It Is Finished
John 19:25b-30
Rev. Dan Schumacher

Will you pray with me?

Almighty God –
Be with us this morning as we strive
to see with your eyes,
to hear with your ears,
and to then move and act in the world with your love.
We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.

We have come to the end of Jesus' passion.

He has been flogged and beaten and has had a crown of thorns pressed into his scalp. He has been marched through the streets, forced to carry the instrument of his own execution to the site where it will be used on him.

And now he hangs on the cross, bruised and beaten, exhausted, laboring for each breath.

The horror of the crucifixion was well-known. The Roman philosopher Seneca, a contemporary of Jesus, thought it better to take your own life than to "weigh down on one's own wound and hang impaled" on a cross.

Seneca asked, "Can any man be found willing to be fastened to the accursed tree, long sickly, already deformed… drawing the breath of life amid long, drawn-out agony? He would have many excuses for dying even before mounting the cross!" (Craig Koester, "The Passion and Resurrection According to John," *Word and World*, Winter 1991, 89).

To any observer, Jesus' crucifixion would appear to be a brutal termination of life…

…And yet, as John tells the story, this isn't the tale of the brutal termination of life, but the glorious completion of Jesus' ministry.

When Matthew and Mark tell the story of Jesus crucifixion, they are sure to include the part where Jesus *cries out in agony*, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 24:76; Mark 15:34). But *not* in John.

When Luke tells the story, Jesus' death culminates with him, again, *crying out in a loud voice*, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirt" and then breathing his last (Luke23:46). But *not* in John.

Rather, in John, even as Jesus hangs from the cross, he busies himself with making domestic arrangements for his mother's future, he partakes in a wine tasting, and it's only finished when he says it is finished.

You get the strange sense in John that Jesus is in total control over the whole scene. No cry of dereliction and no final cry of agony. Instead, he simply says, "It is finished," lowers his head and gives up his spirit.

What's going here?

At one level, it is the brutal termination of Jesus' life. But at another, deeper level, John seems to want us to notice that something bigger is at play in this moment.

Several years ago, Christen and I were in Chicago, and we spent the better part of an entire afternoon wandering the halls of The Art Institute of Chicago. At some point, we came around a corner to their collection of Picassos, and I found myself stopped in my tracks by this one: *The Old Guitarist. (See image 1.)*

There he sits — not in a chair, but on the ground, emaciated, threadbare clothes, skin gaunt and pale, head and body bent as if weighed down by the difficulties of life. The colors are monochromatic and cold. It is something of a tragic painting. As you gaze at it, you get the feeling that this man is on the precipice of death. How will he survive another year?

So I stood there staring at this painting for several minutes, when I started to get the eerie feeling that somebody was watching me. I looked around. Nobody but me. So I turned my attention back to the painting, but I couldn't shake the feeling that somebody was looking at me. That's when I spotted it — the faint image of another face staring back at me from within the painting. It's hard to see, but it's there — peaking back at me over the man's shoulder. *(See image 2.)*

It that time, it wasn't uncommon for artists to use a canvas, and then scrape it clean to be used again. But over time, the underlying image seeps through until it becomes visible on the surface. This particular painting is a prime example of that exact thing.

In fact, they have even taken X-rays of this painting to see the complete image of what was underneath. And do you know what they found? They found a young, vibrant woman nursing her child. *(See image 3.)*

So on the surface is this tragic image of impending death. But at a deeper level there is an image of woman who is bursting at the seems with *life*.

As John tells it, Jesus' crucifixion is a lot like that. On the surface of the canvas, it looks like Jesus story is a story of death. But at some deeper level, it's actually a story about new life in God.

From the cross, Jesus isn't just making housing accommodations for his mother. He's inaugurating a new kind of community in which people will find family with each based on their shared relationship with him. We have come to call that family "church."

Form the cross, Jesus isn't just thirsty for a nice Pinot Grigio. He's thirsty to drink from the cup that his Father has given him.

And, at the cross, it isn't just finished — over, done, caput, the end. It is *accomplished*.

If we only look at the surface, we miss the story of how God's deep reality is bursting forth, even from Jesus' death.

I've told you this story before, but I'm going to tell it to you again. It's a story Fred Craddock used to tell. He says:

"A colleague of mine down at Phillips University, a young woman, taught physical education. She was a marvelous person, young, vigorous, unmarried.

One night she was sitting in her apartment grading papers, and she heard a knock at the door. She went to the door, unlocked it, opened it, and there stood death, with his yellow face, staring right at her. She slammed the door, locked it, and called the doctor. He said, 'Malignant.' She had surgery. A few months later she was back, and I said, 'Hey you're looking good.' She said, 'I never felt better.' Now, she had lost some weight, but she was back teaching physical education, bouncing on trampolines and all, doing great. Everything seemed to be wonderful.

She was at home one night watching television when she heard a knock at the door. She went to the door, opened it, and there he stood with his yellow face. She slammed it and locked it and called the doctor. He said, 'Chemotherapy.' Oh, she was sick. All her hair came out, so she got a wig, and she came back to school. I said, 'That's becoming. You should've been wearing that all along.' She said, 'I feel pretty good.' And she was teaching again.

One night she was sitting there grading papers in her room, and she heard a knock, so she went to the door, unlocked it, and there he stood, old death with his yellow face. She slammed the door and tried to lock it, but the lock was broken. She called her friends and relatives. Everybody gathered, and we took turns leaning against that door. We leaned against the door; we leaned against the door. We even got to where we were joking and laughing. 'We're not going to let him in. We'll keep him out.' We'd look out the window and there he sat under a tree with his yellow face right out there.

One night she said, 'Get away from the door.'

'What?'

'Get away from the door.'

So we got away from the door, and he came in… [We thought] he like[d] to come in with his fiery darts of pain and fear. [But] there he stood; in one hand he had peace, in the other rest. He looked like a servant of God" (*Craddock Stories, 38-39)*.

The story John wants us to hear isn't just that Jesus died, but that in God's economy even death is a servant of God. In God's power, even death can bring accomplishment.

Do you know what that means?

It means that if God can take something as brutal and ugly and unforgivable as the cross, and use it for good; then just imagine what God can do through us — even when we feel like we have very little to offer.

Tom Long tells this story:

"My wife and I are both Presbyterian ministers, but we are summer Methodists. We have a little cottage on the shore of the Chesapeake Bay in rural Maryland, and there are no Presbyterian churches in our county. None. Zero. And the reason for that is, in the early 1800s, Methodist itinerant evangelists burned over that region. So, there is a Methodist church approximately every fifty feet.

And we go to one in the summer. It's called Antioch, and it's at the bitter end of its life. There are about twenty of us there on a good Sunday, and one Sunday we were there — all twenty of us, most of us aging. And, at the end of the service, the pastor said, 'I haven't actually picked out the last hymn. Are there any requests?'

We thought for a minute, and finally someone said, 'Onward Christian Soldiers' — a somewhat controversial hymn, but not there, so we sang it. I had moment in that hymn. We sang, 'Like a mighty army moves the church of God'— as our hearing aids were whistling into the atmosphere…

And I thought, 'If this were not so moving and tear-provoking, it would be really funny.' I realized that we are not the powerful church, but we serve a powerful God.

By the way, the little Antioch church only has one ministry left. They leave their building open 24/7 for prayer. That's all they have left. The community can come 2 o'clock in the morning, 3 in the afternoon, anyone who wants to can come pray. That church is always open.

But one summer, we got there at the beginning of the summer and they were all up in a huff, because the insurance company had told them they could no longer do this. They had to lock the church.

At the congregational meeting, they were outraged. Someone said, 'Let's get another insurance company.' *No, no. They're all the same*. "Well, then let's don't have insurance." *No, no. The church might burn down*.

Finally, they had to knuckle under. And they put a padlock on the front door of Antioch United Methodist Church. But they took the key and put it under a rock next to the door. And they painted the word 'KEY' on it."

That's the mark of a church who trusts that the work of God can be accomplished even in death, even in what seems like defeat.

You see, John wants us to take the camera and to turn the dial on the lens, so that we aren't focused on the cross as the death of Jesus, but as his great accomplishment. It isn't the end. It isn't his defeat. Rather, it's the fulfillment of his ministry.

It isn't just finished. It's *accomplished*.

And John thinks that if we can just *see* that, then we'll finally be able to trust that there is nothing that can come between us and God's love for us.

An Episcopal colleague of mine was once telling me about a church that had a beautiful confirmation service. The kids would go to confirmation class for over a year, and, then, on a particular Sunday the church would recognize their achievements.

And one of the ways they would recognize their faith and their achievements is that the students could show off something that they learned in confirmation class. And on this particular year, the kids had all memorized a portion of Romans, chapter 8.

So, they were all lined up in front of the congregation, and the confirmation leader started with the first one. He said, "George, what shall separate you from the love of God?"

And George recited, "I am persuaded that neither life nor death, nor heights or depths, nor angels or powers…" and on and on. And then George would beam, and his parents would beam.

And then, "Mary, what shall separate you from the love of God?" And she would recite, and on down the line.

But as it moved down the line, the congregation started to grow uncomfortable, because at the end of the line was Rachel — a child with a beautiful smile and temperament, but a child with Down Syndrome, and there was no way she could memorize Romans 8.

But finally, it got to her. "Rachel, what shall separate you from the love of God?"

She smiled that beautiful smile, and said one word: "Nothing!"

Nothing.

Rachel knows what John means for us to know: that *nothing* can separate us from the love of God — not even death, not even death on a cross.

And, in point of fact, it might even be how God's great work is being accomplished.

Amen.

Image 1: The Old Guitarist, Picasso, 1903-1904.

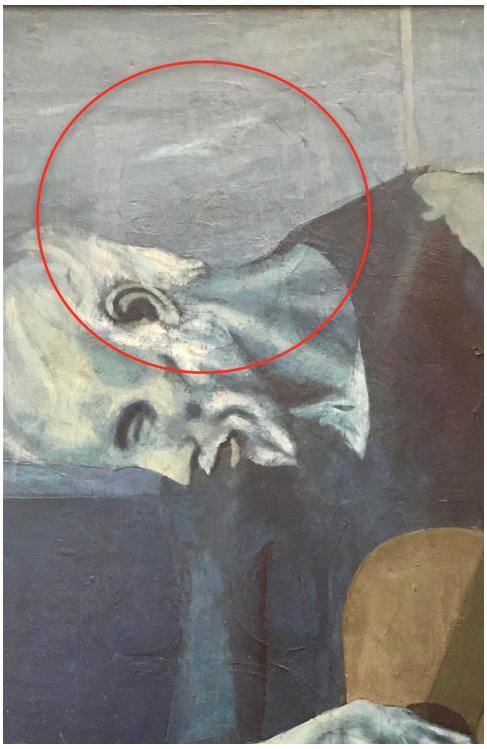

Image 2: A hidden face.

Image 3: Xray of the painting reveals another image of a woman nursing her child.