

SEVEN WOMEN ON HOLY SATURDAY

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Woman taken in adultery

You won't know my name, you'll only know what they said I did. Don't you think it's odd that it's only the women who get caught? It takes two and yet we're always to blame. What could I say surrounded by all those men waiting to stone me to death. They weren't interested in me or my circumstances; they were filled with their own sense of righteousness. They, too, wanted to use my body in some act of communal purification. But in a few weeks or months some other poor woman will be their victim for they will never deal with their own sin

I was terrified. Even if they had wanted me to, I couldn't speak. I was shaking with fear, just praying that it would be quick, that someone would be merciful enough to aim at my head to knock me unconscious. I'd seen this happen before; sometimes for their sick righteous pleasure they could make the stoning last a long time as if a lingering death was somehow of more value.

I thought that was what they intended when they brought me to him and asked him to confirm their judgement. Always looking for legitimation; always looking to be in the right, each one hiding behind the other. Being in a crowd is a great disguise, especially from your own sinful acts.

I was confused and anxious, he didn't even look at me; he was concentrated like a child drawing something on the ground. Please, God, I cried in myself, don't let this go on! Don't let him prolong my suffering. And then he asked that question – I didn't understand it at first; I thought he was siding with them but there was a great silence. Whatever he said, it seemed to remove the camouflage of the crowd; now each one was exposed, naked. I could sense the tension. I was waiting for the first stinging, crushing rock to hit me... but nothing happened.

And when I had the courage to open my eyes, everyone had gone. There was only him and me and he refused to condemn me. He, the only one who could have thrown an stone, he did not even lecture me. He treated me with such natural respect and he looked for nothing in return. I owe him my life! Such strength, such gentleness I had never experienced from any man before.

I followed him here and all through this week I've tried to stay as close as I can, do whatever I can. Yesterday, I watched him die. His body torn and bleeding. I heard the arrogant mockery of the righteous – words can be as sharp as stones. I wanted to say something to counter their vicious words but I couldn't. In my heart I just whispered “thank you and may God somehow free you as you freed me.”

I don't know what to do. Every day I've found something to do but not to today. I just feel numb, empty and useless. I've never felt this way before even when our brother, Lazarus, died. Then, I just kept busy – it's my way of coping. And, of course, then we still had **him**.

I remember sending for him. My brother was a hard worker but he was never strong. **I** always was much stronger. And when my brother got sick that time I knew it was serious, so I sent for him.

We had had such good times when he came. The house was always filled with people, filled with life. I enjoyed looking after them and being busy – I always wanted things to be the best. We don't have much but what we have, well, I wanted it to be the best, just for him.

My sister, she had a different approach: she was always a good listener. I think they thought I didn't listen but I did. I can't just sit and listen, my hands have to be doing things, that's when I listen best.

Now, I'm doing nothing and I hear only silence and see only those terrible scenes from yesterday. I just can't get them out of my mind. Why did he let them do that to him? And where had all the men gone? It was only us left in the end, just us women and we could do nothing. Why didn't **he** do something? That's what I don't understand.

When Lazarus was sick I remember sending for him. He came, I knew he wouldn't refuse, he was too late, we had already buried my brother. Yet, I knew he hadn't come to mourn – he loved us and we loved him. He was a doer you see, just like me. But I was angry and hurting; he could have come sooner, but I knew, even then I knew he could – he would - do something. 'Yes', I said, 'you are the Messiah, the Christ, you can do something, you can even bring the dead back to life.' And he did – now that's really doing something!

But now we've buried **him** and all we can do is wait..... wait – and I hate waiting. And I'm waiting to hear his voice again, now I'm listening and praying that what you said, Lord, will be true, **now**, you are the resurrection and despite everything I still believe in my heart that you are the Christ. Just don't mind the tears and please, don't keep me waiting too long – there's so much to do.

Mary of Bethany

I've been looking for my sister all day. Usually it is she who is looking for me to help with the work. But now I can't find her anywhere.

Today there is a terrible silence. Normally, I like silence but today is different. It's the silence within, the silence of pain and I'm too full of that to know what to do. It's not a real silence; the pain isn't silent - it screams inside, deep inside, and it has no words. It's too deep even for tears. And who would understand even if I could put words on it, but I can't. I need something to do so that for once I don't have to listen.

I miss her, my sister. I miss her business and bustling activity. Today of all days that's what I need, no words, no cliché about time mending death - it doesn't. We just get used to the numbness and the absence, but it doesn't heal. I just need my sister's activity, just the comforting, soothing regular business of life. She makes me feel at home; she makes me feel safe and in secure hands. But she's not here and the house is empty.

I go over the events of these days - that beautiful anointing of his feet - the perfume still lingers, I can still smell it in this room. I didn't know why I did it. People imagine I'm a calm listener but I can be impulsive, too. It just seemed right to anoint him, I don't know why I did it but then, as always, he interpreted for me.

Now, looking back, I was glad I anointed him when I did. Yesterday, that dreadful yesterday, there was no time. Finally, when all the shouting stopped and the terrible screams of those two men crucified beside him finished, there was only the silence - an emptiness in which their screams went on echoing and echoing. Their screams - my scream. Only God was really silent.

I couldn't bear to touch his dead body. Even now I can't really think about it. I was so glad the others were there to do that for him

I go back over his words: they were food and life to me. I'm trying to remember them all now but I'm not sure I understand them. He himself was the key. Somehow in his presence not only did they make sense a whole world opened up. They glowed. I not only heard them, **saw** them.

Listening to him, I learned to wait until the meaning made itself known. Now, too, I know I must wait. Wait in this terrible silence listening for his return. I wish my sister was here.

Samaritan woman at the well

When I saw him yesterday I could hardly recognise him. They'd beaten him so badly. You could see he was exhausted, and still he had to drag that ugly cross up and down the streets. They did everything they could to make it hurt. I tried several times to touch him, offer him a cup of water but they wouldn't let me. I had to be careful, I'm a Samaritan woman you see and I shouldn't be here, not at this time, not at any time. But I just couldn't stay away. I had to see him again. He was the one who changed my life.

I know men, I've had enough of them as husbands, but this one was different. I knew that from that first meeting at the well. He actually spoke to me – to me of all people and he a Jew. All my life I've had to work hard and fight my own corner; with so many marriages I didn't really belong in any family.

All those years, I felt I had been wandering in a desert, looking, searching, going through the motions but dry inside. Then this chance meeting at a time and place I didn't expect. And he took the risk to speak to me, me a Samaritan woman!

It was more than his words, it was **him**. For the first time something in me came alive, came back to life. It was like the rain falling on the desert sands. I've never felt so alive! I never knew even the life that was in me until this moment – everyone noticed it. And I told them about him: The Lord, my Lord, and giver of life.

So I had to come and see him this week. I knew it was a special time. But I had to be careful, discreet, not obvious. Samaritan woman here, well it goes without saying, a scandal, a blasphemy, a danger. But, you know, I'm not afraid; not since that meeting at the well. Fear takes a life and now I have my life why should I let fear rob me again.

And then I saw him and my heart broke. Look at what they've done to him! And now the same words that he spoke at our first meeting I heard him cry again from that terrible cross: 'I thirst.' I stood with my cup of water and I couldn't reach him.

Like most women, a lot of my work is hard and routine. It's about keeping the family we'll fed, clean, clothed and safe – wiping up the mess, wiping a dirty face or wiping away the tears. I'm not an educated woman, I don't really read much but I love reading faces. You can tell a lot from faces. There are whole stories written there.

I noticed this first in my mother's face. She had a beautiful face but she was a shy woman and didn't like to be looked at. I'd wait until she was preoccupied with something or she was asleep or when she was at prayer. At these times I'd study her face and sometimes I thought I saw into her soul. She's been dead many years now but I can still see her face. It's more than just remembering; I feel as if she's with me still.

I didn't expect to be there. It was such a busy day and the city was crowded – not easy to move around and I thought I'd take a short cut. Of course it always happens when you think your being smart, I got caught in the crowd. They were dragging these poor prisoners through the streets to be tortured and shamed even in death by crucifixion. I didn't want to look at them or even be there. Though it had nothing to do with me, somehow just seeing such cruelty, even if it is the work of the law makes me feel unclean. I tell the children never to look at suffering when it is an ugly spectacle, even when it is in the name of justice. Such things only steal our humanity from us. Who are we to disfigure God's image no matter what the reason.

And then I saw his face: covered in blood, dark bruises still swelling and painful, hair matted with sweat and spittle... but his eyes – such eyes, filled with tears. But somehow, and in a strange way, they didn't seem to be tears of pain but tears for me – for us. Not tears of anger or hate but of a deep, passionate love. I don't even remember thinking about it, I had to touch that face; somehow, I had to just wipe those tears, to let him know that someone had recognised, someone had seen. So I quickly took a piece of my own clothing – it was all I had – and when he fell and the guard was distracted, I wiped his face, just held it there for a moment. It was only a gesture, nothing really, I just wanted him to know some human touch. And now, in a way I can't understand, I have his face on my cloth. It is a gift I never expected but in that face I can read a story, my story, our story, the story of so much suffering. I'll never forget it.

Woman with a haemorrhage

Nobody really understands what it's like to have a chronic disability. You get used to people looking at you – some in disgust, some in fear, some in puzzlement and some with pity. You know you're not the same as them; you're not normal no matter how hard you try to be. We say you shouldn't judge by appearances, but most people do even when they're close to you.

I wish sometimes they could see me; see how I have lived with this for years and spent a fortune in doctors' fees. I wish they could see how I've made a life, and not given in to despair no matter how close I've been to it. Yet you also learn to hide - it's partly self-protection, to be in the shadow or hide in the crowd just for a moment to feel part of things. I remember that day... I was hiding in the crowd, trying not to be noticed. I just couldn't help myself – desperation or expectation – I don't know which, but I just touched the bottom of his coat as he passed. It was only the lightest of touches – just a brush really. . I did it so discreetly hoping I wouldn't be seen; I didn't want to make a spectacle of myself. I knew I could cope with my illness, but not that.

Well, I didn't expect him to even notice me. Of course he did, and when he called me out of hiding I didn't know what to expect. Another holy man would have been furious to have been touched by an untouchable, defiled by a ritually unclean woman like me. But no, I couldn't really believe it. I stood there in full view and I wasn't shaking with embarrassment but with joy. I knew I had been healed – for the first time my body felt whole and strong.

He wasn't angry but I could see that he was just filled with joy for me. That day the kingdom had come for me but I never forgot those who had not touched the hem of his coat – how could I? For over the long years of my sickness they had become my family. Now when I saw him hanging on that cross yesterday, his own body broken and his own precious blood pouring from his wounds, I remembered what it was like to bleed without hope of a cure and to be on the margins. I wanted to reach out and touch him again.

Mary Magdalene

We followed him and pushed through the crowds. I didn't care about the guards or the priests - I wasn't going to let him go – not like that! I suspect because we were women and I explain. I begged and pleaded: look, this is his mother with me, you have nothing to fear from us. Eventually they let us get close.

We stood there helpless, but reaching out with all our love to let him know that he was not alone. We were here with him no matter how long it took, no matter what they did to us, we were not letting go.

By most standards his dying was short but it seemed like an eternity to us. Finally, he was dead and finally we had him in our arms again. What could we do now but only anoint the wounds and clean the cuts. Even though he was dead, we did it so gently we didn't want to hurt him anymore. We had to work so quickly...

But tomorrow, early, long before the city is awake, I'll go and make things better and maybe say goodbye. If only I could hear him say my name again, just one last time...