

AFTER THE SABBATH
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

“After the Sabbath,” our scripture says, “as the first light of the new week dawned, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to keep vigil at the tomb.”

This is how the story of Resurrection begins, according to the Gospel of Matthew. Not with trumpets welcoming the worshipping throng into the soaring cathedral on Easter Sunday morning. Not with bonnets and bunnies. But with a day of rest, after a time of trauma. And a vigil. And two women tiptoeing through the dark night into the first light of hope.

We, too, have been tiptoeing through this dark night of the novel coronavirus, in a time of trauma. One full month since the SPC session suspended in-person activities. One full month of watching and waiting. One full month of hoping beyond hope that the tide will soon turn. That the curve will finally flatten. That the promise will once again ring true:

Christ Is Risen! Christ Is Risen, Indeed!

The question for us, this year, as we huddle in our homes like those first century disciples of Jesus, is whether or not our Easter Sunday really does begin with those words from Matthew’s Gospel: “after the Sabbath ...”

It is a throwaway clause in most readings of the resurrection, this “after the Sabbath” in Matthew’s Gospel; this “when the sabbath was over” according to Mark; this “on the sabbath they rested” according to Luke. In most readings of the resurrection this introductory clause merely marks the passage of time between Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

But this year, at least for me, the introductory clause may very well be the entire point. “After the Sabbath,” “when the sabbath was over,” “on the sabbath they rested” assumes, by the time we get to Easter, that there has been a Sabbath!

Sabbath is *everything* in first century Judaism. The earliest recipients of the resurrection message would know that. Sabbath is THE holy day according to some interpretations of Jewish law: instituted by God as an act of creation; a perpetual covenant required by the fourth commandment in the exodus from Egypt; a foretaste of the messianic age to come according to the prophets. Observed for millennia in unbroken continuity ...

“More than Jews have kept the Sabbath,” the saying goes, “the Sabbath has kept the Jews.”

The word *Sabbath*, from the Hebrew *Shabbat*, means “to cease from work.” Not just in the passive form of “not-working” or “resting” but also an active withdrawal of labor in order to make a point about abuses that might be associated with that labor: as in a labor strike.

Shabbat – THE holy day in most understandings of Judaism – is, in its most profound sense, an emphatic Divine “NO.”

No, God says, in the Sabbath of creation, I will NOT demand more of this earth than the earth has to give. And so I will withdraw my labor on this day. And let the creation be as it is, in all of its beauty and all of its wonder.

No, God says, in the Sabbath of liberation, I will NOT allow my people to bear the weight of economic exploitation in service of the world’s empires. And so I will withdraw their labor on this day, and trust my providence to provide for them in the wilderness, in all of its inconceivable and remarkable simplicity.

No, God says, in the Sabbath of the age to come, I will NOT abandon my creation to the worst that is in them. And so I will withdraw the very labor of life on this day, in order to beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. And re-create the entire world in a new occupation of knowing God and comprehending the Creator's wisdom.

This "Sabbath of the age to come" became the message of Jesus throughout his ministry. "The coming of the kingdom of God," he called it. "Change your way of life," he admonished the people, so you can be part of it, too.

And then he died. And hope was gone. "And on the Sabbath ... they rested."

So here we are two thousand years later. Huddled in our homes like those first century disciples of the Jesus who proclaimed the Sabbath of the age to come. And the question is, for us, does our Easter Sunday begin with those words from Matthew's Gospel: "after the Sabbath ..."?

Have we heard, again and again in this season of staying home to save lives, in the gift of this COVID-enforced Sabbath, the Divine NO of our God, refusing to demand more of this earth than the earth has to give? Have we heard the Divine NO of our God, in the gift of this Sabbath, refusing to sacrifice the least of these in our workforce for the sake of the Holy Dollar? Have we heard the Divine NO of our God, in the gift of this Sabbath, refusing to lend one more theological merit to religion at its worst rather than to saving love at its best?

If we have not, if the Divine NO is not yet resounding through our collective global consciousness, then maybe we are not ready for resurrection.

What, then, shall we do?

NO is a hard word for some of us, for most of us, so perhaps it is time to focus on the embedded Divine YES that also comes with Sabbath:

YES, our God says, in the gift of this COVID-enforced Sabbath, we may study Sacred Scripture in its many forms and come to a deeper understanding of the real purpose of human existence: which is to glorify God and enjoy God forever. YES, our God says, in the gift of this Sabbath, we may pray and sing together on all our various technologies, with "virtual dinner parties" and birthdays and other online gatherings, which is the second purpose of human existence: to love our neighbor as ourselves. YES, our God says, in the gift of this Sabbath, we may declare a Debt Jubilee and cancel all debt anywhere just like the biblical Sabbath of Sabbaths requires; and redistribute our wealth toward those who do not have enough to eat or pay the mortgage; and repair the breach of racism brought so vividly to light by this vicious virus. YES, our God says, in the gift of this Sabbath, we may make love to our spouses and plant seeds in the fresh Spring soil and celebrate the life abundant that even today still comes from God.

And when we have done those things, when we have fully embraced the embedded Divine YES that comes within the Divine NO of this COVID-enforced Sabbath, I kid you not, the earth WILL "reel and rock" under our feet, just like it did on that early Easter morning for Mary Magdalene and the other Mary. And God's angel will come down from heaven, with shafts of lightning blazing, and garments shimmering snow-white ...

And the angel will say, "There is nothing to fear here."

And we will fall to the ground, deep in wonder and full of joy, knowing deep in our bones what we are brave enough to shout from the rooftops:

Christ Is Risen! Christ Is Risen, Indeed!