

Ready or not: Matthew 27:55-61

by [Suzanne Guthrie](#) in the [March 8, 2005](#) issue

I once lived in a village in Germany that lay at the foot of a mountain covered in deep forest. A narrow farm separated the houses from the forest, and a cemetery occupied a piece of land part way up the mountain.

Sometimes on my daily walks I stopped at the cemetery. It was the busiest place in town. The steep slope never deterred the widows who busied themselves there in a kind of competitive grave-keeping. Their plantings changed with the seasons: early primroses and pansies, spring bulbs, summer annuals, fall displays of berries and chrysanthemums, winter pots crammed with pine branches and the well-placed artificial but discreet hellebore blossom. No weed dared grow near the cemetery. As the last snowflake dribbled down from each storm, the widows arrived with brooms to sweep the granite and marble and limestone clean; they carried buckets and brushes to scrub their family gravestones and marble slabs.

This last custom was the most puzzling to me. I felt vaguely hostile toward the dead in all that ferocious cleaning. I remembered the cemeteries of my childhood, which were most beautiful in winter, blanketed with snow like a down comforter; silent, spotless havens where the dead may rest in peace. In my mind, I connect the sleeping snowy cemetery to the burial and entombment of Jesus. Joseph of Arimathea and the women have left for the sabbath day. "On the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment" (Luke 23:56b). The admonition to live one day a week, as if in paradise restored and paradise to come, extends even to the grieving. The faithful practice hope even in despair. Even the dead rest on the sabbath. Christians practice this most silent, sacred sabbath on Holy Saturday.

During years of parish ministry I've often felt at odds with the good people who come on Holy Saturday in work parties to scrub and clean, wax the floors, rake the grounds, trim the bushes outside and perform the minor repairs after winter. They polish the brass and silver, iron the altar linens and prepare to relight the sanctuary lights. Quick! How anxious the crew is to get those Easter lilies out into the sanctuary so that all can get home to prepare their own homes and tables for the Easter feast.

All those chores need to be done, but in my soul I want to give the church a time to rest, to stay barren, with the tabernacle open and empty, the sanctuary stripped of all decoration, and the building quiet with no sense of that electric spark that dances in the atmosphere during worship. After the extreme emotion of Friday's liturgy, silence is necessary, like the silence in the house after a funeral when the guests have left, and you no longer have to keep a brave face.

I also secretly object to the Garden of Repose in the small chapel—why flowers? Why a *garden* for the anguish of Gethsemane, the arrest, the torture, the trial, the flogging, Peter in the courtyard, the horrible hours of the night and the early morning, the obscene events of the next day? “Wait with me one hour.” How *nice*—and how strange—to wait surrounded by flowers.

Neither do I like to think about the harrowing of hell—at least on Holy Saturday. It's a fine and even biblical idea, but I don't like to think of Jesus being so busy between his death and the manifestation of his resurrection. Let him lie for a while in solidarity with the dead, just as he suffered in solidarity with the living.

I realize now the cause of my irritation with the busy-ness of Holy Saturday. The day after Good Friday has particular holiness and poignancy to me. For many years of my life, the time span between the death of Jesus and the morning of the resurrection was the one day of the Christian calendar that I understood and practiced devotionally. I eventually embraced the other seasons and feasts and fasts of the church year with similar reverence. But Holy Saturday was the first day that matched the state of my soul. Instinctively, I “got it.”

The incarnation and the resurrection require athletic leaps of faith. Christians don't just sit down and decide to believe in the mysteries. Yes, we find ourselves drawn to Jesus' teaching, ministry, death—and yes, to the resurrection and ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit. Something here seems deeply true in nonrational ways. But some of us need a great commitment of time and practice and learning before this consciousness becomes part of our inner landscape.

And I suspect many people live their spiritual lives in this threshold of silence before the resurrection. Frankly, I trust the skeptic more than the happy “Blessed . . . who have not seen and yet believe,” as the resurrected Jesus said to Thomas. Let the people come through this silent door. Let them come into the sanctuary of empty presence and foolish hope. Keep the Easter lilies locked in the sacristy until an

appropriate time of mourning is past. Keep holy the sabbath day.

The holiness of this day intensifies for me over the years. Now, I hold in my hand the secret key that once opened the treasure of sacred time. Holy Saturday is the measurement of my lifetime's desire to believe in the resurrection of Jesus. Once a year I take the time to contemplate the event that took place in the tomb of my heart, while in the hidden darkness over years of sabbaths, that heart of stone turned to a heart of flesh.