

IT AiN'T OVER
Sermon, April 16, 1017
Easter Sunday
Isaiah 25:6-9, Matthew 28:1-10; Colossians 3:1-4

In December 2006, Sylvester Stallone's **Rocky Balboa** was released, the last and latest of his tried and true success formula of a boxing-comeback film. The original Rocky series started 'way back in 1976, thirty years earlier; those films were hugely popular in the Philadelphia area where I was raised. In this latest release Rocky, now in his late-fifties/early sixties (*according to Wikipedia, the fictional biography for Rocky has him being born in 1945, so in 2006, he'd be 61!*) and long retired from boxing, lives a quiet life as a widower ... having lost his wife Adrian to cancer. In 2006 I was in my late fifties, not retired from boxing but certainly feeling the aches and pains of an aging athlete, and also living the somewhat quiet life as a widower; you can understand how I personally connected to this movie. Just before the fight with the current (and young) boxing champion, Mason Dixon, in Las Vegas, Rocky has a verbal encounter with his young opponent who tries to caution him to not try anything serious or else Dixon would have to hurt him. Rocky replies, "*You know, a lot of people come to Vegas to lose. I didn't.*" Dixon replies with a hint of arrogant dismissal and disgust, "*It's already over, old man.*"

Rocky Balboa replies: "*Nuthin's over till it's over.*" Mason Dixon replies, "*What's that from, the eighties?*" Rocky (*somewhat paternally*) corrects him, "*That's probably the seventies.*"¹

And Rocky was right, it was the seventies. The actual quote is, "*It ain't over till it's over.*" It is probably one of the best known quotes of American baseball legend Yogi Berra (*who passed away at age 90 last September 2015*). "*It ain't over till it's over*" was an offhanded remark made by Berra at a news conference during the 1973 baseball season when the team he managed, the New York Mets, were back in fifth place during the pennant race. Against all odds, Berra eventually managed the team back to the top, and the Mets went on to win that year's division title! The Mets fell to the Oakland Athletics in the 1973 World Series, but they went the distance in a close-fought seven-game series. (*Little personal trivia aside: One of the pitchers of that 1973 team was lefty Jon Matlack — he's from my home town, went to school with my oldest brother and pitched for our high school team. He was drafted right out of high school in 1967 to the Mets farm system, and our town cheered as he won the 1972 Rookie of the Year ... he was arguably New York's top pitcher in the 1973 season, especially the final few weeks!*)

Another well-known quote attributed to Yogi Berra was, "*It's like deja-vu all over again.*" That was reportedly said after Roger Maris and Mickie Mantle made back to back home runs. However, in 1987 Yogi confessed to **NY Times** columnist William Safire that he actually didn't say this; that interview birthed another Yogi-ism: "*I really didn't say everything I said.*" In the same 1987 Times column, Berra declined credit for another widely attributed Yogi-ism: "*Always go to other people's funerals. Otherwise, they won't go to yours.*"² Three other well known Berra quotes he actually did say: "*You can observe a lot by just watching.*" "*The future ain't what it used to be.*" "*The towels were so thick there [at a nice hotel where the team stayed] I could hardly close my suitcase.*"

But again, "*It ain't over till it's over*" is probably the most well known of Yogi Berra's lines; there is something about the never-say-die, no-matter-the-odds-we-can-do-this spirit of "*It ain't over...*" that inspires. Packed into that somewhat oxymoronic but profound quote are the optimistic and inspiring and tenacious imperatives: "Don't give up! Don't make a final judgment on your life situation just yet! Don't quit! Don't despair! Don't give in! Things can still turn around!" The never-say-never optimism of Berra's words resonate to this day; if you'll pardon the pun, that phrase was a home run. "*It ain't over till it's over!*"

It sure looked like it was over to the followers of Jesus that first Good Friday. They had such high hopes. They had listened to His teaching and it had authority and power like nothing they had ever heard before. They had seen Him perform wonders and miracles. They had seen the lame walk and the blind given their sight. They had even seen this man walk on the water and calm storms at sea with just the words of His mouth. And they had even been present at the cemetery and watched Him call a dead man back to life! This must be the Messiah! In Jesus, they saw everything they had longed for, and so they

¹ You can view this exchange at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EgpvtdrtiPc>

² See https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/24/sports/yogi-berra-yogi-isms-quotes-explored.html?_r=0

had committed their lives to Him. They had left nets and boats, tax collection tables and homes to follow this carpenter from Nazareth. In Him they had placed all their hopes and their dreams.

But then it happened. He was arrested. He was condemned in a farce of a trial. They saw from a distance as He was beaten and led out to the gallows. They saw as His hands and feet were nailed to the cross. And while most of the disciples were not close enough to hear it with their own ears, His mother, His mother's sister, two other women named Mary, and one who is called "the disciple Jesus loved" ... all of THEM were close enough to hear Jesus Himself say, "It is finished." Surely they must have thought, "Well, that's it. It's over. He even said so Himself."

That is one way to interpret the words, "It is finished." To any ordinary onlooker at Calvary that day, it would be a logical conclusion. Those who mocked Him that day as He hung on the cross bellowed their taunts, *"He saved others, but he can't save himself. What a failure!"* That's the conclusion many came to that first Good Friday. But there is another way to look at what Jesus meant when He said, *"It is finished,"* a way that spurns despair, cynicism, and defeatism. It is the way that hears, *"It is completed! It is accomplished. It is done."* This is the meaning ratified by the good news of Easter. *"It is finished"* was not a statement of resignation. The Gospels tell us Jesus cried out with a LOUD voice, which can be interpreted a TRIUMPHANT voice. Those who hang on crosses usually whimper into unconsciousness oblivion as they suffocate, as crucifixion causes fluid to fill the lungs. But this cry is not that of a dying man. On Friday, Jesus' life didn't end with a whimper, but with a shout! A shout of triumph! A shout of victory.

Mark's Gospel tells us that there standing in front of Jesus was one who has heard such cries before. There standing in front of Jesus at the foot of the cross was a Roman centurion, one who has commanded men in battle, one who had known the nobleness of life offered for another. And this centurion took notice. Using words which until now have been spoken only by God, the centurion asserts, *"Surely this man was the Son of God."* Is it over? No! Especially for this centurion who recognizes Jesus Christ for who He is, it was not the end; if anything, it was the *beginning* for this perceptive soldier!

Looked at in this fashion, *"It is finished"* is the bold assertion, *"What I have come to do has now been done! All is completed, all is accomplished, all is now fulfilled."* What had been in the works for centuries, even millennia, what the entire drama of prophecy and inspiration and hope and salvation, what all the types and prophecies and promises, what all the sacrifices of the old Jewish law were all about ... it is all now finished. Fulfilled. Completed. *"It is finished"* means it is *done*, settled, decided, complete. *"Consummatum est!"* as they say in Latin. The ratification of the New Covenant is finished, sealed in blood. As mentioned during Maundy Thursday worship, the cup of God's wrath and judgment is finished, drained by Jesus.

As Jesus had repeatedly told His disciples, the cross was a necessity. It was part of the plan. He had to go there. It was not so much something done to Him as it was something He *elected*, something He chose to do. It is *not* over. Rather, it is **completed**. The victory is won and Jesus has won it!

However, as theologian and philosopher Blaise Pascal once remarked, *"Jesus will be in agony until the end of the world."* The agony of Jesus did not end on the cross. Any parent can relate to those words of Pascal. The consummate completion of your love is born in the new life of a child, but the sweet agony that we call parenthood is only just beginning. At birth, it is finished ... the child is born ... but it sure isn't over!

On the cross we see the consummate completion of God's love which enables us all to be born *again*. "It is finished." But it certainly ain't over. *"IT AIN'T OVER UNTIL IT'S OVER."* We live in the time between the times ... the kingdom is begun in Christ, but it will not be perfected, it will not reach full maturity, until the end of the world. In the meantime, Jesus agonizes over the children of God whom His work of grace and love has spiritually conceived; His Spirit broods over them as they mature, as they grow, as they develop into the people of God they were designed and destined to be. The Spirit of God remains at work sanctifying us; making us, molding us to grow and be more and more like Him. The church militant is on the move to become the church triumphant, knowing that He who began a good work in us will see it through to completion to its glorious end result.

As we sang earlier, *"Love's redeeming work is done, fought the fight the battle won."* It may be done, but God's work is not yet over, complete. In that sealed tomb, God raised Jesus from death to resurrected life, the life that will never, never die. And that new life to which He has been raised is also in store for you and for me ... the wonderful, glorious, perfect end in store for all who come to new life in Jesus Christ.

"It is finished." But it ain't over! Because He has Risen. HE HAS RISEN, INDEED.