



**Sermon by the Right Reverend John R Stephens**  
**Good Friday 2021**  
**The Celebration of Our Lord's Passion**  
**John 18.1—19.42**

They laid Jesus there. Those were the final words of the passion narrative from St. John's Gospel that we heard just a few moments ago. And really for the most part I just want to sit in silence with those words for quite a while. While all the busyness of the world is happening all around us, even in this pandemic, I just want to sit with those words, "They laid Jesus there." Not just for the words themselves but for all that they mean to us who are meditating on the pilgrimage of Jesus and ourselves through this entire Holy Week and leading to Sunday. I really just want to sit with those words and let them disturb me and consider much more carefully what they might suggest. The limp figure of Jesus, the life cruelly torn from him, the body of Jesus wrapped in linen with myrrh and aloes provided by Nicodemus. That body left in that tomb, expectant of nothing more. That corpse left, left as a sign of an end and of cruelty. Silence seems the only response for words only clutter the image. Silence filled with anger and outrage. Silence filled with grief and an aching for more. Silence filled with sentiments of futility and emptiness and spiritual distance. Silence as they walked away from that tomb long ago after they laid Jesus there.

(Silence)

I want this silence, even crave this silence for words simply cannot suffice. Words of explanation or words of clarification or words of placation seem empty and problematic. Words on this day that offer thoughts on the purpose and the principle behind it all seem unimportant and noisy. Words trying to wallpaper over the deep chasm that seems to have formed between God and us. Silence seems much more important to consider those final words of the story of Good Friday. Silence to consider the betrayal, the trial, the crucifixion, the death of Jesus. Silence to contemplate the horrific details of the excruciating death of our saviour and friend. Silence to see that the God of all that we see and know, the God of

presence and Spirit, the God of creation and life, the God of love and peace and blessing and grace, this God was tortured and killed and laid in a tomb. And those who took responsibility of his body, after they laid it down in its resting place, could walk away knowing those feelings that are familiar to us who continue to walk on this earth; feelings of emptiness and grief and deep loneliness that stayed with them despite wanting them to disappear.

Silence is the only response to wonder how God is working in this. To consider how God continues to work in us. Silence to let other words flood in to continue to deepen our consideration and spiritual wrestling, like the final three words that Jesus spoke from the cross. It is finished. They are words that sink into our hearts, our souls, our thinking, our meditation. More words to knock us off our comfortable place and invite us to go deeper into our calling, our purpose, our response to God. It is finished he said in agony and seeming conclusion. While we might know that this is not the real conclusion for this day, stay in the silence and feel the sense of conclusion known to those who wrapped the body. Don't rush ahead to a vigil or the liturgy on Sunday, we need to stay here a while, to spend time with the angst and the emptiness and the grief of this day. We need to stay with it to recognize the link with our own feelings of emptiness, grief and separation from all others. Stay with that silence.

(Silence)

A few years ago, back when we were able to travel beyond the restrictions of this pandemic, my wife and I were in Auschwitz. This is a place that needs no other explanation, it carries with it, its own weight of holocaust and horror. We were there and we joined with thousands of others who took a tour. It felt odd to be doing this. In some ways I would have preferred to be almost anywhere else. To ignore it might be easier for it is one of those places that causes us to question the depths of depravity that we human beings can reach. It seemed easier to pretend it did not exist and to only consider the joys of this world, the sunshine and warm days and not the darkness, the evil, the hatred of one for another. For to confront this involves confronting one's self. To dig deeper into what motivates and twists and turns God's hope for us and all people. To explore who we really are and how we really live. To look more closely at who we are and how we err and stray from what we truly want for this world and our own lives. It is disturbing.

But I could not stay away and so I found myself at Auschwitz underneath those gates of mocking cruelty, translated as "work makes you free." Words that in many ways still echo the world as we still assume that we can be cruel and villainous to one another and pretend that work is what sets us free rather than our compassion, a sense of equality, a sense of holiness, a sense of recognizing the image of God in all people. It is a cruel joke that we still have not moved far away from as we still hold it up despite continuing to torture, vilify and shatter one another.

Back to Auschwitz. We were there on this day and there were many things that struck us: thousands of empty suitcases of people hoping for a better life, eyeglasses collected from those who were murdered, shoes (millions of them it seemed) of those who would not walk free from this place. So many things that stayed in our thinking and conscience long after we left, like a strange glue or dark secret, but the one that still haunts me most is the silence. The silence as we walked from place to place. The silence. There seemed to be no birdsong, no traffic noise, no children calling out. Silence even though hundreds of people were there but the only response to the gas chambers, the railway, the living conditions, the pictures, the

images, the children, the adults, the prison garb, the murder... was silence. To not try to fill our heads with words and weak explanations and insincere apologies but simply to be silent and let it all sink in. Let it sink in so that this could never happen again. Let it sink in so that when we continue to see violence and cruelty and division and hatred and blaming in our time that we might stand up and respond. And there is much that takes place today that links to the violence of places like Auschwitz like the local stabbings in North Vancouver, the violence against women particularly in this pandemic, drug overdoses, homelessness, the highway of tears, the climate emergency, racism and white supremacy, the gap between rich and poor... I could go on for a while and still not cover all the concerns, the darkness, the evil. But in that same silence bring them to mind and wonder how we might be ones who recognize that God is calling us to something so much more.

That silence needs to continue to stay with us. Perhaps even more so today, Good Friday as I think more carefully about those final words of the passion reading on this day: They laid Jesus there.

May those words not be our final words on this day or any day. It is not over, we know that it is not over. But it is only by reflecting and considering can we see that they are the words of challenge for us Christians. We need to spend time on this Good Friday for them to affect us and challenge us. For them to cause us to see that indeed God is calling us to more. We will walk through grief, we will walk through cruelty, we will walk through hatred and murder and violence and destruction. And we are called not to simply sit by and feel that this is just the way it is. But we are called to see that they laid Jesus there so that indeed more could take place.

On this Good Friday, what is the more to take place that God is inviting you to consider in the silence of this day? What is the more that God is calling for your response? Where are you to recognize your grief, your loneliness, your witness to hate and division? Where are you to see that as they laid Jesus down in that tomb there are things that you are called to lay down so that one day soon you too can be raised up.