Opinion

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The 14th Station, "Jesus is laid in the sepulcher," is illustrated by a mural in the Chapel of St. Joseph of Arimathea at the Espicopal Church's Washington National Cathedral April 12, 2017. The mural is part of a Stations of the Cross series with a social justice theme. (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)



by Mariam Williams

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I find it challenging to come up with something interesting to say in a column published during Holy Week. In fact, to prepare for this column, I Googled "Holy Week" to see if anything registered anew.

Some random questions came to mind. How do we know which days of the week these events fell on? (Returning to the text, the Gospel of Mark offered the most clarity on chronology.) What was everyone doing on Saturday? (One site said Saturday was the day Jesus was buried, but Mark says that was still Preparation Day, not the Sabbath.) Why do we have Easter parades on such a somber day? Since Saturday was the Sabbath, I would think all was quiet. Most people would have observed the day by resting, and the disciples would have rested and grieved.

But a more important point did register: the burial of Jesus. The exact day it happened aside, the participants in Jesus's burial are undisputed. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus embalmed Jesus' body, wrapped it, and placed it in a tomb Joseph had purchased. The event spans only four or five verses in each Gospel and is easily overlooked, lying between Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. But the minutiae in each Gospel put together for me the picture of a deeply subversive and risky act.

Joseph was a rich man and a prominent member of the Sanhedrin council. He was also a secret follower of Christ. When his court decided to crucify Jesus, he did not consent. The Gospels don't say whether he abstained from voting, wrote a dissenting opinion, or simply voiced his disagreement, but whatever he did, he's the only one noted to have done it. Nicodemus also was a council member, and though he visited Jesus at night to inquire about salvation and believed Jesus' message, he showed up after Jesus' trial, beating, and crucifixion.

I don't think Nicodemus's inaction makes him a bad person, but I admire Joseph a bit more in this situation. Each man would have had to give up position, power and money to follow Jesus openly. Each also might have exposed his family to danger, especially in those violent days around Passover. But when there was an opportunity to use his position to prevent an injustice, Joseph took it.

Joseph reminds me of students around the country and some around the world who marched for their lives on Saturday. Protest movements often are led by students because they are bold, energized, have a clear and unjaded picture of right and wrong, and because they have very little to lose. Most haven't acquired the money, power, position, spouse, or children they could lose if they chose to speak up in a national movement. Yet, some of the students do have the privilege of whiteness and of their parents' wealth. Some of them have recognized that their affluence and physical presentation have made their peers' murders more worthy of national mourning and their tactics of walkouts, rallies, direct debate with lobbying organizations, marches, and trips to state and national capitols more praiseworthy than the same actions by Black Lives Matter activists.

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By "shar[ing] this stage … with those communities who have always stared down the barrel of a gun," as Parkland shooting survivor Jaclyn Corin said Saturday, they risk losing what support they do have. Make no mistake: the country is still deeply divided along lines of who is believed to face hardship and discrimination, and these lines often cross over with gun ownership and political party affiliation. Saving children's lives is something you'd think the country would be united on, but it isn't. Students like Corin, David Hogg, and Emma Gonzalez risk being called race-baiters and other labels pushed onto people who mean to stir up justice, not division. And those attacks can be personal and ruthless. And yet those children speak for themselves and for those haven't been given the same chance to have a voice.

This Holy Week, I'm thinking of them, of Joseph of Arimathea, of Nicodemus, of the paralyzing thoughts, "But what will people think?" and "What will happen if I speak?" and of those who do it anyway.

[Mariam Williams is a Kentucky writer living in Philadelphia. She holds a Master of Fine Arts degree in creative writing and certificate in public history from Rutgers University-Camden. She is a contributor to the anthology Faithfully Feminist and blogs at MariamWilliams.com. Follow her on Twitter: @missmariamw.]

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