

Isaiah 50:4-9a
Psalms 31:9-16
Philippians 2:5-11
Matthew 27:11-50

Sermon for April 2, 2023

THE HAPPY ENDING

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: All's well that ends well.

I'm not a big movie fan. I haven't been to a movie theater in many years, and I don't have a cabinet at home full of DVDs of movies that I'll watch over and over again. And I wish I did, in fact enjoy movies more than I do, because I recognize that they truly are the main art form of our era and that tremendous amounts of effort and creative talent go into making them. It's a lack on my part, not the part of that form of entertainment, that I'm just rather cold to it.

Having said that, there are evenings when I'm sitting there and it's too soon for bed, but I don't feel like reading or listening to music, and there's no pro football or baseball on TV, and I'll switch on Netflix or Hoopla and scroll through the movie listings looking for something to watch. And typically what happens is that I'll pick a movie and watch it for about ten minutes, then turn it off and look for something else, watch that one for ten minutes and turn it off, and so on, until I finally find one that I can sit through for an hour and a half, or until we get to my bedtime and I just give up and go to bed.

That's my dreary life. But anyway, over the years, I have found three movies that, when I see them on Netflix or Amazon Prime or some other streaming service, I'll occasionally put them on, even though I've watched them several times before. So I end up watching each of them again once every couple of years. Not that it matters, but FYI the three movies are My Cousin Vinny, School of Rock, and Galaxy Quest.

And in reflecting on those three movies, I've come to realize that the reason I enjoy turning to them every couple of years is that they have three things in common.

The first is that there's no foul language, no coarse obscenities. I of course recognize that such language is part of the shared common parlance of our time and that the artists who make movies these days can incorporate it skillfully into their story-telling...but I don't care. I don't enjoy hearing it in real life, and I don't want to hear it blasting out of the television screen in my livingroom.

The second thing my three movies have in common is that there's no icky stuff, like kissing, or cute little cuddly babies, or young couples dancing in slow motion through fields of wildflowers. Sweet and wonderful and sentimental as all that may be, for me it's just a dealbreaker.

But the third thing they have in common is far and away the most important, and the reason I'm talking about this at all on this Sunday before Easter. It is that all three movies have happy endings. If a movie has a sad or tragic ending, I might be moved by it, I might even be deeply affected by it, I might honor and admire it, I might even feel that I have learned something important in watching it...but one thing such a movie will never do – speaking completely for myself – one thing such a movie will never do is make me want to watch it again.

This great Easter season that we are in now might be compared to the final two scenes of a movie, or perhaps a play. Perhaps it could be titled JESUS, the way Shakespeare sometimes used a name for a title: King Lear, Othello, or Hamlet. The first of these two concluding scenes is what I read for you from Matthew's Gospel, the act that contains the terrible mockery of justice of the trial of Jesus before Pontius Pilate, the verdict based on the rejection of Jesus by his own people, the mockery and scourging and horrible march through Jerusalem to Golgotha, and finally the agony and death of the crucifixion itself.

If our Gospel account were a work of imagination like Shakespeare's plays, and if this were the final scene, then what we would have is a tragedy. And like one of Shakespeare's tragedies, we might get a great deal out of reading the tragedy called JESUS. As we relish the great soliloquies in Shakespeare – "To be or not to be, that is the question..." so we might admire and appreciate the beauty and moral insight of the Sermon on the Mount. As we imaginatively respect the great drive and ambition and courage of Othello, so we might do the same for this heroic young Nazarene who dedicated his life so completely and fiercely to what he

believed. And as with Othello and Lear, we might be emotionally affected or even imaginatively devastated by the way the story of his life ended.

But here's the problem. Our Gospel account is not a work of fiction: it's the account of an historical event, the biography of a man who actually lived for thirty of so years in a little out of the way corner of the Roman Empire called Israel during the reign of the Emperor Tiberius. And if what we read in Matthew's account this morning were the historical record of the final events, the final scene, of that young man's life, what that would mean is that life itself, not a play but human life itself, your life, my life, every life is a tragedy.

Some of you may remember a few years back when Marcy and I led a BS segment in which we read through some of the reflections of the great religious writer Oswald Chambers, the author of perhaps the most influential of all modern Christian devotionals called *My Utmost for His Highest*. In one of his other books, Chambers puts it quite bluntly and succinctly: The principle of human life is tragic.

Many of you can bear greater personal witness to this than I can yet; but the simple and unavoidable fact is that, considered simply in themselves, there are no happy endings to most of our lives, only different varieties and degrees of tragedy.

But now, here's the point. If the events that we read about today in Matthew's account in fact had described the final scene of the historical life of Jesus, then not only would it have been a tragic ending for him, but it would also have been a tragic ending for all of us.

This is what Paul is talking about in his first letter to the Corinthians, when he writes:

"...if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty...your faith is futile...Then all those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all people the most pitiable."

If there were no Easter Sunday following this Passion Sunday, then Oswald Chamber's pronouncement about human life would be the final word, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Then every life would have tragedy as its principle and conclusion, and if you were to make a movie of every life, it is not a movie that I myself, would ever want to watch twice.

But because we have an Easter Sunday, because there is a following scene in the life of Jesus, and because it is a scene that lasts forever, so we can say the same about ourselves, and a movie made of every life would bear watching again and again. As the crew of Galaxy Quest returns victorious to earth and goes on with their lives, as the kids in School of Rock put on a great concert and then graduate and carry their musical talents into other adventures, and just as Joe Pesci and Marisa Tomei get his cousin off and live happily ever after, so this earthly setting is, for us, only one scene in a much longer, indeed, an eternal story.

Would that make the movies of our own difficult, sometimes bitter, sometimes disappointing lives worth watching over and over again? Let me close with a reflection that might suggest why the answer could be Yes.

Have you ever noticed how when family or friends get together they can reminisce about things that happened in the past, even terrible things, and enjoy talking about them? “Remember that time you fell off the roof and broke your leg, and how miserable you were to everybody for the entire summer because you couldn’t play soccer with your friends? We laugh about it now, but boy we weren’t laughing then, right?”

You all know what I’m talking about. It’s because life went on after, that looking back even on bad times has its own enjoyable quality.

Someday we might all be sitting around in heaven, having a beer, and laughing about what losers and fools we used to be, and all the rough times we went through. And we might meet again five years later and tell each other the same stories again, and smile or laugh about them again. And then after ten years, after twenty years, after a thousand years, each time with a fond reminiscence, perhaps all the fonder, the longer the time that has passed.

And so our prayer, Father, on this Sunday before Easter, is that we always remain mindful of what Jesus accomplished for all of us in the *final* scene of his earthly life, how he turned each of our lives into movies that we will enjoy remembering and living in memory again and again, through all eternity, and we pray in his precious name for that mindfulness and the love and gratitude to him that it must generate. Amen.