



## TREASURES OF DARKNESS

# REFLECTION WEEK 2 - MYSTERY

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### ◆ About this reflection

This reflection invites us into the mystery of grief, waiting, and the liminal space of Holy Saturday. It includes personal experience of infant loss.

Please engage at your own pace and care for yourself as you read. Where possible, this is best explored prayerfully and in community.

### ◆ Scripture

*On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled. Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently. As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder.*

*Then the people stood at a distance, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.*

Exodus 19:16-19 and 20:21 (NRSVA)

### ◆ Reflection

#### *A personal story of loss*

Nearly nine years ago, on what should have been an ordinary Wednesday afternoon, I went into labour unexpectedly. I was at a theology conference, on the other side of London, and I was supposed to lead Evening Prayer in a few hours' time.

Instead, I ended up giving birth to my first child, in dangerous circumstances, before we could reach the nearest hospital.

Rowan was born early but alive, with a heartbeat and a full head of hair. The paramedics raced him to hospital in one ambulance; I went in another. By the time he and I were reunited, Rowan was dead.

He had lived for 39 minutes.

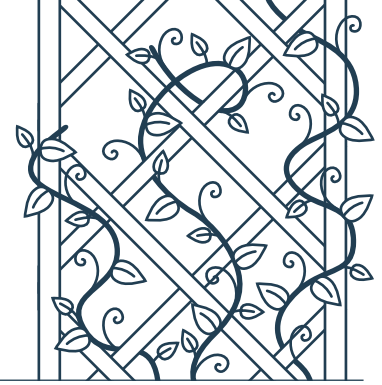
A birth. A death. And then the aftermath.

I had so many questions, all needing answers. What had happened? Why did it happen?



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Why did it happen when it did, in the way that it did? What could I have done differently, to have averted this terrible event? What should I have done differently?  
And looping through it all: Would this happen again?

My husband and I spent the night at the hospital. Rowan was given a special temperature-controlled cot, but he spent far more time in my arms. I wanted to soak up every moment. I knew that I would never again have this opportunity to be with him.

Rowan's body was so ravaged. In the pictures that we took that night, you can see the bruise on his chest, where the medical staff tried to resuscitate him. But his face was perfect, and so were his limbs and his tiny hands and feet.

It felt cruel to damage his body even further, but my husband and I decided to give our consent for a post-mortem examination. I didn't think I could live without answers.

So we waited. Weeks later, we were invited back to the hospital, to meet with the pediatrician who had been on duty in A&E on that terrible afternoon.

We learned that there would be no answers. Rowan, himself, had been strong and healthy. It was the disastrous delivery that had killed him.

As for why my body had decided to go into labour, when it did and where it did, there was no answer. There would be no answer. To this day, we don't know why.

So those weeks of waiting were just a prelude. They left us with questions unanswered and hopes unfulfilled. They left us in a thick fog of grief, made all the more painful by the mystery that remained unsolved.

In the long months that followed, this cloud of grief remained with me. I carried it everywhere; it was like my own personal weather system.

I look back on that time, and what I remember is the colour grey. Everywhere.

### *Standing at the mountain*

In our Bible passage for today's session, we are asked to reflect on the story of Moses and the people of Israel, as they stand before Mount Sinai. The threat of death is real. The Israelites have fled slavery in Egypt. They have journeyed through the wilderness. They are frightened and exhausted.

Three cycles of the moon pass. They come to a new wilderness, at the foot of Mount Sinai. Here they camp. Here they are consecrated and made clean, to prepare for an encounter with God.

On the morning of the third day, they wake to thunder and lightning. A thick cloud covers the mountain. They hear the blast of a trumpet – a blast so loud that it makes every person tremble.

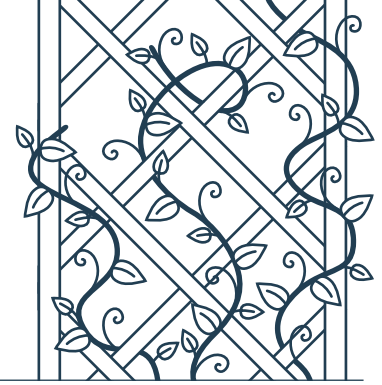
Moses leads the people of Israel out of the camp; they stand together, at the foot of the mountain. We can imagine them gazing upward, terrified and awestruck.

The sound of the trumpet grows louder. Moses speaks; God answers in thunder. The people remain where they stand, at a distance, while Moses approaches the darkness of that shaking, smoking mountain. He goes alone.



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### *Living in the cloud*

The summer before last, I relocated from London to the coast of Oregon, on the far western side of the US. I now live amidst active volcanoes and the ever-present threat of a Magnitude 9 earthquake. A tsunami will follow the earthquake; it's inevitable.

So I bring to this passage a newfound appreciation for the Israelites, as they stand before that shaking, smoking mountain. I recognise this from my own experience of waiting after Rowan's death – of trying to find my balance when I could not trust the ground to remain stable beneath my feet. I recognise it from my own experience of grief, as a fog so thick that you cannot see the path in front of you.

And there I stayed, for a very long time. Like Moses approaching the mountain, I entered that cloud alone. The loss of an infant is more common than we care to think, and yet it felt to me like an utterly solitary experience.

Sometimes, I would be confronted with other people's pregnancies, or with new babies. It was like looking at the sun. The flash of light was too bright to bear. I would avert my eyes, quickly.

In its own way, that dark cloud served as a sanctuary. It was a place of safety from a world where other people got to leave hospital with new life in their midst; where other people got to take their children home and raise them.

I left hospital not with a living child but with his absence. I carried that absence into the dark cloud – and inside that cloud, Rowan's absence slowly became a presence.

Shortly after his birth and death, I found myself in a bookstore. On an impulse, I left with *A History of the World in 100 Objects*. This book was written to go alongside the British Museum's podcast by the same name.

Every Wednesday, for 100 Wednesdays, I wrote a short essay. Each essay began with three things: the date, the age Rowan would have been, and the name of an object from the British Museum. Each essay served as a snapshot of my life in that dark cloud of grief and mystery. Into each essay I wove a reflection about a museum object. Writing these essays was a discipline that gave shape to Rowan's shadow: week after week; Wednesday after Wednesday. Through the process of writing, I found a way that I could understand Rowan's presence in my life.

Eventually, another pregnancy followed. It happened when we least expected, at a point when it felt too dangerous and precarious to hope. Throughout that terrifying second pregnancy, I continued to write those essays. One hundred Wednesdays later, I held Rowan's new brother in my arms. Life carried on – and so did Rowan's death.

### *Holy Saturday faith*

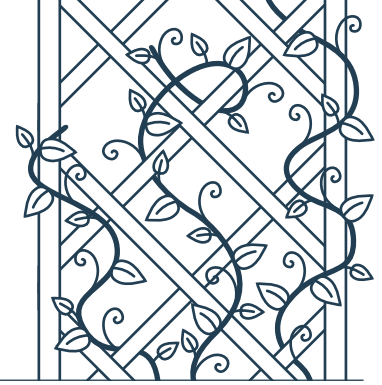
In this season of Lent, our Christian traditions and practices are meant to carry us through the wilderness, into Jerusalem, through the highs and lows of Holy Week, and finally to the glory of Easter Sunday. It's a familiar and comforting direction of travel.

Yet the Resurrection is not exclusively a story of the victory of life over death. There are other stories that we might tell.



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I'm grateful for contemporary theologians who are working in the field of trauma theology: Shelly Rambo, Karen O'Donnell and Serene Jones, to name just a few. In their work, I have found a spaciousness that holds mystery and doubt. These theologians urge us to resist turning too quickly to the Resurrection. Bravely, they ask us to resist the powerful, linear thrust toward life-after-death.

Instead, we are invited to take seriously the work of Holy Saturday – that liminal place and time in which death is complete and hope is elusive. We are invited to dwell in Holy Saturday, no matter how uncomfortable or confusing or ambiguous it feels.

It's hard work to remain in Holy Saturday, to wait without answers and without certainty

But in this liminal space, we can find scope for another story of the Resurrection. It's not as triumphant or as victorious as the version we usually know. This alternative story emerges from the hard work of waiting – with all our questions and doubts, our griefs and our fears. It's a story of Resurrection that acknowledges the painful reality that death remains. It's a story about love that persists through death, about love that remains alongside death.

### *Questions that remain*

Within that dark, mysterious cloud, my questions are shifting. Rather than "What happened?" or "Why did it happen?"; new questions are taking shape.

These days, I am far more inclined to ask: "What does it mean, that Rowan was born, lived briefly, and then died?"

I ask: "What does it mean, to live with Rowan's absence and his presence in the centre of my heart?"

I ask: "What does it mean, to hold this death in the midst of life?"

These are questions that I cannot answer. Not now. Not yet. Perhaps not ever.

But what I can do is to continue letting the questions evolve. I can continue asking the questions.

I can remain in the dark cloud that is God's mystery: the dark cloud that is, and always will be, a place of paradox – a place where absence is presence.

A place where Resurrection is also a story of death alongside love.

Lia Shimada, 3rd March 2026