
FINISHED

JOHN 19:28-30

**A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL,
FOR GOOD FRIDAY ON FRIDAY, MARCH 30, 2018,
BY THE REV. DR. LUKE A. POWERY**

I recently celebrated a birthday and I must admit it feels good to be 24. But this year, as has happened on previous birthdays, I thought of my death day. It was 1974 on 216th Street in Bronx, New York. One afternoon, I was resting in my mother's arms and I began to struggle to physically breathe and convulsed due to a very high fever. I turned black and blue. One of my older brothers, who was 12 at the time, had just arrived home from school and saw what was happening. He picked up the phone and called my father at work while crying and said, "Luke is dead, Luke is dead." The ambulance came and took my mother and me to the hospital while my father met us there. The medical team said that I was "out for fifteen minutes." Death touched me as an infant and it is a touch that never really goes away. I'm beginning to realize why my students call me 'Dr. Death.' I'm beginning to recognize that theology is not about morality but mortality, life and death. I can't shake death nor will it shake me. I've been touched by its stench. And tonight, I smell it here. Death.

*Does it dry [us] up
Like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore--
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over--
like a syrupy sweet?
Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.
Or does it explode? (Langston Hughes)*

Death does all kinds of things; it does what it does. It demolishes. Tonight, we remember when the Dream of the world died. At least, that's part of the story. It's the part that we may want to overlook so we can electric side into Easter but we can't ignore the smell from Golgotha's tree. It stinks like rotten meat because Christ's bruised and beaten and bloodied flesh sags like a heavy load on a piece of rotten wood. I smell it. I smell death all around for when the Nazareth Dream died, we all died. You might even say—we killed him. Isn't that what one hymn tells us?

*Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon thee?
Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone thee!
'Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee;
I crucified thee. (Ah Holy Jesus).*

It was I, reminding us that sometimes we destroy the very things, the very people, that would save us. The Savior of the world couldn't save himself from Calvary's torture chamber. The horror of the crucifixion was well-known in that day. The Roman philosopher Seneca, a contemporary of

Jesus, thought it was better to commit suicide than to "weigh down on one's own wound and hang impaled on a gibbet."

With all due respect to NCAA basketball fans, the crucifixion of Jesus is the real March Madness and I am mad. Mad at death. Mad at innocent people dying, then and now. Mad about how so many dreams die in the grave. And I'm finished with all of the religious platitudes in the face of suffering and death. I'm finished with death even though we all are dying right now and have been touched in some way by its sting. I'm finished with all of the violence—shootings of innocent people in their own yards or in their schools or mail bombs. I am so finished. I'm through. I'm done. I'm fed up. I'm mad. I'm mad we call this Friday 'Good.' Death is not good and there's nothing good about an innocent man on a bloody death row. There's nothing good about the dehumanization of 'the other' in this nation. There's nothing good about racism or sexism or classism. There's nothing good about any form of schism. I'm finished with the 'isms.' I'm through with a legacy of colonialism that is so prevalent that people need hashtag slogans to assert their own humanity--#blacklivesmatter, #metoo. Why do we need hashtags to see our common humanity?

There's too much inhumanity and I'm mad in March, not over basketball, but because Jesus died this way. As poet Wendell Berry says,

*...who does not tremble
for his pain, his loneliness,
and the darkness of the sixth hour?
Unless we grieve like Mary
at His grave, giving Him up
as lost, no Easter morning comes.*

If we don't care about his death, we don't understand his life. And perhaps we don't care when others die, because we are still alive, so we think. Yet we are killing ourselves. If we keep going like we are, destroying each other with guns, we will kill each other off and we will be finished. We will be in hell, no matter how holy or good or righteous you think we are, because remember as the early church father John Chrysostom said, "Hell is paved with priests' skulls." We are living in the real March Madness. And I'm finished. I'm done.

Luckily, Jesus does not say, "I'm finished." Or, "I'm done." Or, we'd really have a problem on our hands. No matter how stinky and sour or rotten the world gets, Jesus never really gives up on us or the world, although he gave up his spirit. "When Jesus had received the wine, he said, "It is finished." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit." "It is finished" does not mean "I am finished." In the Gospel of John, the crucifixion is presented as the completion of Jesus' ministry and fulfillment of God's will. We're told that "Jesus knew that all was now finished." "It is finished" is more appropriately translated "It is accomplished." His telos, his goal, was reached. What God in Christ set out to do, that is, save the world, was accomplished, and Jesus lets us know that all is complete at the cross.

The cross of Christ shows us the logic of what happens to unconditional love. The cross of Christ shows us that accomplishing anything will cause at least a part of our lives to die. The cross of Christ shows us that anything worth saving is worth dying for. God shows us in Christ that we are worth dying for, even when we are confused about what we are living for, even though we are mad this March, even though we keep falling short of the glory of God, even though through our actions

we keep crucifying Jesus, even though we often exhibit a fickle faith when one day we'll cry "Hosanna" and the next day, we'll scream, "Crucify him!"

Jesus said, "It is finished." It is accomplished. The Christ on the cross cries out, "Done!" So, we enter the Christian life not depending on our own doing but on what Christ has done. "It is finished." He said it. I believe it. He did it. Not us. In fact, his end on the cross is our beginning. In fact, "It is finished" means we are finished. It is finished means we are finished, meaning we've come to the end of ourselves and a new beginning. It looks like an end but it is the end of the end which means a beginning. And maybe that's the whole point. We have to come to the end of ourselves. We have to be finished with us so that we can begin with God in Christ. And where we end is where we begin with God. "I, not I, but Christ." "It is finished." I hope so. I pray so. We need it to be so.

This death day is our birthday sealed in Christ's blood. You've heard about how water turned into wine. Well here, "When Jesus had received the wine, he said, "It is finished...and gave up his spirit." This means, here, we have wine turning into his blood. The blood done signed our name, written in his own blood with a wooden cruciform pen. The cross was Christ's own blood letter of love.

In China's history, there is the tradition of writing in blood, literally. My Divinity School colleague, Professor **Xi Lian**, has recently written a book called *Blood Letters: The Untold Story of Lin Zhao, a Martyr in Mao's China*. This book is the first authoritative biography of Lin Zhao, a poet and journalist executed in 1968 at the height of the Cultural Revolution. She is only Chinese citizen known to have openly and steadfastly opposed communism under Mao and she rooted her dissent in her Christian faith and expressed it in long prophetic writings done in her own blood, at times on her clothes and on cloth torn from her bed sheets. Zhao told the truth with her own blood because human blood doesn't tell lies. It speaks from the soil. It speaks truth. It speaks pain from a prison or a cross. It speaks love. And Christ's love letter inscribed on his body spills over us in crimson so that we might live and love.

When he says, "It is finished," he's always saying to us, "I love you. It's your beginning. It's your new start. You can be a new creation, born through my blood. You might be finished but I'm not finished with you." As David Foster Wallace writes in his novel, *Infinite Jest*, "The truth will set you free. But not until it is finished with you." Jesus isn't finished with us. The wood of the cross puts finishing touches on us, tonight, to give us a new beginning through his lifeblood.

In the midst of life, we are surrounded by death and experience what might be called "little deaths." This is what happened to me as an infant in New York city when my brother said, "Luke is dead. Luke is dead." I was dead to my family but I wasn't dead to God and God wasn't dead to me.

At some point between our departure to the hospital and while there, my other three siblings arrived home, joining my brother. At some point, a neighbor came upstairs in our duplex on 216th Street to see what the commotion was all about. She had heard a lot of movement above her on her ceiling. When she arrived upstairs, she discovered that the noise she heard was that of my four siblings—around ages 14, 12, 8, and 4—pacing the floor, praying for me. The noise she heard was the pacing of little praying feet. Others might have been saying "It's over" but God was saying, "I'm not finished." At the hospital during this time, the doctors used a bucket of ice water to shock me

back into consciousness and to break the fever; it was a baptism back into life. Those little feet on 216th street changed my life with God's help. My life was touched by death *and* life.

“It is finished,” Jesus said. He didn't say, “I am finished” which is what everyone thought. “It is finished” but Jesus is not. **In other words**, it is finished but it ain't over!