

**IT IS FINISHED; JOHN 19:30; GOOD FRIDAY, APRIL 3, 2015; THOMAS H. YORTY;
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We read tonight portions of three gospel accounts of this somber day in history. Each one is a literary gem and worthy of our attention in full—perhaps not a bad way to spend a few minutes tomorrow, Holy Saturday. In preparation for this evening, I read chapters 18 and 19 of John from which the title of this sermon is taken.

While I want to focus on the words “It is finished” as an ending to Jesus’ story it cannot be separated from the larger sequence of events from the arrest to the crucifixion that together are one of the world’s great dramatic conclusions; each scene masterfully contributes to that final moment on the cross.

After his arrest, as the leaders of the Sanhedrin question Jesus the focus shifts to Peter denying any association with Jesus. When Jesus is brought to Pilate the religious leaders refuse to enter the praetorium in order to maintain their ritual purity. Pilate, presumably the man in charge, is indecisive going back and forth from the high priests on the outside to Jesus inside with the hypocrisy of the religious leaders in full view, preoccupied as they are with eating the Passover lamb, all the while preparing for the death of the Lamb of God.

Soldiers strip and flog Jesus mocking him as King of the Jews, though that word is never used by John for whom Jesus remains dignified and regal through the entire evil charade. When Pilate presents Jesus as “your king” to the people they say they have ‘no king but Caesar’ oblivious to the liturgy of the Passover they will soon recite in which they acknowledge God as their king. And so, in rejecting Jesus, they unwittingly reject God, and yet in doing so unite Jesus and God as one.

As the drama unfolds it is increasingly clear that Pilate is the one on trial, not Jesus. When Jesus says in response to Pilate’s questioning his kingship, that it is Pilate who calls him “king” and Pilate defensively exclaims he has the power to release or crucify Jesus, Pilate is the one stripped of power and status by the crowd. Inside the praetorium Pilate is impressed with Jesus, yet outside the praetorium his opinion is meaningless, he is at the mercy of his subjects.

Yet, ultimately, neither Pilate nor the religious authorities, nor the crowd hold power at the trial and crucifixion. These scenes, as the narrator reminds us, occur to fulfill divinely ordained purposes. In their long exchange, Jesus says to Pilate, “You would have no power were it not given to you from above.”

At every turn, God’s purposes are being worked out by Jesus. With clarity and resolve, he makes his way to the cross for which he is destined and where he utters not a word of complaint or forsakenness. Rather, in three words he announces the completion of his mission and the fulfillment of God’s plan: “It is finished.”

Jesus, not the authorities, has the last word.

Yet, the end he announces is not of his own life only but of God’s hope for human creation also.

At least, at this moment, that's how it appears, especially if we identify with the scattered and frightened disciples.

While the events taking place fulfill the Old Testament descriptions of how the suffering servant would be treated, the larger biblical promise that God's people would embrace God's dream – that Yahweh would be their God and they would be his people – falls tragically short as the people conspire, then carry out the execution of the Son of God on a Roman cross.

Nor is it a secret that the great obstacle to God's hope for humans has been our desire, first exposed in the garden, then rearing its head repeatedly through the long history of God's people, "to be like God."

What started as perfect harmony between humans and God and humans and creation in the Garden was changed into what we refer to as "the real world" by our ambition to "be equal to the One who made us." And so the story unfolds:

the call to Abraham and Sarah to be the progenitors of a great nation led through the infighting of later generations to Joseph's exile to Egypt where Pharaoh enslaved God's people; then God provided yet a new beginning and called Moses and Miriam to lead the people out from under the brutal monarch into their own land; then, over time, their own leaders betrayed the poor and needy among them so that the people were taken from the land God gave them into exile as the prophets warned; once again, however, God opens a path that enables the people to return and rebuild the city and temple.

This is the epic narrative of God's pursuit of us that comes to a stunning, ignominious halt on a cross outside of Jerusalem.

It is a profound indictment that four thousand years of history conclude with such shame and tragedy. Surely, this is not the ending God envisioned—that the one who was not just his representative but whom he claimed at Jesus' birth and baptism was his own son and again that day on the mountain, like a proud father, his beloved son. But it is the only ending we have.

From the earliest fables to today's masters of poetry and fiction – the ending is what gives the narrative, the story its fullest meaning.

Melville's Ahab and the entire Pequod descending into the infernal vortex and chaos of the lonely deep; Hemingway's protagonist in *Farewell to Arms* walking home in the cold rain to the hotel from the hospital where his lover has just died; or Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* emerging from his "hibernation" naming the critical role chaos plays in society's attempts to order life.

Endings give great stories meaning. But the ending to Jesus' life on the cross was not a fictional ending to a fictional character. We know little about Jesus but we do know that he existed, that he was a charismatic leader, and that he spoke like a prophet against injustice and with healing reached out to the rejected, outcast and diseased.

We know that the authorities were threatened by him.

And we know his followers abandon him when he was taken into custody, that he was absent friends when he most needed them.

A more despairing conclusion would be hard to imagine. And yet it is not an ending with which we are unfamiliar. Tragedy filled with violence and irony is an apt description of the human family at any given time in our history.

Witness now the attempts in Indiana and Arkansas to use religion as a cover for bigotry precisely at a time when the majority of the nation is letting go of its long held prejudice against gays and lesbians.

From a Christian perspective, which those who support the new laws in those states consider themselves to have adopted, it is a cruel, but lately all too familiar, irony that the faith Jesus established by dying on a cross would be used to champion discrimination against the very principles of human community and wholeness for which he was crucified. It is a repugnant reminder that the Sanhedrin is still with us. The story sadly repeats itself – dressed in 21st century garb.

What does it say about our species that we seem always to undercut the progress we make toward a humane, civilized and just world?

One thing it says is that this ancient ritual of remembering the death of Jesus is not an historical relic but a mirror into which we look each Good Friday to remember how the world works, how God works and who Jesus really was.

Which leads to the second thing we learn tonight. The Greek word for finish, “teleo,” also means “to complete.” The Gospel writer depicts a Jesus who is aware that he has completed the work God has given him to do. In other words, Jesus’ death on the cross is not a moment of defeat and despair but of confidence in his completion of his mission in the world; and as an expression of his love for his own for whom he said he would lay down his life.

Verse 30 literally reads, “he handed over this spirit (or “pneuma” in the Greek which is a synonym for “life”).” The significant phrase is “handed over.”

Though Pilate, the Sanhedrin and the crowds may consider themselves the agents of Jesus’ death, in the end, John wants to be clear, it is Jesus who hands himself over, even as he began to do as far back as Capernaum when he realized he must go to Jerusalem and die.

What this day and the conclusion to this story says from the first century to the present is that when we put justice, righteousness and goodness on the gallows the God we worship is resolved to love us, even at our worst, even to the end. Amen.