

Good Friday Meditation: "It is finished." –John 19:30

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Ecumenical Good Friday Service
The Community Church of Sebastopol, UCC
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church
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I.

Good evening, and may the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. My name is Benjamin Broadbent and I gratefully serve the good people of The Community Church of Sebastopol, a congregation of the United Church of Christ. On behalf of the members of Community Church, I greet you, the members of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, who are extending your hospitality to members of the wider community on this Good Friday.

Our two congregations have engaged in some significant ministry together over the years, including support of the Inter-Church Pantry which began on our grounds and abides on yours.

This mutual work for the common good is something worthy of celebration.

Since arriving in August, I have been grateful to your rector, the Rev. Christy Laborda Harris, who has warmly welcomed me as a colleague and co-laborer.

I trust you know that you have a remarkable pastor who leads with vision, faith, creativity, and intelligence.

Pastor Christy, I am honored by your invitation to preach on this occasion.

Perhaps I told you know that the first sermon I ever preached in Sebastopol was here in your sanctuary.

Last February, the Search Committee at Community Church was looking for a neutral space for me to preach a candidate sermon and right here is where it happened, on a Tuesday afternoon no less.

I expect to have a special place in my heart for the people, pastor, and place of St. Stephen's Parish for years to come.

II.

For Christians of various traditions to come together like this is a powerful statement. While we practice the faith with slightly different flavors, we are people of a common story.

Hearing the story together, we acknowledge, that, in Christ, I belong to you and you belong to me.

We are not separate or opposed, but members of a common body.

Furthermore, our coming together is a statement to the wider culture that God is at work everywhere, healing divisions, overcoming barriers, and creating a new world.

That said, I will observe, here at the outset, one apparent difference between Congregational and Episcopalian liturgical practice, and that is that Episcopalians aren't afraid to read long scriptural texts.

My own experience in the United Church of Christ is that we tend to like our scriptures short, imbibing in tiny sips, so to speak.

Perhaps this is because we tend to feel that our responsibility is to let no syllable of scripture go by untested – or tasted, to stick with the metaphor – but one effect of sipping the scriptures is that we don't experience the scriptures washing over us in all their grandeur and mystery.

This evening, we have heard one of the Suffering Servant songs from Isaiah which begins in one chapter and ends in the next, and we have heard the passion narrative from the Gospel of John.

Like the waters of baptism, these texts have washed over us.

There is too much to comprehend all at once, and so we enter the experience of being awash in story and saturated with meaning.

As we kick our feet and tread within that ocean of text, I would like to concentrate on a single Greek word, *tetelestai*. In English, we hear this: "It is finished."

According to the Gospel writer John, this is the last word Jesus utters before releasing his spirit and surrendering to death upon the cross. *Tetelestai*.

My hope is that by focusing on this one word we might understand the spiritual truth that in a single drop of water is contained the entire ocean.

III.

I am becoming more and more convinced that we should never read scriptural texts in isolation, but always within the wider context of the book wherein they are contained and within the canon of scripture itself.

When some of us hear the phrase "It is finished," we wonder "What is finished?"

If you search the internet looking for answers, you might find a page explaining that *tetelestai* is a legal term signifying that Jesus has finished the work of paying off humanity's debt to God.

While this is a one interpretation of Jesus' death, it is not the only one, and so-called "ransom" theology requires a lot of extra-biblical sources to keep itself going.

When we don't read the Bible much, we can end up believing that the Bible says a lot of things that it just doesn't say, or at least that it emphasizes things it does not emphasize.

Another option is to consider "It is finished" in light of how the Gospel of John begins.

The Gospel writer did not compose his account willy-nilly, but to make a theological statement.

You remember the first words of John's Gospel, a kind of hymn to God and creation: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. The Word was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through the Word, and without the Word not one thing came into being."

As you read through John's Gospel, you realize that Jesus is the incarnation of the primordial Word which was there since the beginning. This is what is referred to as John's high Christology – whereas in Matthew and Luke Jesus was born in Bethlehem, in John Jesus was already there at creation.

John begins with "in the beginning," and so does the book of Genesis.

The word "finished" appears in the Genesis account. Do you remember?

At sundown on the 6th day, after God has finished creating, God looks at everything that God has made, porpoises, poppies, and people, humans, and God blesses all of it and calls it good

And the text tells us, "Thus the heavens and earth were *finished*, and all their multitude."

And God takes a whole day off for a well-deserved rest.

If Genesis is the story of the creation of the universe, John is the story of the re-creation of the universe through the incarnate Word.

But if God created the world once upon a time, blessed it, and called it good, why does God need to re-create it?

Because look around you, look at what we humans have done with the freedom God granted as a gift.

And yet the whole of scripture is the story of God creating and granting freedom, while humans struggle with the enormous responsibility of this gift, sometimes getting it right and other times getting it terribly wrong.

And yet God does not give up.

The story of scripture is not creation, fall, redemption, but creation, fall, redemption, fall, redemption, fall, redemption, fall...

In the Word made flesh, God seeks to establish a new kind of relationship, not by taking away freedom, but by filling that freedom with love, for God so loved the world, that God created a new kind of relationship, giving a new commandment to love one another as God has loved you, modeling the love of a friend laying down his life for a friend, going so far in a later letter to claim, unequivocally, that "God is love."

What is finished when Jesus says, "It is finished"?

The work of re-creation through an act of love that overcomes the power of death and violence once and for all.

This is the truth which the Gospel has entrusted to the church, that death, poor death, has been defeated once and for all, that creation has been re-created, and that eternal life is not so much everlasting life in the great beyond, but fullness of life already in our midst.

IV.

I can hear someone saying, those are some fine ideas, preacher: recreation, love overcoming death, eternal life now, but let me quote your words back to you: "Look around you. Look at Syria. Look at our homeless neighbors. Look at mental illness. Look at lonely elders. Look at strung out teenagers. Look at the blanched coral reefs. Look at depression. If Jesus has put an end to death, why is it so obviously everywhere around us?"

Whoever you are, you have a very good point.

In 2012, my family and I went on a sabbatical together to South Africa.

With children who were 6 and 3 at the time, my wife and I were tested over three months in our ability to let go.

One week we flew to Mauritius, an island nation in the Indian Ocean.

On the day we arrived, night fell as we got lost trying to find our rented apartment.

We finally found it, but every day held a similar adventure.

On one such journey, we drove through cane fields to the opposite side of the island trying to find a water park, Le Water Park, to be exact.

When we finally arrived, we were crushed to find the parking lot empty.

All that way and Le Water Park was closed.

But it wasn't closed, just not well attended. We were one of three other families there that day, outnumbered by staff 10-to-1.

Our favorite waterslide was also the scariest. It was called The Black Hole.

It was a long, dark, winding tunnel that you rode on an inner tube, either solo or with another person.

You need to know that, from the time I was a kid, I've had an irrational fear of enclosed waterslides.

For some reason, I was afraid they wouldn't open up at the end, but would close up causing me to drown in the dark.

So, of course, when my son wanted to go down the Black Hole, I said, "sure."

From the bright island sun, we plunged into pitch darkness.

Water splashed in our faces as we made our way steadily down the tube of death.

After what seemed an eternity in the dark, I panicked.

This seems longer than it did from the outside.

Shouldn't we have come out the other side by now?
Something is terribly wrong. We must have taken a wrong turn.
My heart racing, I gripped the edge of tube, ready to meet my watery grave. This is how it would all end.
And then I remembered to breath...
And, suddenly, a glow appeared and then a bright light, a splash down, laughter, clapping, relief, joy.

I don't know why violence and death are so tenacious, and hope so tenuous.
Much of the time my faith is at risk of drowning.
But my faith is buoyed when we come together like this, to tell the story, the old, old story of Jesus and his love.
When we come together, we remind one another, in the words of the letter to the Hebrews, that "Jesus is the pioneer and the perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God."
It is finished.
The victory is already won.
We're half way down the dark waterslide.
Panic if you must, but you know the whole story, you know how it ends.
So, breathe. There's light up ahead.
Amen.