

**April 4, 2021
Easter Sunday**

Meditation: “The End?”

Did you hear about the wise old minister who acted as a mentor for a newly ordained minister? One day, the newly ordained minister sought out the wise old minister for advice about his sermons. “What,” he asked, “is the secret to a great sermon?” “Well,” replied the wise old minister, “a great sermon has three parts: a beginning, a middle, and an end.” The newly ordained minister mulled this over for a moment before replying, “But all sermons have a beginning, a middle, and an end.” “Very true,” said the wise old minister, “but the trick is to make the middle as short as possible, so the beginning and end are close together.”

Have you ever been to a worship service and the minister drones on and on and on? I’ve been to one or two myself. The minister preaches not only an eloquent sermon, but several eloquent sermons all in one long never-ending sermon. I suspect that most people, like myself, don’t really remember anything the preacher said in the sermon, just that the preacher passed several excellent ending points.

Any person skilled in the art of telling a story, or a joke, or a sermon can tell you, the ending can be the trickiest part of the entire venture. The entire piece revolves around setting up the ending of the story, for the ending must bring all things to a satisfying conclusion. The ending must wrap up all of the loose ends in a way that makes sense, or in a way that is humorous, or in a way that makes some profound statement, depending on whether it is story, joke, or sermon. And so, from the very beginning, the ending is in mind, unless you are writing a soap opera, in which case, there is never an ending.

And yet, preachers don’t entirely want there to be a pat ending to sermons. They don’t want people going home after church thinking that they now have the definitive word on the apocalypse or eschatology or perichoresis. No! Preachers want people going home thinking about the content of the sermon, struggling with it, coming to grips with what it means in their lives, and an ending that ties up all the loose ends like a ribbon around a present prevents such pondering.

Fortunately for preachers, there are any number of biblical examples of stories without endings. Like the story of the prodigal son. What happens at the end of that story? Does the older brother join in the party, or does he run off? Are the brothers reconciled? Does the older brother crash the party and tip over the tables of food in a spirit of sour grapes?

And what about the story of the man beaten and left for dead, who is discovered and nursed by the good Samaritan? What happens at the end of that story? Does he recover fully, or is he left with some kind of permanent impairment? Does he seek revenge on the men who beat him, robbed him, and left him to die, or does he commit his life to ensuring

that all have work and enough pay to feed their families without resorting to highway robbery? Does the Samaritan ever return to the inn-keeper to pay the balance of the bill, or is the inn-keeper on the hook for the injured man's tab?

And then there is the gospel of Mark. We read the ending that is found in the most ancient transcripts. ' "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.'

Really? They said nothing to anyone? Then how is it that the gospel of Mark was ever written? How is it that the church came into being? How is it that we are followers of the Christ if nobody said anything? What a stupid ending. No, what a non-ending. What happened? Did Jesus rise? Did they actually see him, or did they only hear about it from a divine messenger, God's UPS guy, an angel? What happened next? Did they go to Galilee? Come on, Mark, give us a break. This should be the ultimate happy ending, and instead, it stops abruptly, like you had some kind of massive heart attack and died mid-sentence.

At least Matthew had an ending, sort of. The eleven saw Jesus in Galilee, and he said, "Hit the road Jack, and don't you come back no more, no more, no more, no more. Hit the road Jack, and don't you come back no more." Well, okay, he really said, "Go, and make disciples of all nations." At least in Matthew the disciples saw the risen Christ.

Luke says that the disciples saw Jesus in Jerusalem, and that he told them to stay in the city until they were clothed with power from on high. And then he led them out to Bethany, lifted his hands, blessed them, and then disappeared into the heavens. Okay, so what then? Actually, the book of Acts was written by the same author, and to the same person, Theophilus, so the entire book of Acts is the ending of the gospel.

John, like the others, had a difficult time wrapping up his gospel. With Jesus dead, the disciples went back to what they knew; fishing. And after breakfast on the beach, Jesus tells Peter, "Follow me." Follow me? That was what Jesus said at the beginning of the story; follow me. The story has gone full circle.

Maybe the real problem is that we all expect the end of the gospel to be the end of the story. All the gospels tell us of the life, ministry and death of Jesus. Matthew and Luke add in the birth of Jesus. Matthew, Luke, and John add in post-resurrection stories. They all tell of the end of Jesus, but not one of them tells the end of the story. That's because they are but a chapter in a larger story that is being told. They are but part of the story of God's grace, and God's grace continues.

We see God's grace in people working to build shelter for the homeless and hard to house. Think of the tiny homes London erected for the homeless to shelter out of the cold and separated from one another due to pandemic concerns this past winter. We see God's grace in the transitional and supportive housing Indwell is building in St. Thomas for people with disabilities, mental health issues, addiction issues, or a combination thereof. We see God's grace in the recent story of the men building tiny homes for First Nations communities, to address the lack of decent housing in those communities.

We see the grace of God in safe injection sites that help keep people alive and out of our hospitals. They give people a safe and regular place to go where relationships and trust are formed, which in turn leads to opportunities to help people deal with their psychological and other issues and break their addictions.

We see the grace of God in the men and women who work in the ICUs, keeping people alive, or at least treating people with dignity in their dying days in this pandemic. We also see the grace of God in the vaccination centres where some are finding not only immunity to the virus, but hope for a future beyond the pandemic.

We see the grace of God in being able to gather virtually to worship God together and to keep one another safe from the pandemic for the second Easter in a row, knowing that we will, once again, be able to gather safely in-person to worship God in the future. For as surely as Jesus left the tomb, we too will leave this pandemic time of social isolation and lockdown to begin life anew.

We see the grace of God all around us. Indeed, the ministries each of us engages in is a sign of God's grace to someone. The end of the gospel is not the end of the story. The story continues. We are the church, the Body of Christ. We are the story in our time, in our place. What this chapter looks like is up to you and me. God is not done with us any more than we are done with God. This is not the end, but a new beginning.

Hallelujah! Christ is risen! The story continues.