

First Presbyterian Church, NYC. Good Friday, April 9, 2004, "It is Finished."

It was the end, the final moments, the last time Jesus looked to the sky and told his truth. The very end time. There was no going back, only moving forward with Jesus strapped to the cross. "It is finished" he declared. And at that moment we don't know, his community don't know if Jesus would be coming back in another way to be with us. We grieve all around him. Is this really the end, can we not try again? Can we not take back the things we said, the actions we took, all that we regret?

Perhaps you can relate. Most of us here have lived this story, at least once. Perhaps you are living this story right now. The story of the time when you can't go on the same way anymore, when the world all around you has changed and you have no power to stop it. The time when you are confronted with life that can never be understood logically, when you are forced to go to the most basic and visceral places, those times when you may be found falling, screaming, ranting, crying, "no, not me, not me, not now."

The story of the time when you are forced to stop in your tracks, as stopping is the only thing you can do right now, to just stop and be with yourself and care for yourself, as hard as that is, to care for your wounds. The time when the world around you keeps going, and you don't know why it can't just stop for you to grieve. The times when the world keeps going and you somehow don't fit in that world anymore. The grief and anger and shame you have to feel. The loneliness, even though you may be surrounded by a community or a family or a church, the loneliness that no one can take away. The story of the time when you sit furious at God, demanding answers to the question "why didn't you protect me God?," not realizing that you have been held the whole time. The story of the time when you are reduced to depend on God, since the belief that you can solely depend on yourself has failed. The story of the time when you have to give up any illusion that you have power over yourself, that you can solely control how the world around you effects you. The time when you are forced to let go.

So, God we often have to turn to, God, our most loving Creator, with the petition, "get me out of here, help me survive, don't leave." And you may hear God answer unexpectedly through a psalm or

through your neighbor or through your therapist, or just through the whispering of the wind, “you must feel this, you must be here, you must learn from this, I will never leave you my child.”

When is your time? What is your story? For myself, I was no older than 16, my sophomore year in high school. I was in my bedroom when the call came through. Leila had passed, Leila was my neighbor, the woman who had four children I considered to be my brothers and sisters. She treated me as one of her own, she took me in and and listened to me, she told me that she loved me and God loved me and that I must be patient. So, it was Leila that passed that afternoon on December 19 at about 3:00 p.m. I will never ever forget that day. I collapsed, screaming, I didn't know how my life would go on without her, I never told her how much she meant to me, it was so sudden, it was so fast, I wasn't prepared, I didn't have enough time. And the next two years—I hope I never have to live them again, although I wouldn't trade them for anything, the grief, the fear, the loneliness, the tears, the prayers, the sleepless nights, the growth. And I wonder what your story is, if you have one yet? The stories are endless, the times when we have been forced to stop, stop in our tracks.

And then the truth has to come out, after these ending moments. All you were hiding behind can no longer be hidden, it must come out, it must be exposed, at least to yourself, initially. You are driven to the core of your being forced to examine and proclaim your own truth, your own story, with the cobwebs and the barriers from which you were hiding taken away. You must just be and feel your way through it until we realize that the ending, the finishing moment, is also the beginning.

In Jesus' death we are given a model of how we are to live through those ending times, of how he lives through his completion, the moment when he literally proclaimed, “it is finished.” He lived through it by telling the truth of his life over and over again, most shockingly to me throughout his entire crucifixion. He proclaims and questions and commands and challenges. He reassures himself and all those around him that he has hidden nothing. No deep secrets, no unforgivable mistakes, no socially unacceptable part of his identity.

And so up until the very end he lives before us, speaking his truth, proclaiming his identity. King of the Jews, his identity a king he believes himself to be who eats with the lowly, who reaches his arms around the outcast and the poor, because he himself knew that there was no distinction between them and him.

Up until the very end he witnesses that all power comes from God, not from humans, not from us. So when we begin thinking that we are more powerful than our sisters or brothers and use that lie against them, it blows up in our face. And when we begin to believe

we have ultimate control over our own lives, we can leave that illusion at the door.

Up until the end he reimagines family. He claims new ties of kinship, between his mother and his disciple, because he knows that family isn't just who you share blood with. And up until the end he names his needs: a drink. At the end all he needs is a drink.

And then, the word of truth he speaks, "it is finished," or better translated, "it is fulfilled" or "it is completed," unable to do any more from the vantage point of a living walking person on earth, having fulfilled his mission, having completed his purpose. The final events of his life, his dying was not one of submission and powerlessness, for up until the time it was finished he was conscious, he spoke his truth. His death was one of truth. It was one of transforming the ugly torture of a cross, the most despicable and socially unacceptable way of being killed in his time, to a death full of truth and integrity. He transformed the world around him. He transformed himself. He transformed to continue living in each one of us. He had to, so that we could understand how we can and must change. He had to transform so that the devastating and liberating times in our lives when we are forced to declare "it is finished" are also the times when we can understand that "it has begun." But we can only do so after facing our pain and our truth and our shame, after grieving and ranting and crying and reflecting on what has been learned.

Today we join together, alive, living, grieving the completion of Jesus' life on earth, remembering the times when our lives have been finished, and when we have kept going. Here we are forced to acknowledge our deep and painful memories, and the core of us that has been revealed because of them. In Jesus' death we experience our own, in his statement "it is finished" we remember and live in all the places where we are complete. We arrive with each other grieving the life of the one who has come to help us know and love ourselves. We come grieving because we persecute the one reaching her arm to us in the form of our teacher, friend, lover, brother. We come because we have rejected life, shocking us in ways we would never expect. We grieve the lost opportunity, the missed relationships, the loved one no longer here with us, the memories that do battle in our bodies, the letting go so that we can begin again. We grieve and learn to know ourselves as well as Christ knew himself and God knows us now.

To grieve is to acknowledge and to speak truth. In the words of advice columnist, Cary Tennis, you are to "grieve completely, until the poison is gone...the result of grief is the contour of your own survival, a knowledge of your hidden animal strengths, the words you tell yourself when you think you can't go on, the noises you make when you're in pain, the shape of the road you're on and what it feels like to walk barefoot across the broken glass, the knowledge that somehow above all you survived, and if you survived this, you can survive the

next trial too, and the next and the next and the next. That is what grief is about: it sobers you up right quick and reminds you to be ready. Make your grief into something you can tell your grandchildren about, how to endure what gets handed to you, and if you keep practicing, you learn to walk over it happily.

So it is finished. We grieve together that it is finished, that this relationship or this job or this marriage or this home, is fulfilled for now. This chapter is complete. And we look to begin again.