

Good Friday 2010

Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12  
Psalm 22:1-21  
Hebrews 4:14-16, 5:7-9  
John 18:1 – 19:42

It is over.  
He is dead.

Once again,  
Like so many before us,  
We can enter this story,  
If we will.

We have stood on the streets of Jerusalem  
And shouted with the crowd,  
We have entered the upper room  
And washed each others' feet.  
Now it is time to climb the high hill,  
Where the cross stands against the sky.

It is all over,  
And he is dead.  
The crowd has gone away.  
Just a few friends remain at the foot of the cross,  
a ragged group,  
Three or four women  
And a young man.

But now another man is coming,  
A big man.  
Rich, important, well-known,  
Ready with a letter of permission  
To take away the body.  
Joseph of Arimathea has come to join the mourners.

And now, another man,  
A Pharisee,

With servants bringing bundles and boxes.  
Nicodemus has come;  
Though a place of death  
Will make him unclean,  
He too wants to honor Jesus  
And tend his body.

You can join them now,  
If you are not afraid,  
As they climb the rocky ground  
Towards the awful place  
That is the center of the world.

It is quiet.  
A few crows,  
And the sound of weeping,  
And the wind blowing,  
But that is all.

These people have never met before,  
The rich man  
And the Pharisee  
And the disciples of the dead man,  
His mother among them.  
They have never met before,  
But they have come here,  
As have we,  
For only one thing,  
To do what we can  
For love of the one who did everything for us.

They take him down,  
Handling him with as much care as they can.  
It is a difficult job,  
Hard to figure out what to do first,  
How to keep from hurting him even more.  
It makes no sense,  
They tell themselves,

It does not matter so much now,  
But it breaks their hearts to have to do it.

They lay him down  
On the rocky ground,  
And for a few moments they just hold him.  
One touches his cheek.  
Another strokes his hand.  
His mother takes him in her arms.

Then, after a while,  
They pick him up,  
Cradling him in their arms,  
And they carry him away,  
Not too far,  
To the place Joseph shows them.

Nicodemus has brought much of what they need.  
They anoint his body now for real,  
No sign or symbol this time,  
but simple human care.

The women do their last piece of women's work.  
They take up the linen cloth  
They have woven.  
One last time,  
They touch his face and hold his hands.

His mother remembers  
the first time she held him,  
and wrapped him in linen cloth.

Nicodemus remembers the darkness of a city street,  
The knock,  
The crack of light at the opened door,  
And the hand of Jesus drawing him in  
To a world of meaning  
So completely changed

It was as if he had been born all over again.

Mary of Magdala remembers  
Those hands laid on her head,  
Quieting all the clamor within,  
Opening the prison and setting her free.

The young man who loves him,  
The disciple John,  
Holds his broken hands.  
He remembers how just last night,  
Jesus took bread in these very hands,  
Blessed it,  
Broke it and offered it to him.  
My body, he had said.  
I give it for you.

Now they take the cloth  
And wrap him securely,  
Head and hands and feet,  
And then his whole body,  
Round and round.  
All is done,  
But it is hard to go away and leave him.

For a little while  
They linger.  
Though they hold him in their arms,  
They still cannot believe  
That he is here, like this.

The image of him  
With his arms stretched out across the sky  
Is branded on their minds.  
Will that image last forever?

I don't understand,  
Says one.

Why did this have to happen?  
He did not deserve this.  
What did he do?

What did he do?  
All I know,  
Says Mary of Magdala,  
Is that I was trapped inside myself,  
And he set me free.

All I know,  
Says Nicodemus,  
Is that I lived in a world  
Where I had all the answers,  
And it didn't mean a thing.  
He showed me how to see it new again.

All I know,  
Says John, the young man who loves him,  
Is that he promised us  
That if we looked at him,  
We would see what God is like.

Is God like this? someone passing by might ask.  
Can you look at this and see God?  
You might look at the cross where this man died,  
and see nothing but punishment,  
Payment, an awful price.

You might see that, and say that, but  
You might see it and say it another way.

And so, as they stand at the foot of the cross,  
They offer their different ways of seeing.

You might say, says John,  
this is what love looks like,  
The love that is who God is.

On the cross,  
Love offers everything,  
Freedom, meaning,  
Acceptance, forgiveness,  
Loves does everything,  
Heals, renews,  
Brings joy.

Love on the cross will do everything –  
Everything except one thing.  
It will not meet force with force  
And become what it is not.

All the powers of the world,  
Brute force and fear and the will to win,  
Will roll over love  
And crush it under their wheels,  
But they cannot kill love,  
If it keeps on loving.

Jesus holds on to love.  
The bosses can rough him up,  
The thought police can interrogate him,  
The Romans can nail him to the cross,  
But Jesus holds on to love.

So when you look at the cross,  
You see love in all its pain,  
All its heartbreak,  
All its longing.  
You see God.  
That's one perspective,  
Says John, as he stands at the foot of the cross.

And I might say,  
says one of the women  
Who has been silent,

I might say  
That when you see this cross,  
You see all the broken pieces of the world,  
All the women and children and men  
We use and throw away,  
All the tribes and nations  
We starve and try to wipe out,  
All the hillsides we tear open  
And leave to die,  
You see all the broken pieces  
Held together while love  
waits for justice.  
Yes, God is like this –  
Or that's another way to see it.

And I might say,  
Now it's Nicodemus speaking,  
When you see this love  
At the center of the world  
It gives you something to steer by,  
A compass to guide you  
When the way is dark.  
Yes, God is like this.  
Or that's another way to see it.

Some passersby stop to listen,  
And shake their heads,  
Wondering at the mystery of it all.  
Perhaps we are among them.  
Perhaps we stay,  
Because we know is that it is not over after all.

We place his body in the tomb,  
Then we look back up  
At that awful place.  
It is still the center of the world,  
Because he is still waiting there,  
Arms stretched wide to circle the world,

Lifted up so all can see, someday.

He will not make us see.  
He knows we cannot see until we are ready.

Until we see at the cross  
All the wounded we have sacrificed to war,  
All the helpless victims  
We have used and thrown away,  
All the lost and lonely  
Whose lives mean nothing to them,  
All those so consumed by guilt  
It seems nothing can take it away,  
All those held so fast  
In the grip of things beyond their control  
It seems nothing they can ever do  
Will get them free,  
All those so adrift  
In a life without meaning  
It seems nothing  
Will ever hold them fast,  
Until we see them  
And love them as we try to love him,  
He will wait.

Because we are not ready yet to love the way he loves,  
He waits.

He waits here,  
Nailed to the center of the world,  
Loving us beyond what we can know or tell,  
Calling us,  
Gathering us,  
Offering us freedom and forgiveness,  
Meaning and peace.  
He waits,  
And he will keep on waiting,  
For as long as it takes.

It is not over yet.