

# O Darkest Woe

Lutheran Service Book 448 | study by Marion Lars Hendrickson

## Introduction

An anonymous fourth-century homily for Holy Saturday begins, “Something strange is happening — there is a great silence on earth today, a great silence and stillness. The whole earth keeps silence because the King is asleep. The earth trembled and is still because God has fallen asleep in the flesh ...”

The Welsh poet R.S. Thomas (1913–2000) wrote a poem titled “Threshold” that captures that silent absence of Holy Saturday, a day of waiting on the threshold between death and resurrection:

... what balance is needed at  
the edges of such an abyss.  
I am alone on the surface  
of a turning planet. What

to do but, like Michelangelo’s  
Adam, put my hand  
out into unknown space,  
hoping for the reciprocating touch?

([poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/52748](http://poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/52748)).

Like that ancient homily and Thomas’ poem, “O Darkest Woe” plumbs the theological and emotional depths of dwelling in the silence between Jesus’ death on the cross and His resurrection on the first day.

- Think of an occasion of woe in your life — the death of a loved one or a very great loss. Describe your feelings at the time. Did God seem absent? Silent? What hope did you have?

## Exploring the Scriptures

Each of the four Gospels records the burial of Jesus, emphasizing details according to the purpose for which the evangelist wrote his Gospel. Read Matt. 27:57–66.

- The evangelist records no words spoken by the disciples or the women. Who does speak here?
- The irony is that the chief priests and Pharisees appear to remember what the disciples and women do not. What do they remember? What do they lack in regard to these words?

Read Mark 15:42–47 and Luke 23:50–56.

- Both evangelists mention Joseph of Arimathea, who was looking for the kingdom of God. What do these words mean? His actions imply some bravery. Why? Do

his actions also imply faith or a remembering of Jesus’ promise about the third day?

- Both evangelists mention the Sabbath. How is Jesus’ rest in the tomb a Sabbath rest? Read Rev. 14:13. Jesus rests from His labors and His deeds follow Him. What are those deeds? How does Jesus’ death and burial create a blessing for those who die in the Lord and for us who remember them?

Read John 19:38–42.

- John includes Nicodemus with the mention of Joseph of Arimathea. Given Nicodemus’ conversation and confusion with Jesus in John 3, what might his inclusion here be saying about his faith? About Baptism? About the Son of Man being lifted up?

## Exploring the Hymn

### Background

Johann Rist (1607–67) was a Lutheran pastor who served his entire ministry in the north German village of Wedel on the Elbe. His years of ministry were marked by the conflict of the Thirty Years’ War (1618–48).

While Rist’s hymn-writing was certainly influenced by the Thirty Years’ War, his writing was also shaped by his work as a dramatist and poet. He wrote and produced a number of dramatic works. In 1644, Emperor Ferdinand III made him laureate, and Rist was elevated to the nobility

as Count Palatine, Johann von Rist in 1653. In 1660, von Rist founded a literary society that he called the Order of Elbe Swans.

In times of war or deep grief, poetry can give expression to the myriad emotions in play, from despair to hope.

- In the silences of a Holy Saturday, in the grief that accompanies death, what is important to remember?

## Text

The first five stanzas of this hymn begin with a cry of lament. Stanza 1 begins, “O darkest woe! / Ye tears, forth flow!”

- Read Matt. 27:57–61. With the burial of the body of Jesus, the evangelist records the presence of the women at the tomb in straightforward words. How might this opening stanza animate that scene?
- Read 1 Thess. 4:13–14. What is the basis for hope in the apostle’s words? For the disciples and the women in the time between Jesus’ death and His resurrection, were they without hope? Why or why not? What had they been told but seem to have forgotten?

The lament that begins stanza 2, “O sorrow dread!” introduces a very startling thought: “Our God is dead.”

- How can Rist say that God is dead? Isn’t it Jesus who has died?
- Read 1 John 4:9–10 and John 16:12–13. What do these verses tell us about God’s love?
- While it remains a dread mystery of the Holy Trinity that God in Christ could die upon the cross and lie in a grave, how do Jesus’ words in John 14:8–11 strengthen our faith and hope and peace even while we are unable to explain this profound mystery?

After the initial two cries of lament are cast toward heaven, toward God, the next three stanzas are addressed to the singer.

## Making the Connection

With his poetry of lament (together with the plaintive melody to which this hymn is set), Rist wraps the singer in great woe while preaching the Good News of Jesus.

- How is this mix of woe and Good News a description of Holy Saturday, a time in between?

## In Closing

Thomas closes “Threshold” with the words, “I am alone on the surface / of a turning planet. What / to do but, like Michelangelo’s / Adam, put my hand / out into unknown space, / hoping for the reciprocating touch?” Our faith reaches out for that “reciprocating touch.” Yet, faith also knows that even before the silence, the reciprocating touch has come to us in the promises of Jesus Christ.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 448.

- Stanza 3 begins, “O child of woe: / Who struck the blow ...?” Read Matt. 26:24. Why is there woe? While Jesus’ words are spoken of Judas, how does Stephen expand the woeful guilt in Acts 7:51–53?
- Read Is. 53:4. Who else is implicated? Does this get us off the hook? Why or why not?
- Stanza 4 begins, “Thy Bridegroom dead!” Read 1 Peter 1:18–19. What has happened to us? At what cost?
- Stanza 5 cries out, “Such innocence!” Read Is. 53:9 and 2 Cor. 5:21. How extensive is Jesus’ innocence! Yet, because of His death, how extensive is our innocence in Him?

The final two stanzas turn from words of lament to words of confident hope. Because of the great woe in Jesus’ death for sinners, there is great joy for us sinners.

- Stanza 6 rejoices, “What Thou hast won / Is far beyond all telling.” Read 1 Peter 3:18–19. On Holy Saturday, we customarily recall Jesus’ descent into hell. What has He won for us by this act?
- Read Eph. 2:4–6. What is the hope and expectation expressed in the apostle’s words?
- Read 1 John 3:2. What is the hope and expectation expressed in these words?
- Read Psalm 130. While the psalmist cries out from the depths, there is hope in his cry. In hope, the psalmist waits for the Lord. For what does he wait?
- Living on this side of our own day of resurrection, how does our hope in Christ strengthen us to wait?

- Could this hymn be sung at a Christian funeral? Do you think it would be harder or easier to sing it at a funeral rather than Holy Saturday? Why or why not?
- In the midst of sorrow and woe, why is it easy to forget the Good News of Jesus Christ? How could this hymn help bring the hope we have in Christ into the sorrows we feel at a death or great loss?

## Prayer

O God, creator of heaven and earth, grant that as the crucified body of Your dear Son was laid in the tomb and rested on this holy Sabbath, so we may await with Him the coming of the third day, and rise with Him to newness of life, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Holy Saturday).