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## This is Not the End

John 18:1-19:42

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on Good Friday 2020 by the Rev. Bruce Puckett

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I was with my friend the day he died. I visited him in the emergency department where he had arrived by ambulance after suffering another setback related to his cancer. Neither of us knew it would be the day he would die. He'd made so many trips to the ED. In fact, he was quite certain his fight with cancer wasn't over yet. He was certain healing was on the way. It was characteristic of his resolve throughout the whole process of dying for him. He participated in drug trials and new therapies, always looking for what might be the magic bullet for his cancer. But more than that, he was unfailingly hopeful and unfailingly trusting that his life was in the hands of a good God. So he never thought there was a reason to stop hoping he would be healed, even when the prognosis grew more dire.

As we talked that warm July morning, my friend spoke something I'll never forget. "This is not the end," he said. Of course, in one sense, my friend was wrong. It very much was the end for his life on earth. That day was the end of being at home; it was the end of seeing his small children; it was the end of struggling through pain; it was the end of all his desperate attempts to make it out of life alive.

Yet in other ways, he was not wrong. "This is not the end," my friend said, and he was right. My friend spoke a deeper truth that day grounded in his faith in the one who about 2000 years ago spoke a different word at the end of his life. The story from John's Gospel that we just heard, tells us that as Jesus hung on the cross, nailed to the empire's favorite instrument of punishment for political criminals, he spoke a last word before giving up his spirit: Finished. It is finished. It is ended. It is complete. Finished. My friend's hopeful words that day rested in Jesus's declaration. My friend saying, "This is not the end," pointed to a truer, more permanent and abiding reality grounded in Jesus declaring, "Finished."

Yet even recognizing this reality, John's Gospel story doesn't allow us to blissfully close our eyes as if all things are right—as if we could do some sort of spiritual magic trick that keeps us from recognizing and relating to the realities all around us. "This is not the end" reminds us of what has not come to an end. You see this is not yet the end of so many things, and John's story does not let us back away from seeing it. The characters of this story remind us that Jesus's finished work is not the end of human freedom, willfulness, or culpability. Which means, it is not yet the end of humanity being broken, unfaithful, sinful, and even at times hell bent on the kind of harm that nails God to a tree.

John's Gospel reminds us this is not the end of the likes of Judas. Jesus's work being done does not prevent betrayal or selfishness or being sold out by a trusted friend. Jesus's death did not mean the end of heartbreak caused by lies or pain caused by unfaithfulness. You've known this hurt. It's the hurt of abuse, of belittling, of breaking trust, of having the rug pulled out from under you, of being treated unfairly. It's the harm of being disposed of for other's profit or being used to advance someone else's desires. It's the devastation that #metoo and other movements giving voice to victims speak so clearly to. We've experienced this hurt or walked with friends through it or even caused it ourselves. So we know deep within that this finished work of Jesus was not yet the end of these kinds of harm.

This is also not the end of the likes Pilate and the high priests. Jesus's work being done does not stop political maneuvering, responsibility deflecting, calculated power-grabbing, or unjust condemning. You've witnessed this reality. It's the reality of half-truths and calling reports "fake news" meant to deceive and manipulate. It's the reality of abusive religious leaders taking advantage of vulnerable parishioners. It's the reality that makes poor folks pay the highest price and keeps people of color in this country perpetually bound to worse outcomes by nearly every measure. It's the reality that forces undocumented workers into the shadows of suffering and squalor while insisting their harvesting work is essential. It's the reality that allows some companies to reconfigure in order to receive funds not intended for them, while others are left shuttering doors. We don't need to look far to witness that these realities have not yet come to an end.

This is not the end of the likes of Peter either. Jesus's work being finished does not prevent disappointment leading to denial, or fear inspiring rejection, or crushed hopes causing social separation. You've experienced this devastating distancing. It's the distancing done when our faith feels naïve or socially unacceptable, so we walk back on our commitments and leave behind what once we boldly proclaimed. It's the distancing that happens when we're utterly disappointed because change has not come swiftly enough or our methods, though faithful, have not been efficient enough, so we turn to another way, looking for more certain results in shorter time. Our tendencies to turn to ways that are less demanding, more expedient, and more glorious reminds us that being like Peter in these ways has not yet come to an end.

This also is not the end of the likes of the gathered women. Jesus's work being finished does not end piercing grief, overwhelming sadness, or excruciating loss. You've felt this suffering. It's the suffering of a mother seeing her child in searing pain or a child watching her father take his last breath through a video screen. It's the weeping that comes when pandemics steal loved ones, or bullets strike children in cars, or empty plates portend emaciated faces and protruded bellies. It's the pain of irreplaceable relationships ending and isolation and loneliness beginning. It's the gut-wrenching feeling that comes from watching someone you love mocked, belittled, lied about, and harmed. If our world knows anything right now, we know that the tears that come from these kinds of grief and loss have not yet come to an end.

And while these realities yet remain present, they also are not the end. These realities do not get to say "Finished," as if they have the final word. My friend knew the reality of his pain and suffering was not the end. It wasn't the last part of his story; there was more to be told. Tonight, we remember that Jesus is the one who finally declares with his mouth but so much more through his death on the cross, "Finished. Complete. The End." Completed on Jesus's cross is his demonstration of what love looks like. "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (John 13:1). Completed on the cross is Christ showing us what loving as he has loved really means. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:12-13). Completed on the cross is the revelation of how God will go through anything to be with us forever. "God so loved the world that God gave God's only son" (John 3:16). This love is complete. God's love is the end.

Though tonight is not the end of the likes of Judas, or Pilate, or Peter, or the mourning women, tonight is when we remember and claim that the realities represented in these characters do not have the final word: they are not the ultimate end. Betrayal and selfishness and being sold out by a trusted friend are not the end. Political maneuvering, responsibility deflecting, calculated

power-grabbing, and unjust condemning are not the end. Disappointment leading to denial, fear inspiring rejection, and crushed hopes causing social separation are not the end. Piercing grief, overwhelming sadness, and excruciating loss are not the end. The end is God's love. The end is God's love revealed in Jesus's mission completed on the cross.

Tonight is when we remember the end because tonight is when we remember Jesus finishing his mission to show God's love for the whole world by giving his life. And with this end, comes the end of needing to wonder if God really loves you. Finished. With this end, comes the end of a deterministic future "held in sin's dread sway." Finished. With this end, comes the end of the myth that there are things that can separate you from God's love in Jesus. Finished. And while Jesus's life and work is finished, God's story has not yet come to an end on Good Friday. In a short while, there will be a dawn, early on Sunday morning. And the end that is God's love will become a new beginning for all the world. Amen.