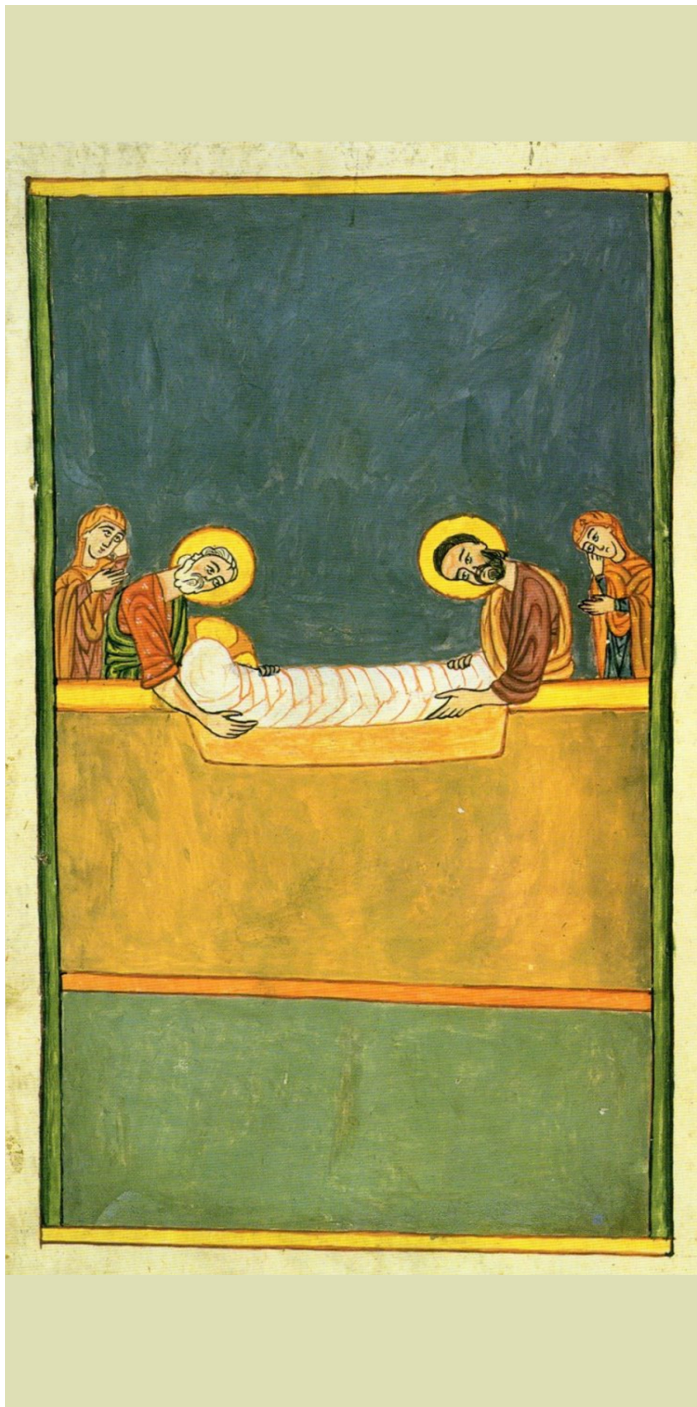


40. Holy Saturday: Stone



Once Jesus had died, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for his body. Then he and Nicodemus bound it in strips of linen while tucking in spices like myrrh and aloes (John 19. 39-40). In this page from an Armenian Gospel-Book (1437), we see the two grieving men bend tenderly over Jesus' body as they gently lower it onto a stone shelf in a rock-hewn tomb. Two distressed women look on and, burial rites completed, watch as Joseph rolls a "great stone to the door of the tomb" (Mt 27.60). The following day, anxious Jewish clergy make the tomb even more secure (Mt 27.66). Jesus' crucified body is, as the carol has it, "sealed in a stone-cold tomb."

No breath now. Just silence. Rigidity. Jesus is stone-dead. And so much else is too. Expectation, excitement, hope. All dashed. The austere emptiness of much of this beautiful little painting emphasises that. For his disciples, life has been emptied of meaning. The hard, unyielding fact of a body behind rock means that nothing matters anymore.

But for us, it's different. We try to enter fully into the utter bereftness of Holy Saturday but we know that this is also Easter Eve. In Wesley's words, "Vain the stone, the watch, the seal." We know we are on the threshold of everything that matters...

Today...

...we will wait quietly by your tomb, O Lord,
grieving your death, yet confident of your Life.

Amen