

Holy Saturday, 2022, St. David's Episcopal Church (Elizabeth Felicetti)

This is one of the most overlooked services of the church year. We tend to leap from Good Friday to Easter, ignoring the work of Holy Saturday. The time that Jesus was in the grave. Dead. For the resurrection to happen, Jesus had to experience death. Not the appearance of death, but actual death. His corpse was in the tomb, the stone rolled in front of the entrance, his body wrapped in strips of cloth. On Holy Saturday our altar is still stripped. Just black garments: no chasuble or stole or even a surplice. It's stark.

Have you heard of Pauli Murray? She was a seventh-generation Episcopalian and a lawyer and writer who became the first female black Episcopal priest when she was 66 years old.

But more than anything, in my opinion, Pauli Murray was an activist. When I was researching her<sup>1</sup> for the book I'm writing about childless Christian women, I was surprised to discover that she had been arrested on a segregated bus fifteen years before the great Rosa Parks.

And it happened on Holy Saturday.

Murray lived in New York at the time and was not yet in law school. Murray was a college graduate who was going to visit her Aunt Pauline in Durham for the Easter holiday. Her friend Mac wanted to accompany her, which worried Pauli a bit because Mac had not experienced the segregated south.

The two friends took a bus from New York to DC, where Pauline hoped to borrow her sister's car for the ride to Durham, since that way they wouldn't have to take a segregated bus. No such luck: the car was being repaired.

The ride from DC to Richmond was fine but then they had to change, and the bus to Durham was too crowded. A relief bus came that they hoped would eventually overtake the other bus and enough people would get off so that those on the relief could join them. The relief bus was smaller, cramped, even. One seat was over the wheel, and the wheel protruded upwards in a way that made travel in that seat uncomfortable. And that, of course, is where Pauli Murray and her friend Mac ended up sitting.

At that time, Blacks had to fill seats from the back and remain behind white riders. As the relief bus sped to Petersburg in the hope of passing the first bus, the ride was uncomfortable, and became almost unbearably so for Mac, who was experiencing a pain in one side that was exacerbated by turns and bumps. She wanted the two of them to move to an empty seat in the first row, right behind the driver. Pauli said, let me talk to him first, and hoped to get the driver to ask the white passengers to all move up a row.

That didn't happen. The driver yelled at her and pushed her back when she tried to explain that her friend was ill. Murray went back to the uncomfortable seat and they made the best of it until

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<sup>1</sup> Some use "he" or "they" pronouns for Murray, who experienced gender identity issues. Since Murray died before it became common to ask people's pronouns, I am referring to her as she/her, which Murray used.

Petersburg, when a number of white passengers disembarked, leaving the two rows in front of them vacant.

While the bus was stopped they moved up one row before discovering that seat was broken, so they moved up one more, still behind all white passengers. The driver, however, yelled at them to move back. Telling him about the broken seat didn't matter to him. He got off and summoned the police, who came on to speak to them. They explained the situation, and after the police pointed out the broken seat, the driver fixed it and they moved into it. That would have been the end of the matter except that the bus driver then got off the bus to get some incident reports in case of a later lawsuit, which he distributed only to the white passengers. After Murray asked why he hadn't distributed them to the Black passengers as well, he got the police back on and had them arrested.

It was, as I said, Holy Saturday. They spent Easter in jail, as well as Easter Monday. But they made an impression on their jailers as well as other prisoners with the way they were polite and yet insisted on humane treatment. Ultimately they were convicted not because of the segregation order but because of disorderly conduct.

This act did not change the world the way the bus incident of 1955 in Alabama did, but it happened on Holy Saturday, and it makes me think of the quiet work of Holy Saturday before the splash of Easter Sunday. The bus boycott in Montgomery stood on top of many earlier actions, many important lessons.

Tonight will be our first celebration of Easter, of the empty tomb. For the next few hours, we are stuck with the occupied tomb. How will you fill those hours? What work remains to be done in your life in the holy, purifying season of Lent before the dawn of Easter?