

Words From the Grave

I remember that night by the fire. A few friends and I had gathered with a wealthy acquaintance at his estate perched atop a hill on the edge of the city. We lounged on a wide patio overlooking the rolling hills dotted with vineyards and pastures. As the sun went down, we circled around a fire pit beneath the stars. Though the night was dark and cold, I felt a warmth in my chest like that feeling you get when you're wrapped up with a blanket in a cozy spot. The fire brought light and comfort while we sat around it, basking in one another's company. As the conversation ebbed and flowed, I found myself captivated by the flickering light of the fire reflecting off Mary's soft cheek. I smiled at her, our eyes met, and she smiled back as we chatted and laughed with our friends, sipping on glasses of wine. I loved her. It wasn't a romantic love - it was something deeper and purer than that. It was a love I felt for all my friends that night. All I wanted in the world was to just be with them. The simple state of peaceful presence with them was pure bliss. And that is what made it so hard for me to say what I said next. I hadn't planned to say anything, but the warm friendship of that night and Mary's sweet smile somehow compelled me to spill a painful secret. I looked at them all and told them the truth - that I was dying. I didn't have long left to live, and at this point there was nothing anybody could do to stop that day from coming. But I told them to have hope, because really, death isn't the end of the story.

Do you remember how my friends reacted to the news? Most of them struggled to process the truth of what I had said. The following weeks proved how they were unable to cope with the news. They refused to address it, as if they had put it out of their minds in order to protect their own emotions. I recognized it as denial. I would catch them speaking about me as if I would still be around in the future. Most of them seemed to be pretending that things would turn out just fine - that I wasn't really going to die at all. I understood why they reacted the way they did. They too loved me and they didn't want to lose me. So they distanced themselves from the truth in order to cope, because the unvarnished truth was more than they could bear. But I wondered, how deeply did they really love me? Doesn't true love mean accepting and embracing the truth? Wasn't their love for me tainted in some small way by their own selfish desires to hold on to me?

In the end, none of the denial could delay the inevitable. Death came to me, and it was neither swift nor painless nor graceful. It wasn't a quiet death in bed surrounded by friends and family. It was traumatic, it was ugly, and my friends who saw it felt not hope but pure horror. And then, I remember, I sank down into the earth, down through the dirt, down beneath the bedrock, into a dimly lit cavern, onto this tiny bit of black rock jutting out from an endless sea of dark, still water. The horizon was an infinite span of nothingness, just black water stretching forever beneath a low featureless ceiling just above my hand's reach. The ceiling pressing in made me feel trapped, constricted, while the great sea surrounding me on all sides made my world one of vast emptiness. I was separated from all of humanity and nature and everything

good. I was completely, utterly, unfathomably alone. But that is why I came to this empty place - to be alone yet remain unconsumed by it, so its power could hold no sway over me. So my friends would never have to come to this place. I came to experience it so they would never have to feel such great depths of loneliness.

For I know my friends knew the deep loneliness of loss when I left them. That night they sat together yet alone, huddled by their cold, dim fires. Their dreams for a bright future lay crushed like my body. So, abandoned by hope, they retreated into themselves. It breaks my heart to leave them in such depths of loneliness. I'm sorry. I'm sorry I had to leave them in that state. And I'm sorry that you must also sit from time to time by that lonely fire, for you too know deep, deep loneliness.

You have become adept at hiding it. You might not even recognize how the loneliness lurks beneath the surface. Maybe it comes when you least expect it, crashing upon you when you step out into a dark night or hear a sad familiar song. Or maybe you feel it coming with every step, fighting it, denying it, until you can't keep it at bay any longer. Maybe if someone understood, even someone close like your wife or your husband really understood it, then it would be better. But they don't, so you resign yourself to bearing that feeling of isolation all alone, all by yourself. Does God understand it, sitting high up in His tower on a gleaming throne? I do, for I am loneliness. For my throne was that black rock in the forgotten place beneath the earth. I sat there to know your loneliness more deeply than even you could know it. I embraced it so I might walk with you in its depths.

Though I was apart from my friends, you could almost say I was walking with them on that gray Saturday morning. Them, huddled in their beds, burrowed deep under the covers, unable to pull themselves out of their misery. And me, laying in my tomb, trapped beneath the earth. Them, feeling abandoned by God, and me, rejected and utterly abandoned as well. Some of my friends may have faintly remembered my promises to return, to bring hope back into their hearts. But they couldn't hold on to hope in the face of such overwhelming loss.

I know from your words and your thoughts that you feel it too. You can feel the deep, pregnant silence of Holy Saturday. While my body lies in the tomb, one can only sit in silence and wait. And if you're honest, you know you're not too good at waiting. It tests your patience. It can wear down your spirit. You know who I am and you know the healing I bring. You have witnessed the glory of God and you have heard how much more brilliant it will be on that great day. Yet for now you sit and wait, for you feel dry and you want that fire in your heart to return. You live in a land of broken promises and fractured relationships. You see, painfully, the cracks deep inside yourself that need healing. You call on me to come and fix those things, but hope begins to fade when things don't get better, or when old wounds reopen. I know how hard it is to cling to hope when the substance of hope seems so far away. I understand. They say I felt my greatest temptation during my forty days in the desert. But to tell you the truth, the temptation was greater when my friends failed, time and time again, to accept my teachings. It was greater when I came to my Father's holy temple, the place of such purity, and found the money changers

exploiting it, desecrating its holiness and goodness. In those moments I almost wanted to give up. I knew it would all be worthwhile in the end, but still, for a moment, I wondered whether my words were just falling on deaf ears, whether I was just beating my head against a wall.

If you approached my grave on this Holy Saturday, you would hear a love song. My body, lying alone in the tomb, is an ode to you who know the truth of the gospel but are restless, waiting for deliverance, doubting if or when the promise of new life will spring into reality, wondering whether that stone will ever roll away. But take heart; for you will yet catch a glimpse of resurrected life. All it takes is a miniscule seed of faith, the faintest ray of light through the cracks. I know because that light has returned to my eyes. I'm pulling back the veil and stepping into the early morning sun, and far away through a window I can see Mary stirring in her bed, getting ready to set out on the road to my tomb.

Mary remembers. She remembers that sweet night by the fire when I told them how death would relinquish its power over me. She'll tell herself she's only coming to prepare my body, for she's not yet ready to fully open herself up to such foolish hope. But while my disciples remain huddled in their beds, that little ray of hope is piercing through her pain and loneliness, setting her feet on the road to come and see whether life really can spring up from a world of death. And that little act of faith will sprout into something beautiful in the morning light. She will be the first to witness the glorious victory. She will see the opening to the empty tomb, beckoning her in, to lay down the corpses of her own loneliness and hopelessness. And she will step back out into the light and roll the stone back over the mouth of the tomb, sealing them away forever.