

THE END OF THE BEGINNING; THE BEGINNING OF THE END

Sermon, Easter Sunday April 17, 2021

Texts: Luke 24:1-12; Acts 10:34-43

Those of you who were here on Good Friday remember our liturgy that commemorated the Seven Last Words of Jesus from the cross. The sixth of those seven statements from our Lord's lips was, "It is finished." When something is finished, it's over, isn't it? That's certainly what it felt like 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. Why, they had even been present at the tomb of Lazarus and watched Him call that dead man back to life. This must be the Messiah! The One they had long been waiting for! In Jesus, they saw everything they had longed for, and so they 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 their hopes and dreams.

But then it happened. He was arrested, and it looked like the beginning of the end, a dreadful end. He was condemned in a farce of a trial. They saw from a distance as He was beaten and led out to the gallows carrying His own cross. They saw as His hands and feet were brutally nailed to that 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" were all within earshot at the foot of that cross and all heard Jesus Himself say, "It is finished." Surely they thought, "*Well, that's it. He even said so Himself. It's over.*" The End.

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. By any typical measure of success, Jesus' life and His little movement were now a resounding failure, and had come to an end. Those who mocked Him that day as He hung on the cross bellowed, "*He saved others, but He can't save Himself. What a failure!*" It seems the logical thing to conclude: "It's over." That's the conclusion many came to on that first Good Friday. For that matter, it is a conclusion many in our day come to about Jesus and His movement, as well. "*Christianity is dead,*" they say. "*In this secular day, why waste your time with a crucified man named Jesus and the dead faith that bears His name?*" Why indeed? And Jesus continues to be ridiculed.

But you know, nailed to Jesus' cross was Pilate's mocking sign that read "JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS." It was written in just three languages. Three languages spoken in that region of the world, Aramaic, Latin and Greek. Three languages, because no other language was needed.

However today, people around the whole world are proclaiming not in just three languages, but in hundreds, if not thousands, of languages: **CHRIST IS RISEN!** (*the following are largely phonetic spellings as I don't have an Arabic, Cyrillic, Mandarin, Korean, Greek, etc keyboard! For a whole bunch more, see the link in the footnote!*)¹

In Germany, people are proclaiming: "**Christus ist auferstanden!**"

In the Ukraine, people are proclaiming: "**Khrystos voskres! Voistynu voskres!**"

In Russia, there are people proclaiming: "**Khristos voskres!**"

In Greece (*and on Oaklawn Avenue in Cranston!*), people are proclaiming. "**Christos anesti!**"

In Spain and Mexico: "**Cristo ha resucitado!**"

In France: "**Le Christ est ressuscité!**"

In Saudi Arabia: "**Almasih qama haqana qama!**" (*or something like that!*)

In China: "**Jīdū fùhuóle!**"

In Korea: "**Yesunimi buhwal hasyeosda!**"

In the Philippines: "**Si Kristo ay nabuhai!**"

In Hungary: "**Krisztus feltamad!**"

And in my native Philadelphia – "**Yo! Christ is Risen! How you doin'?**"

That's just twelve languages; again, it is being proclaimed around the world today in hundreds, if not thousands, of languages ... according to a little googling I did, there are over seven THOUSAND known languages in the world today. No, it wasn't over on that first Good Friday; Good Friday was only the End of the Beginning! For just a few quick (and encouraging!) examples: According to the research organization **Operation World**, the

¹ [Paschal Greetings from Around the World - Orthodox Church in America \(oca.org\)](http://oca.org)

fastest growing church in the entire world ... is in Iran! The Iranian Revolution of 1979 established a hard-line Islamic regime, and over the next few decades, Christians faced increasing opposition and persecution: all missionaries were kicked out, Bibles in Persian were banned and soon became scarce, several pastors were killed. The church came under tremendous pressure, and many feared it would soon wither away and die. But the exact opposite has happened. If you are under twenty years of age, more Iranians have become Christians in your lifetime than in the previous thirteen centuries combined. The second-fastest-growing church in the world? It's in Afghanistan ... where Afghans are being reached in large part by Iranians! ² In 1948, missionaries were forced to leave China. Today there are more Christians meeting to worship saying "Jīdū fūhuóle!" in mainland China than there are Christians gathering to worship in America saying "Christ is risen." ³

You see, there is another way to look at what Jesus meant when He said "It is finished." It is the way that spurns despair, cynicism, and defeatism. It is the way that hears, "It is COMPLETED!" It is accomplished! It is done. We just sang, "Love's redeeming work is done, fought the fight the battle won!" This is the meaning ratified by the good news of Easter. With His words "It is finished", we now know what Jesus was saying is that all was now *complete*; all was now *fulfilled*. "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 hung on crosses usually whimpered into unconsciousness oblivion as they suffocated, 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! Then, now that His work was completed, He willingly chose to commit His spirit into God's hands; some marveled that He died so quickly (*that's why His legs weren't broken, see John 19:33*). Mark's Gospel tells us that there standing in front of Jesus was one who had heard such cries before ... a Roman centurion, one who had commanded men in battle, one who had surely known the nobleness of life offered for another. This battle-hardened centurion took notice of the Divine Warrior fighting His battle on the cross, and he asserted, "Surely this man was the Son of God." Is it the end? Especially for this centurion who recognizes Jesus Christ for Who He is, it was not the end; if anything, it may have been a grand new beginning for this perceptive warrior.

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, once and for all. Fulfilled. Completed. "Consummatum est!" as they say in Latin. The ratification of the New Covenant is finished, sealed in blood. 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." His agony 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 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. But to quote another great theologian, Yogi Berra, "It ain't over until it's over". "It is finished." But it is not over. We live in the time between the times -- the kingdom is begun in Christ but 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 God designed and destined them 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 temporal church militant is on the move to become the eternal church triumphant, knowing that He who began a good work of redemption in us will see it through to completion to its eternal and glorious end result.

Yes, "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. Good Friday was the end of the beginning, and Easter is the beginning of the END ... the grand and glorious and wonderful and eternal and perfect END ... that is in store for all who come to new life in Jesus Christ.

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

² [Day 2: The Fastest-Growing Church in the World \(thegospelcoalition.org\)](http://thegospelcoalition.org)

³ [Will China be world's largest Christian nation by 2025? - Denison Forum](http://denisonforum.com)