News
Spirituality

A girl places a candle in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem's Old City on April 11, 2022. The church is built on the site where tradition holds that Jesus was buried (CNS/Reuters/Ronen Zvulun)

by The Life Panelists

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As we prepare to celebrate the joy of Easter on March 31, we pause to reflect on Holy Saturday, when there is no liturgy and with the altar stripped bare, we wait in silence.

We asked our panelists:

What has been the Holy Saturday of your life? When have you experienced the in-betweenness of Holy Saturday? What empty tombs have you been sitting by?

Kathleen Noelle Cummings is currently a novice at Monastery Immaculate Conception, a Benedictine monastery in Ferdinand, Indiana. Before entering the community, she worked in communications at the University of Wisconsin, in marketing for an academic publishing house and taught music. She enjoys reading, writing and discovering how God is present in the moments of everyday life.

My memories of Holy Saturday are ones of loss, waiting and expectation. The gravity of Good Friday has passed, but it's not yet the joyful moment of Easter. It's time to clean the house, prepare the Easter food and dye the eggs, but it's not time to rejoice. Currently, the Holy Saturday experience of my life is my time in the

novitiate. I'm not "there" in my former pre-monastery life, and not "here" in a full ability to engage in ministry. My work is to grow and develop in the greenhouse of formation, obedient to what is asked of me and faithful to the practices that will help me grow in virtue. Some days it goes better than others.

As I sit beside the tomb of my old pre-monastery life, I remember the relationships, career and places I left behind. I miss living in a city, I miss my friends and my family. I miss the lake I lived beside, my favorite Indian restaurant and the ability to make my own schedule. I remind myself that grief and loss can coexist with hope and newness.

The cemetery of the Monastery Immaculate Conception in Ferdinand, Indiana, is seen at sunset. (Kathleen Noelle Cummings)

When a new discerner or community member talks about what they miss or mourn, a well-meaning person will often quote the story of the rich young man from Matthew's Gospel. This story is beautiful. However, the verse quoted regarding the sacrifices of religious life is usually Matthew 19:29 (RSVCE), "And every one who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life."

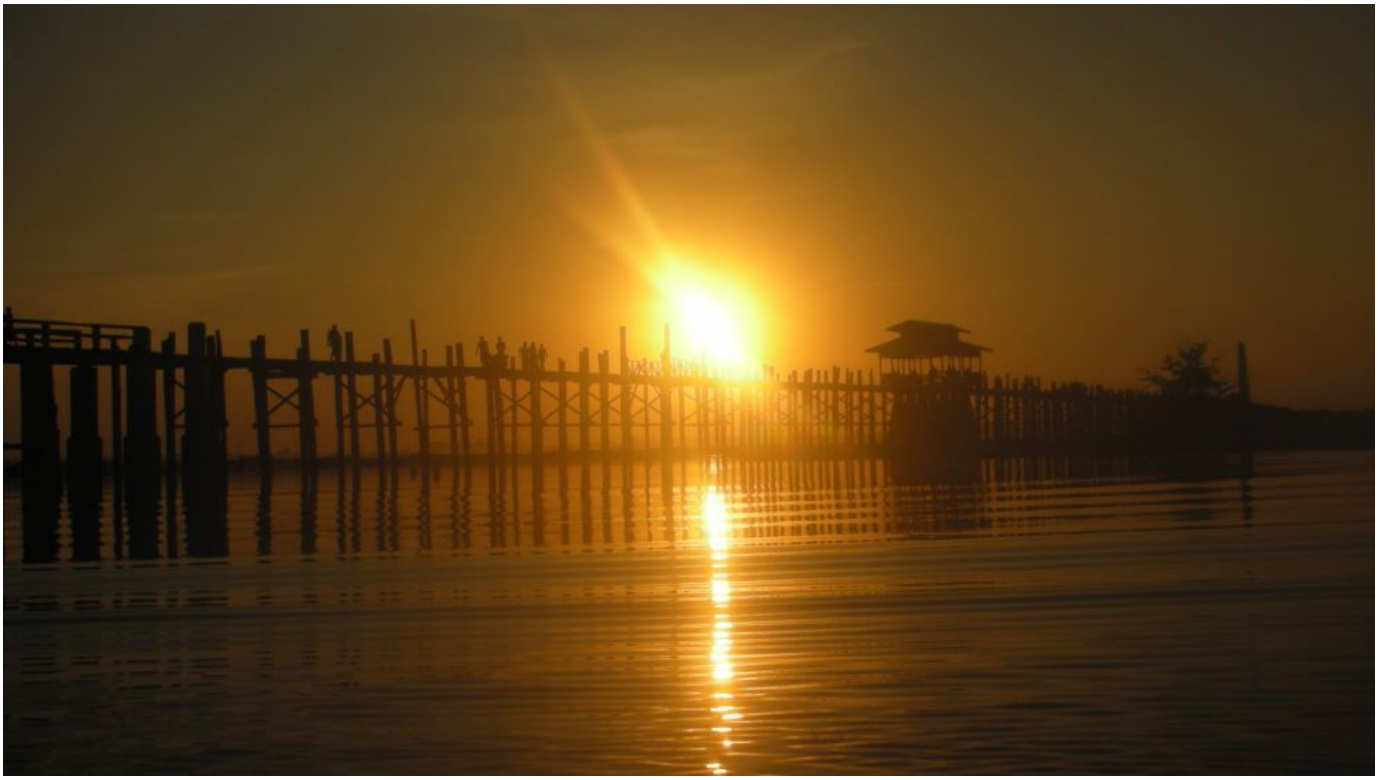
The thread I want to pull out here is the idea of the hundredfold. Some interpret that to mean "everything you give up will be given back to you by the Lord in an immeasurable amount." I contend that this is, while certainly attractive, not a realistic interpretation of the verse. We know that God is trustworthy in the end, but what we will experience between now and the end of life is uncertain.

Faced with that, how do I wait by the empty tomb in my time of formation? Right now, it is unknown what I have sacrificed forever and what may return. How do I maintain hope and trust? I believe that the empty tomb holds a promise of something new. Perhaps if I remain faithful to the waiting, I will encounter a mysterious man who looks like a gardener but turns out to be the glorified Lord.

Ann Grey is from Scotland and has served as a lay missionary in Sierra Leone and as a Missionary Sister of St. Columban in Hong Kong, where she studied Cantonese and co-established Action for REACH OUT, an organization providing services to female sex workers on the streets and nightclubs of Hong Kong. After a short time in China studying Mandarin, she was elected congregational leader. Since completing her term in leadership, she has been in Ireland working on the development of congregational spirituality.

All the post-Resurrection Gospels tell us, "He is not here" but, like a child, I find myself asking, "is he really 'not here'?" Holy Saturday is my favorite day in the liturgical calendar — a day of deep silence, expectant waiting — a day of emptiness, yes, but not in any negative way.

On days like this, I call to mind all the times I have sat in vigil with our dying sisters — moments of profound silence, awe and reverence as they wait to answer that final call to let go and into God. In that waiting, they epitomize Edwina Gateley's poem "Let Your God Love You": "Be silent. / Be still. / Alone. / Empty / Before your God. / Say nothing. / Ask nothing. … / Let your God — / Love you."



The U Bein Bridge in Mandalay, Myanmar, spans about 1,300 yards across Taungthaman Lake and is a popular tourist site. (Theresa Kim)

In this unique moment of their lives, they are surely experiencing and are surrounded by God's unfathomable love. They have entered into an emptiness over which they have no control — an emptiness which Buddhists would recognize as an invitation to let go of all attachments and which leads to a fullness. Most times as I sit with them, I sense nothing but peace.

This year we Columban Sisters are celebrating the centenary of our founding in 1924. As we look back on a truly wondrous journey of faith and love, this is indeed a time of celebration and thanksgiving as we remember our early days when our first sisters, united in a deep faith and concern for the poor, took the plunge and found themselves in China, dealing with victims of floods, epidemics, hunger and war.

As we rejoice and continue to be inspired by this heritage, for me, there is also a certain sadness and emptiness, an experience of the in-betweenness of Holy Saturday as we look back — and at the same time, forward — we wonder what lies ahead for us. The uncertainty of it can be frightening and, like Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb, I could weep for what has been.

> Can I trust and enter into the mystery of this? Or will I plunge into the fear, the sense of loss?
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For religious life in general and for our congregation, we are in the midst of a certain dying. As I face the challenge of this, I am aware that I need to keep in mind the words of Richard Downey, "God's reach is so deep that even the regions of death in our own lives are seized and saturated by God's love in Christ."

Can I trust and enter into the mystery of this? Or will I plunge into the fear, the sense of loss?

As I wait at the empty tomb of my life today, I experience trasna, the crossroads that challenges and calls me to choose the ancient path, to cross over and through the empty tomb — to believe and to trust, "God is here."

Margaret Kerry, a Daughter of St. Paul, served as director of the Pauline lay Association of Pauline Cooperators for 15 years. For most of her 45 years of religious life, she was missioned to Pauline Book & Media Centers,

serving as volunteer coordinator, outreach coordinator, manager and superior. For six years she served in the provincial government as councilor for the apostolate. Her studies were in organizational development at DePaul in Chicago and a master's in pastoral theology and ministry at Boston College School of Theology and Ministry. During studies, she initiated inner-city reading rooms for afterschool programs in collaboration with the Volunteers of America (New Orleans) and the Boys and Girls Club (Chicago) and began a reading program at Horizons for Homeless Children (Boston).

In an article by Maronite Bishop Francis Zayek I discovered a new way to consider the in-betweenness of Holy Saturday:

> The cavern of the hermit is a true "martyring." It is there they went 'to struggle with all the deaths': the death of the body, the death of man, the death even of their own mind, just to live with God in silence. The angel at the door of the tomb does not tire of repeating to those who pass by, "The one for whom you are looking, Anthony, Peter, Macarius - is not here."

One day may the angel at my tomb announce, "The one for whom you are looking is not here," (Mark 16:6). It is no longer [she] who lives but Christ (Galatians 2:20).

(Unsplash/Cristina Gottardi)

I am usually outside the tomb of Christ, waiting. This year, counting 50 years within my congregation, I wait. I am waiting for an assignment. I wait for assurance that the future will be vibrant. I wait with my expectations. It is difficult to wait by that immovable stone covering Christ's tomb, hoping that the cross is not the end. God, will you do something? Jesus is there in the tomb trusting, totally surrendered in death as in life. Am I called to wait in the tomb with Jesus? To be with him in the tomb, trusting I am where I am meant to be, is an act of surrender, a burial cloth wrapped around my freedom.

Article 30 in our constitution says, "From the Apostle Paul we learn how to accept the fatigue, sufferings and failings of the apostolate, carrying within us the cross of Christ, so that all may have life" (1 Corinthians 4:10-12). Paul was able to write, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (Galatians 2:20).

This Holy Saturday instead of waiting outside of the tomb I will wait inside with Christ. Venerable Madeleine Delbrêl's insights remind me that waiting focuses my gift of self to God and others in all circumstances — riding the subway or writing a podcast, listening to another sister or creating a social media post, doing dishes, taking up the broom or the pen, answering the door, or caring for a sick person. I am doing the mission of Christ wherever I happen to be, in the very situation I am in, and especially the very place I wait.

A Benedictine Sister of Chicago since 1988, Susan Quaintance currently serves as her community's subprioress; she also works part time as director of Heart to Heart, a ministry for seniors at a nearby parish. Classrooms are where she most feels most at home, having spent decades teaching in a Benedictine single-gender high school for young women and then directing an educational outreach program for older adults in downtown Chicago. She sits on the board of the United States Secretariate of the Alliance for International Monasticism and on the council of the Monastic Congregation of St. Scholastica.

(Unsplash/Hoach Le Dinh)

August 2013 to August 2014 was the longest Holy Saturday of my life.

In May 2013, St. Scholastica Academy, the all-girls high school which my community sponsored and where I had taught for 23 years, closed. In the midst of grief, confusion, anger and a broken leg that was healing but not yet whole, I made two

decisions. One was that I wasn't going to look for my next job in education. I had taught where I was most needed: a racially, ethnically, economically diverse community of young women where I could speak and teach about the Benedictine charism freely and enthusiastically. If I couldn't do that anymore, I didn't want to be in a classroom. My second decision was that I was going to take the summer off; I knew that was a luxury, but I was going to treat it like a "regular" summer with reading, time outside, vacation.

When late August rolled around, most of my former colleagues began new jobs in several different schools. The building adjacent to my monastery, where our school had been, was taken over by a charter school, and I began my job search. Naively (and with hubris clearer in hindsight), I envisioned myself as a strong candidate for jobs in social services or communications or customer service. I was a hardworking, stable, principled worker with loads of transferable skills.

What potential employers saw was an older woman (I had turned 50 the previous May) with limited experience and little polish or knowledge of workplace vernacular. My resume was clearly designed to hide my age and long stint at one place.

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For 12 months I scoured job sites and crafted endless cover letters. I networked and sought advice about how to make myself more marketable. In that year I was invited to interview for exactly two jobs and offered one — teaching in an all-girls Catholic high school.

People in tombs are dead, invisible. That's how I felt. In the physical therapy that followed my leg injury, I learned the word "proprioception," one's perception of a body part, relative to the rest of the body and surrounding environment. While I was taught the concept in relation to my leg, it also gave me an insight into my spiritual and emotional life. My soul was lost, disconnected and disoriented. It wasn't just potential employers who couldn't see me; I couldn’t locate myself.

Since that year, that experience has shaped how I approach Holy Saturday. It informs how I sing the lamentations of Tenebrae, how I hear the Scripture, how I listen in the quiet before the Easter Vigil. How I welcome Easter dawn.

Maria Yen Do is a member of the Sisters of Mary, Queen of the World in Vietnam. She has been working for years as a catechist and kindergarten teacher and serving as an organist and choir director in various faith communities. She previously taught English to novices and catechism to postulants in her community. She came to the United States to pursue higher education and is currently working toward a doctorate in religious education. Upon completing her studies, she hopes to serve her community and the church in Vietnam.

Sr. Maria Yen Do decorated these eggs as gifts for friends and family. (Maria Yen Do)

Holy Saturday is a day of in-betweenness, not too dark nor too bright, mixing silence and noise. It is a day of preparation for great joy and hope.

When I was little, I was excited to welcome Holy Saturday. It was the day I could kiss Jesus on his knees or feet and receive a gift. On that day, as part of our tradition, my parish displayed a large statue of crucified Jesus in a coffin. Every time we came in and kissed Jesus, we were allowed to have a pop rice treat called nå in Vietnamese. I

love nả, so I tried to kiss Jesus several times. I saved that nả to share with my friends who did not get to kiss Jesus.

When I entered a convent in Vietnam, Holy Saturday became a day blended with silence and noise. Unlike Good Friday, when we observed absolute silence and performed tasks quietly, on Holy Saturday, we sisters remained in silence, but somehow a growing sense of anticipation filled the quiet, expressing itself through our gestures. I found my heart was restless with the joy of hope that Jesus would be resurrected tomorrow. Along with the other sisters, I spent most of the day praying in the chapel.

> Holy Saturday serves as a day of preparation for great joy and hope.
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Holy Saturday in the United States offers another experience. I decorate eggs and write Easter cards while meditating on the joy of the resurrection, not only of God but also of human beings' relationship with God. I imagine how happy people will be to receive my eggs and cards and to experience the joy of Jesus' resurrection through those gifts.

Reflecting on my three experiences, I realize a hidden theme in them. Whether it is the simplicity of pop rice, the spirituality of holy prayers or the spiritual joy of giving eggs and cards, Holy Saturday serves as a day of preparation for great joy and hope. I do not have to wait until Easter Sunday to experience or celebrate this joy and hope, I experience it on Holy Saturday.

In many ways, our lives can be likened to Holy Saturday. We do not always live in the unbearable suffering of Good Friday or the extreme joy of Easter Sunday. We live in between dark and light, sorrow and joy, doubt and hope. On Holy Saturday, things are not very clear. The same can be said of our daily lives. Things are not always certain in our earthly lives; however, we hold on to the hope that Jesus will resurrect the next day. This hope encourages us to prepare ourselves while we are in this world. We allow ourselves and others to experience joy and hope right now, in the Holy Saturday moments of our lives, moments we share through our kindness and love.

This story appears in the **The Life** feature series. View the full series.