

How Does the Story End?

Sermon for Easter Day, April 4, 2021

Readings: Isaiah 25:6-9, Mark 16:1-8

Sermon text: The women went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. Mark 16:8

What a joy to come to this day, to this place, and see your faces—or at least your eyes above the masks.

It is good to be back in church with you present, not only online but here, in the flesh. It is another step. It is another sign of spring. It feels like a mini-resurrection.

On the Day of Resurrection no less. Alleluia, Christ is risen.

But before we get to celebrating the Resurrection—either that of Jesus or the hope of ours—let's look back for a moment. It has been a long Lent, a heavy cross the world has borne this past year. So many have died, so many countless others have suffered. We have all had to find ways to cope. Some have flourished but many, many have felt locked in, on the brink of falling, if not in free fall. Alone, isolated. We mourn for them, and us, for our children's lost year of childhood, and the death and separation of our elders.

Throw in a racial reckoning set off by the death of George Floyd under the knee of Derek Chauvin, whose trial for murder is underway now. Add in an increasing number of violent deaths and recent mass shootings. Makes a sad story.

But not all sad stories have tragic endings. We may emerge strengthened in certain ways. We may find new life and hope. We are after all an Easter people. We do not lament the death of Jesus of Nazareth, we proclaim the good news of his resurrection.

So let's talk about stories. Some are sad, tragedies. From ancient Greece, through Shakespeare's Hamlet and Lear, to recent film noir—the world as a harsh and unforgiving place, where corruption and evil and implacable

fate defeat human aspirations for love and justice. Forget it, Jake, it's Chinatown. All the way down.

Some stories are realistic slices of life. Mary and I just watched *Minari*, a recent film about a Korean immigrant family coming to Arkansas in the 1980s—the hard work of starting a farm, of adapting to a new culture. Not an easy life or happy ending—but not a tragedy either. There's hope in family and neighbors. There's possibility in the future.

And some, perhaps what most people crave, are the comedies and romances and triumphs of good over evil. The mythic stories. When Luke Skywalker comes flying through the narrowing gate into the Death Star. When Harry Potter sacrifices his life to save his friends—and defeats evil. When Frodo the Hobbit, is about to give up his quest to destroy the evil ring, but Sam Gamgee stands up and tells him about what kind of story they are in, one of the great ones, one of “the stories that matter.”

“Full of darkness and danger they were and sometimes you didn't want to know the end because how could the end be happy, how could the world go back to the way it was when so much bad had happened. ...Folk in those stories had lots of chances to turn around, but they didn't, they kept going. Because they were holding onto something.”

“What are we holding onto, Sam?”

“That there's some good in this world, Mr Frodo, and it's worth fighting for.”

The stories that matter. The triumph of good over evil. The love that wins in the end.

Such are the stories that touch us in our hearts. And music has that gift as well. And I can't wait to sing the great Easter hymns again!

Well. The Easter story is obviously the archetype of archetypes. Indeed that is why it resonates so deeply—not only does it answer a deep longing of the human spirit, but it is a true story, about a real person, with testimony from those who were with him. So at least we believe—for there is no video records (not that any record is evidence enough these days). There is only the testimony of the witnesses—whose lives were completely

changed, from defeated followers of a slain messiah, to the empowered apostles of a risen Christ.

Believe them, I say. Because you can see by our Mark's gospel account this morning that out wasn't easy for any of them to understand and absorb this tremendous event. Though Jesus had talked about rising from the dead after three days, no one really expected it. There was, maybe, a general belief in a future Day of the Lord when all people would be raised to stand run judgement before God. But for an individual to emerge from the tomb?

The women arrived at the time with only the expectation that they would find the dead body of their beloved rabbi. They wondered how they would get in to properly prepare the body—who would roll away the stone? But it was already rolled away. A young man told them Jesus had risen—he was gone. They fled in terror and amazement, They said nothing to anyone for they were afraid.

And that is the end of the gospel of Mark.

Wait, what happens next? Wait, Mark, you can't leave us here! That's not how the great story ends!

Well, no, but perhaps the gospel is intentionally cut off at this point—some scholars think—so that those being prepared for would only learn the full story, be included in the mystery of rebirth and sacramental participation in the life of the risen Christ—after baptism and communion. Then the resurrection stories would be told. Stories Mark surely knew—he was after all the disciple of Peter and knew Paul. She knew the stories that Matthew Luke and John would tell. Stories we are familiar with__ how Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalene in the garden, then to Peter and the others, to the disciples on the road to Emmaus, in the breaking of the bread, in the reappearance to Thomas, to many others on the mountain.

But imagine you have never heard those stories. Imagine yourself back with the three women in the story from Mark. All you know is that the tomb is empty. Jesus is gone. It's dark and crazy and scary. You don't know will happen next. You run. You don't know what to say.

Bishop Dietsche in his sermon on Holy Tuesday for the renewal of ordination vows spoke about this time we are living in as one in which we know that a world historical event has just taken place—the pandemic. That things around the world in all sorts of ways are affected and we will look back at this year as turning point. But we do not yet know what will happen next. There are all sorts of possible outcomes, different futures. Will the story in the end simply be a tragedy, or a triumph of the human spirit?

Or a mix, a story of loss but also resilience and hope.

We do not know. But we will live into the answer. We will be part of the story.

And here's where your training as a disciple of Christ, your faith as a Christian, will make a difference. You already know how the great story ends. Not in the short term, not in a timeline measured in years and election cycles, but in the aspect of eternity, in the narrative arc of the Bible. For the story of the Bible is, as someone has said, essentially a love story of the love between God and the people, God and creation. It has lots of hard chapters. There is exile, suffering, death. But in the end God is faithful and the people are freed. In the last chapter of the Christian Bible, God and creation are unified in a glorious vision of the heavenly city of Jerusalem coming down to earth.

That happy ending is made possible by the heroic self sacrifice of Jesus, the Son of God. His is the triumph over evil and death that opens the door.

That victory was won two thousand years ago—and we are celebrating still. We still sing the victory cry, alleluia Christ is risen.

The story is still unfolding. The enemy of evil and death remains potent. We must continue to fight and fall. Because we know, with Sam and Frodo and all the saints and heroes before us, That there's some good in this world, and it's worth fighting for. And so we strive on the side of truth, justice, love. We will prevail. Though the hour is dark, we remember those who have gone before—their stories of ultimate triumph shape and strengthen our spirit. We have in our time our opportunity to stand for something good and true, to fight for justice, equality, freedom. To love. No matter the cost. To love. However hard even futile it seems. To love.

Because love wins in the end. That is the Easter story. The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins, Rector
Grace Church, Millbrook, NY