

Comedy or Tragedy?

An Easter Sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on March 31, 2024
Friendship Presbyterian Church

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.
(Luke 24:1-12, NRSV)

Thanks to the miracle of Netflix, I watched a fascinating movie a while back. It was called "Stranger than Fiction." Have you seen it? It stars the comedian Will Farrell, but it's definitely a departure from his usual work. Farrell plays Harold Crick, an auditor for the Internal Revenue Service. And one day Harold begins to hear the voice of a woman describing his thoughts and actions in real-time. So while he's brushing his teeth, for example, the voice says, "Harold brushes his teeth exactly 76 times (38 vertical strokes, 38 horizontal)" and so on. He discovers that he is a character in a story being written by this woman, and, as you might imagine, he becomes obsessed with finding out how the story ends.

Harold goes to see a literature professor (played by the brilliant Dustin Hoffman), who tells him that there are basically two kinds of stories: comedies and tragedies. Now, comedies aren't necessarily "ha-ha" funny, though of course, they can be and often are. At the root, a comedy is simply a story with a happy ending: the main character wins ... the hero saves the day ... the couple rides off into the sunset. Everybody lives happily ever after.

In a *tragedy*, the story has a very different ending: the main character – the character you become attached to, and even love – dies. And so, Harold needs to figure out if his story is a comedy or a tragedy.

I won't tell you what happens to Harold. You can see the movie for yourself. But it occurs to me that this same question hangs over *our* lives and everything we do. What kind of story are we living, a comedy or a tragedy?

Those first disciples of Jesus *thought* they knew what kind of story *they* were living. It had been a *beautiful* story. The previous three years had been the most amazing adventure. They had learned and seen and done more than they ever thought possible:

- ... Experiencing the mother-of-all wedding parties with the best wine in the world
- ... Witnessing 5000 people getting fed with five loaves and two fish
- ... More ex-lepers than you could count
- ... Knocking tables over in a Temple rabble-rouse
- ... All the wonderful, crazy things that Jesus said and did

What a journey it had been. But now it was over.

They had come to believe that he was the Messiah, the promised one who would set them free from the Romans, put down the indifferent elites, and finally lift up the poor. They had pinned all their hopes on him, had left everything behind to follow him all the way.

Maybe they should have known better. Maybe they should have seen it coming. Jesus was a dreamer, and we all know how it goes with dreamers. It had been a beautiful story. They had *lived* a beautiful story, but as the horrific reality of that Friday came crashing in on them, the terrible truth was that their story was over and was revealed as a *tragedy*, with an ending to break your heart.

And so, we find the shattered disciples confused and in despair, not knowing what to do or where to turn. They are lost and broken, alone in a desolate inner space ... the kind of space Robert Penn Warren described in which the “Wind does not move” and “is afraid of itself, as you have been afraid in those moments when destruction and revelation have spat at each other like cats, and the mirror showed no breath ... and the wind, far off in arctic starlight, is afraid to breathe.”

How *could* they go on, with things having happened as they did? How do you pick up the pieces of a life that has fallen apart? The women in our text at least have it in them to go back to the tomb, to prepare Jesus’ body according to Jewish burial customs, as painful as *that* must have been. But when they get there, they find the huge stone rolled away. Wondering what’s going on, they walk anxiously to it and look inside. They see nothing – no body, no Jesus – which leaves them even more confused and afraid.

And then, from within the darkness of this tomb of despair, they see an impossible sight – two men in dazzling clothes beside them. Understandably, they fall to the ground in mortal terror. But then they hear the impossible word: “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.”

You can only imagine the thoughts and emotions flooding their hearts and minds in this moment: Doubt ... a glimmer of faith ... more inner terror ... maybe all these things at the same time. Even so, this isn’t something they can just let go of. Jesus *did* say something about rising

again on the third day, and so, with a mix of faith, doubt, fear, and desperate hope, they go and tell the apostles and others what they've seen and heard.

And ... they don't believe them. The women's story is dismissed as an "idle tale" – though the male apostles, too, know what Jesus had said. Maybe they're just men dismissing women for being too emotional, and not being rational (By the way, gentlemen, that approach never *ever* goes well). Maybe it's because it's all *too good* to be true ... Maybe it's that they want to believe it, but they aren't ready to trust and take the chance of being burned again. Maybe it's because they're too lost in themselves and their own pain to look beyond.

But here's my favorite part of the text: In spite of the fact that the apostles are said to have dismissed the women's story, Peter gets up and runs to the tomb! We're given no reason to think that he didn't doubt their report either. The other gospels, too, suggest that Peter was just as unable to accept it as any of the others. And *yet*, something in him drives him to run to the tomb to see!

Why, do you think? Was he not firm enough in his doubt? Did his desire to believe it overcome his fear of being wrong again? Did he simply long more than anything to be able to fall at Jesus' feet one last time and say, "I'm sorry"? Did some small part of him wonder, after all he'd seen, that maybe – just maybe – this story could have a happy ending after all? Was some part of his heart ready for the possibility, against all odds, that his own story wasn't over, because it was somehow being embraced and lifted up into something bigger and greater that he and his companions were only beginning to see?

I've told you all before of my first church out of seminary, of what my first senior pastor would say when he did a baptism ... how he would hold the baby as he was about to sprinkle it with the water ... how he would look into its little eyes and say something like this: "Little one, it was for you that Jesus Christ came into this world. It was for you that he was born in a humble stable. It was for you that he grew up and taught, for you he healed and forgave. It was for you that he was betrayed, and suffered, and died. And it was for you that he rose again in glory. And right now, you know nothing of this story, but we the people of God in this place have promised to teach you this story, so that in time, it may become the Great Story of your life."

It's a story of how the great Mystery "which moves the sun and the other stars" was encountered in a human life. It's a story we tell over and over – of one who healed the sick, reached out to outcasts, sought out the lost ... of how he took it to the end and stretched out his arms upon a cross and suffered the depths of forsakenness in an unimaginable death.

And it's the story we tell today of how this death, somehow, was not the end of the story – for the women, and Peter, and all those scared and broken-hearted disciples discovered something that they would never have dared to dream. As they came together in support of one another, as they broke bread together in remembrance, they *saw* him – experiencing his life and presence among them still, empowering them to move forward and live *in* him and *for* him, with passion and courage to the end.

It's this Greater Story which has room for all of us, for all *our* stories, whether happy or not, and I believe that in our baptism, we are all somehow grafted into it. And as we walk together, we may find that our hearts burn with its promise ... of finding ourselves, of seeing our lives, in all their brokenness and beauty, within the matrix of this Greater Story in which we find our true home and are endowed with meaning and purpose.

But our world does know so much pain, and I confess that I have often struggled with living in this kind of resurrection hope. Like many others, when I answered God's call, I set out on a journey – one in which I didn't know where I was going and didn't know what "arriving" would look like. And today, I am very much yet to arrive. I don't know how my own story is going to play out. But I am not alone – and neither are you. In the midst of many doubts and struggles, I am finally willing to run to the tomb like Peter and look in.

And so, as Frederick Buechner has written, "Let the preacher tell the truth. Let the preacher preach this overcoming of tragedy by comedy, of darkness by light, of the ordinary by the extraordinary, as the tale that is too good *not* to be true, because to dismiss it as untrue is to dismiss along with it that catch of the breath, that beat and lifting of the heart near to or even accompanied by tears, which I believe is the deepest intuition of truth that we have."

On this Easter and always, we celebrate this greatest truth of all – that our own stories, with all their joys and their sufferings, are finally embraced, taken up, and fulfilled in the Divine Comedy of God, swelling with universal Easter laughter, for *Christ is risen ... He is risen indeed ... Alleluia!*