

“CROSS WORDS: VI – ‘IT IS FINISHED’”
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Elkton United Methodist Church
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Fifth Sunday of Lent

Romans 5:8-11

John 19:29-30a

Well, I don't know about you, but I sure have been spending a lot more time on the computer since this coronavirus crisis began. I've been working from home on it, I've been writing back and forth to people on it, and I've been connecting with people on Facebook as well. And I have to tell you, while Facebook has been overloaded with some really heavy stuff about how to deal with this horrible pandemic, there have also been some things on there that lift your spirits, and others that make you laugh out loud.

Wendy Eller sent me a hysterical film clip of a mother praying to God, totally frustrated with trying to home school her children. I mean, it made me laugh until I cried! Then, of course, tons of people are posting about how being inside constantly has seen them cave in to eating all sorts of not-so-good things – particularly an overabundance of chocolate!

And finally, one of the other funny things is all of the women who are posting about the fact that, pretty soon, their roots are going to be showing – you know, since all of the hair salons are closed these days. The only solace they find in their panic is that everyone else will be walking around with gray roots too!

Thankfully, for me, that's not an issue. God is and has always been my hair colorist. I think I told you once that, when I was younger, I decided to wait to start to dye my hair after a decent amount of gray showed up. Well, one day, I looked up and clearly, I had waited too long, for my head was filled with more than a decent amount of gray, and I decided, oh well, too late, I'll just go with it.

But really, truth be told, and I've told you this before too, the reason I have gray hair is that I've been a Philadelphia sports fan my whole life. And that means long-suffering seasons of hoping for the best and living with disappointment when it doesn't come.

Oh, of course, we had the Super Bowl a couple of years ago, and that was fantastic. But this year, with the Eagles, oh my . . . I'm not sure any team had to deal with the amount of injuries that starters suffered more than the Eagles did

this year. But miraculously, they made the playoffs anyway, so when they did, we diehard Eagles fans thought to ourselves, “Why not? We did it before, we can do it again.”

But then, not too far into the game, our starting quarterback Carson Wentz, went off the field after a play, and the camera caught the medical team checking him out. Then the camera followed as he was led off of the field into the locker room, and no matter what amount of optimism we tried to muster, we knew it was bad. My brother Adam said to me later, “As soon as I saw that, I knew it was finished. We were done. It was over, the season ended.”

In that single moment, defeat set in.

Well my friends, in a single moment, on a Friday long ago, defeat seems to set in as well. Jesus, suffering and dying on a cruel cross at Golgotha. Before he was even put on the cross, he had suffered horribly at the hands of his enemies – both physically and emotionally. And then, hanging on the cross in agony for hours . . . death coming closer minute by minute, as a crowd stood by watching.

Jesus spoke words in those last hours – words of forgiveness, words of promise for a dying criminal, words of love and care for those he loved, words of forsakenness and thirst – and now, he speaks a sixth word – “It is finished.”

No doubt, some of those standing by nodded their heads in agreement.

The Pharisees, with evil grins on their faces, must have thought to themselves, “It sure is finished. Finally. He’s not going to be able to challenge us anymore, not going to be able to practice his radical lifestyle that makes everyone question what we’re doing. It’s finished alright, and it’s about time.”

And no doubt, Satan was pleased as well. He had done his worst, and it appears to have worked. Why, he even got the crowds that had shouted “Hosanna!” to Jesus on Palm Sunday, to turn on him and shout “Crucify him!” just days later. Satan knew he had won when he heard Jesus say, “It is finished.”

But there were others, who didn't hear it that way. Like Jesus' disciples. For them, those words were devastating. "It is finished." They must have been thinking, "It **is** finished. All those hopes and dreams we had. Those things he called us to do – finished. The change in the world we had hoped to see because of him – not happening." For the disciples, "It is finished," broke their hearts. Life as they knew it would be no more.

It's very shocking when life as you know it comes to a screeching halt, isn't it? We know a little bit about that right now, don't we? I mean, who knew, that for the third week in a row we would be worshipping via video? Who knew, when we left church on Sunday, March 8th we wouldn't be back together in person for a long time, the end date of which we're still not sure?

Who knew that schools, stores, restaurants, practically everything would close down, and we'd be asked to stay away from each other? Who knew that a little virus could take over the world and everyone's way of life?

It's been a shock to all of us, and for me, and I suspect for you as well, there have been moments, when we're tired, or we've watched too many news reports, or seen too many things on social media, that we've succumbed to fear and actually started to think, "It is finished. We can't go on like this. It's over."

It is precisely then, my dear friends, that we need to remember these words that Jesus spoke from the cross. Because when Jesus said them, they were **not** words of defeat, there were words of victory. For Jesus was saying, "It is finished. It is done. I have come what God sent me to do. It is complete."

Someone has likened what Jesus said to what the great artist Michelangelo might have said when he finished painting the Sistine Chapel. When he made that last brush stroke on that masterful work, imagine, with paintbrush still in hand, and weariness around his eyes, he looked up to God, giving it to God as a gift, saying, "It is finished, it is complete, it is done."

Indeed, when Jesus died on the cross, it was not a moment of defeat, but a moment of victory. He was finished, he had done what God sent him to do, he had shown the world what love looks like, and then, in his final act of love, he sacrificed

himself that we might have life – forgiven, free, and forever. He paid the price for all of our sins, and, by doing that, insured that nothing would ever separate us from God again.

Matthew, Mark and Luke, in each of their gospels, speak of the curtain of the temple being torn in two when Jesus died. Here's what they were talking about. You might remember that the temple in those days was divided into different courts, and only certain people who go into the different courts. Some were reserved only for priests, and one, was reserved only for the high priest – it was where the Holy of Holies resided – the Ark of the Covenant.

Separating the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple was a huge, heavy curtain. That curtain only parted once a year, when the high priest went in to offer a sacrifice for the sins of the people. So only the high priest had direct access to God.

That is, until Jesus died on the cross, and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Which means that Jesus' death forever changed things. No longer is anyone separated from God – his death erased that. So that, too, was finished on the cross.

“It is finished.” No, not words of defeat, but words of completion, accomplishment, words that remind us that with God evil never has the final word, death never has the final word, chaos never has the final word.

Words we dearly need to remember and cling to especially now. Coronavirus does not have the final word, neither does separation, social distancing, chaos or confusion – God does. And the final word with God is always life.

Even in the midst of the chaos of these days, we’re seeing signs of that God-given life. When the world is calling us to turn inward, many instead have turned outward, helping others. You know that earlier this week I called for people to help make face masks for Union Hospital. You can’t believe the response I got! So many offers to help, that we now have a waiting list a mile long (waiting for more materials to be ready). A sign of God-given life!

I know many of you have personally received gifts of God through other people during these weeks of isolation. There have been phone calls, letters, cards, offers of help, groceries dropped off at your house. I was the happy recipient this week of homemade soup and a bag of Kit Kats!

You want to see life go on in the midst of chaos? Go to Channel 11's website and look at the video of the neighborhood in Baltimore where neighbors go to the end of their driveways early every morning and say the Pledge of Allegiance together, then greet each other from a distance before going back inside for the day. Not a big deal in the grand scheme of things, but a sign of God-given life that says sickness and separation does not have the final word – life does – God does!

Something similar to that happened up at Willow Valley where the residents there went out on their balconies waving flags and singing “God Bless America” together.

And something equally wonderful happened on Facebook when a former Camp Pecometh counselor, Barbara Dean's granddaughter Olivia, sang camp songs live, so that others could join in and spirits could be lifted.

In those and so many other ways, we Christians are saying to a world that might be thinking “it is finished” that they need to look at those three words in a new way – not as defeat, but as a sign of confidence that everything is in the hands of God and all will yet be well. God is in control and his will **will** be accomplished, in his time. If we cling to that in these troubling days, we will not only get through this, but we will witness to the world the power of God’s love poured out in the life, death and resurrection of Christ Jesus. May it be so.

Amen.