some of the men in the family had gone out to pick morel mushrooms. When they brought their slim picking to my grandmother that morning she let me sit by her and watch as she prepared those delicacies for the frying pan. Then I watched as she carefully laid each one in the pan and the sound of crisp frying was heard. I knew that I would not get one. There were far too many adults that deserved them more, especially the pickers. The children were low on the totem pole when it came to morels. I had never had one before, nor did I hold out hope that I would get one then. But a miracle happened when those mushrooms came out of the frying pan. My grandmother had gotten a little plate and placed one of them on it. And guess where she put that small plate. My eyes must have shot open and my mouth oh’d in disbelief. There, right in front of me was the most delicious looking thing I have ever seen. I had to make this moment perfect. So risking that it would disappear if I walked away, I quickly ran over to the sink, washed my hands and scurried back to that tiny plate holding its treasure. My grandmother, bless her hard working heart had kept it safe for me. I painstakingly began to cut my morel with a knife, poked the fork into it and lifted it toward my mouth. I wanted to savor that moment of morel entering mouth, touching tongue, flavor bursting. And I was not disappointed. I had never tasted such an incredible flavor before. The moment was perfect. I had cherished the moment to perfection. The Morel was given its proper final demise. It was one of the most perfect moments of my young life.

The women at Jesus’ burial wanted his death to be wrapped up in perfection. They knew his goodness and although they may not have fully known his complete identity they knew he deserved better than how he had been treated that day. Perfection meant doing all things in accordance with the laws of God, including honoring the Sabbath. So they left his body until the third day after the Sabbath to anoint him properly and give him an honorable burial. As much as he was dishonored in life, that much more was he honored in death.

By following God’s ways, the women gave God the chance to do His greatest act in human history. The women rested in accordance with the Sabbath, in keeping with one of the 10 commandments of Moses’ laws from God. Jesus’ burial was not completed! If Jesus had been anointed before the Sabbath, there would not have been an excuse to revisit the tomb and find it empty. If Jesus had appeared later to his disciples, he may have been deemed a ghost or a spirit. But he appeared to them in the flesh, eating and drinking with them. They knew he was truly risen because, in part, they knew that his body was no longer in the tomb. The miracle of Jesus lies in the fact that the tomb was empty, that Jesus had physically risen from death.

I wonder sometimes if there wasn’t the same type of thinking going on in the minds of the chief priests. Perhaps they planned their arrest knowing that the Sabbath was coming. If all things happened with timing perhaps there would be no loud outcry from the crowd about the injustice that was being done. The people would not have time to protest because the Sabbath was a day of rest. Any outcry would have to wait until the Sabbath was over. A day between the dirty deed and any action that could be taken against the chief priests would go a long way in quelling any unrest. But it also gave the opportunity for a miracle to take place. It gave the opportunity for those who were deeply saddened and pained to discover what God had done, to have sadness turn to joy. The women knew what was honorable for Jesus. But God knew what was best.

Our lives are filled with ups and downs and we cope in the best ways we know how. The women could have pushed the Sabbath keeping and violated their law because they did not want Jesus’ body to go unprepared for burial. But they chose to do the right thing based on their desire to follow God’s laws.

When I stop and think about it, my perfect moment as a child was because I had done what I was supposed to have done. I wanted to watch my grandmother cook, so I found a place in the kitchen where I would not be in the way. I hovered safely away from the stove. I did not do anything to get yelled at or to be told go away. My only comment was, “Mmmmm, that smells so good.” In my eyes I was a perfect little girl. I knew what the rules were, mostly. As Christians we know what the expectations are *mostly.* We try to follow God’s ways as we have come to know them through our faith, through what we learn on Sunday mornings, by listening to others, by reading scripture, by praying, by attending Sunday School and by our upbringings. It is through our efforts guided by faith that God is able to do great little things that do help shape the world in ways we cannot often see.

We may try to be perfect in our faith, but stuff gets in the way. A little lie here, an unkind word there, a skipped morning devotion, a wanting to do things our way and not God’s, all are symptoms of our sinful ways. But the women of faith surrounding Jesus did not give in to making Jesus’ burial less than perfect. They stuck to the laws of God and Joseph of Arimathea managed to get the clean tomb, to honor Jesus in death. Because of his position, he knew the laws of Moses as well as anyone. These people of faith made sure that Jesus’ death was befitting a good and righteous man. But they were not perfect people. Joseph came to Jesus in secret fearing the other members of the council and what they would think. The women probably lived lives similar to ours, being good and righteous at times and committing little sins at other times. We often caught in a dilemma about how to do life. We may often get it right, but then slip a little as we set God aside to try to make sure things turn out the way we want them to.

Jesus knew what our tendencies are. He knew that we were not perfect, that sin was always just around the corner, that sin could block us from our relationship with our Creator. And I think that is what was at the heart of his decision to sacrifice himself. His love for humanity was so great that he wanted to provide a great gift to all of us. He took the worst that humans could do, kill an innocent man, and wrapped it up in supreme forgiveness, “Father, forgive them..” he said. He demonstrated love in its fullest capacity. The sacrifice would have gone unnoticed except for one event that literally changed the world. He defeated death itself, the ultimate distance from God. He showed that even death could no longer separate us from our Creator. In fact death became identified as the ultimate step toward God and being held in perfection in God’s love.

In the light of forgiveness and the fear of death extinguished we can live our imperfect lives knowing they will be perfected. We can commit sin and know that they are already forgiven when we take our stand with Jesus. Does that mean we can do anything we want? Of course not! The better we understand ourselves as forgiven and loved, the more we want to do what God wants us to do. It is that return of love that drives our thoughts and actions. When we feel we have failed, have committed sin, we know the forgiveness that is available through Jesus’ sacrifice. Then we can respond by asking for and receiving what God offers in forgiveness.

All too often though, we hang on to our guilt about the little sins we commit. We may not truly believe that we can be forgiven. But I am here to tell you on this Palm Sunday that forgiveness is there for the asking and receiving. No sin is too big for God, but it takes letting go and receiving His forgiveness and moving forward in life. It takes action on our part. Jesus has already said the words, “Father, forgive them…” Do we believe those words were just a one time occurrence. If we do then Jesus’ sacrifice means nothing. Jesus took on all our sin, showed us a new way of thinking about it and a new way of dealing with it. Every time we crucify Jesus through our actions, we must believe the rest of the story. “Father, forgive them…” becomes our words of grace. As John Wesley puts it, we are moving on to perfection, but we are not quite there yet.

Isn’t it time we let go of the sins were carry with us in our conscious and believe that Jesus takes care of it so we don’t have to be distanced from our creator. Isn’t it time we believe and accept the core of our faith.