

SEQUOYAH HILLS  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

**“Rest in Restless Times”**

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**Luke 23:44-56**

April 2, 2023

If you’ve been with us throughout this Lenten season, you’ll remember we’ve been focusing on a particular discipline: the Sabbath, or Sabbath rest in the Lord. I hope that this journey has been one that you have embraced, an invitation to stop, to listen, and to share how God invites you into his rest.

Today, we wrap up that series, and as we look today at the cross of Christ, we consider how in the death and sacrifice of the Lord, we no longer have reason, in the sight of God, to prove anything anymore. And sometimes in the face of that sacrifice, as well as in the face of all the cruelty that surrounded his death, the only thing we can do is step back for a moment. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

*<sup>44</sup> It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, <sup>45</sup> while the sun’s light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. <sup>46</sup> Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.’ Having said this, he breathed his last. <sup>47</sup> When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, ‘Certainly this man was innocent.’ <sup>48</sup> And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts. <sup>49</sup> But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.*

*<sup>50</sup> Now there was a good and righteous man named Joseph, who, though a member of the council, <sup>51</sup> had not agreed to their plan and action. He came from the Jewish town of Arimathea, and he was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God. <sup>52</sup> This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. <sup>53</sup> Then he took it down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid. <sup>54</sup> It was the day of Preparation, and the sabbath was beginning. <sup>55</sup> The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid. <sup>56</sup> Then they returned, and prepared spices and ointments.*

*On the sabbath they rested according to the commandment.*

[Luke 23:44-56]

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me?

Almighty God, we come to you humbled, even horrified, at the death you suffered for our sake. Lord, we pray that on this day upon which we acknowledge our own fickleness, our own

need for a savior, that your grace would sustain us. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

It's a part of the crucifixion story that I'd dare say often gets overlooked, what with all the drama surrounding it. The betrayal the night before, the sham trial, the fickle crowd, the beatings, the whippings, the crucifixion itself, the darkness in the daytime, the temple curtain tearing in two, the cry from the cross, culminating in the death of the one who was and is the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God, God himself really. Sometimes lost in the shuffle of all those powerful, even disturbing instances is this quiet addendum that all four Gospels include: that Christ was killed the day before, really just within the few hours before, the Jewish Sabbath.

What would this mean? That the next day was the Sabbath, and the day after that being the day Christ rose from the dead. (And for those keeping score, you might think, "Hey, that's only two days. I thought Jesus rose on the third day." Fair point. Short version, as commonly counted then, the day of the crucifixion would have been considered day one.) But the Gospels make sure we know that Christ died the day before the Sabbath.

Well it explains a few things. First it explains why they had to hurry to bury Jesus in a nearby tomb, rather than take him elsewhere. They simply didn't have time before sundown, that is, the beginning of the Sabbath. It also explains why the women who came to the tomb two days later wouldn't have come the very next day. Normally you'd come to anoint the body with oils and spices, and do so sooner than later, but they couldn't the next day because that was the Sabbath.

So some practical reasons why the Gospels make sure to tell us this.

But only Luke includes this little note that says in v. 56, "On the sabbath day they rested according to the commandment." The rest don't say that. Implied probably, but only Luke comes out and says it.

I wonder what that day must have felt like. The shock and horror of the day before, of seeing their teacher, their friend, the one they thought was the Messiah, crucified, but then the unsettling quiet of a Sabbath day, a day when truly you couldn't, shouldn't do anything. Tears, I'm sure. Still in shock, I would only assume. I wonder if it would've felt something like the day after a memorial service. If you've been through this, maybe you know what I'm talking about. If you've lost a loved one and were involved in planning a service for them, you know it can be a bit of whirlwind tending to everything between their death and the service, to the point that it can feel like you don't even have time to *feel* anything. But then the service comes, and then there's the next day, and for many, *that's* when the reality of the loss really sets in.

I wonder if it was something like that.

This whole series we've been talking about the Sabbath as a discipline, yes, but more so as a gift—the *gift* of rest, the *gift* of rest in the Lord. But I wonder how much of a gift that day would have felt like.

Sometimes there's nothing left to do but step back. When everything is confusing, heartbreaking, even infuriating, sometimes there's nothing left to do but step back.

I know many of you were shocked and saddened, as I was, by the shooting this past week in Nashville at Covenant School. Sadly the notion of school shootings or mass shootings are all too frequent in the headlines, but this one struck I think hit a nerve for many of us. Just a few hours away in Nashville. At a school at a Presbyterian church. Any number of connections between our congregation and that one.

For me, it was a church just a couple of miles from where I grew up. My grandfather lives just across the street. And maybe the most gut wrenching: as many of you already know, one of the children who was killed was the daughter of the pastor of that church. And I think about this. I don't know that pastor personally, and I don't know what he's doing this morning, but may the Lord's strength be upon that man.

Last week, the day after, I spoke briefly with Robin Wilhoit. Many of you know Robin, a member of our church. Others know *of* Robin, just through her work with WBIR. I asked her permission to share this. She was asking what I knew at the time of what churches were doing, but then she shared the shock, the sadness, even the anger she felt at this sort of thing happening *again*, but then having to balance that shock, that sadness, that anger with her responsibility as a journalist to report. To report, when she was at a loss for words.

No doubt others felt something similar. Shock. Sadness. Even anger. At a loss for words. Maybe like the women in Luke, the day after Christ was crucified.

Can rest be a gift when it feels like there's nothing else you can do?

Part of the faith that we share, and more specifically, embedded in this invitation to rest, to embrace the Sabbath, is this acknowledgment that it doesn't all depend on us. We are not in control. We do not have the answers. The professions of faith that our Confirmands made this morning don't say, "Well, I've got this all figured out now." They instead say, "My trust is in the one who does, in the one who took upon himself the cruelty and sin of the world and said, 'It is finished.'" And in that faith, we can in fact rest when it feels like there's nothing else you can do. We can in fact rest, for a day.

I've found it compelling that a psalm that has been commonly cited this past week has been the psalm we read earlier, Psalm 34. It's a powerful psalm of God's faithfulness in hardship, with perhaps the most known verse being v. 18: "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the

crushed in spirit.” We can surely rest in that hope: that the Lord is near to us when we are crushed, that the Lord has endured the turn from Palm Sunday, to betrayal, to the cross, to death, that the Lord knows the pain of losing a child. We can surely rest, for a day.

But then it’s perhaps just as compelling that just a few verses earlier in that same psalm, v. 14 says, “Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it.” *Seek* peace, and *pursue* it. I think often we consider peace as something that’s just quiet and passive, even as just the absence of conflict or violence. Doesn’t seem to be talking about peace that way. *Seek* peace, and *pursue* it.

We can surely rest, for a day, but then let us *seek* peace, and *pursue* it. Because after all, the women who rested the day after the cross didn’t just stay there. The day after, they came back. No doubt still in shock, still in sadness, maybe still in anger. But they got back up, came to the tomb, and what peace they would find there.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.