

In Our End is our Beginning
Jim Ward
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I love movies, but I'm not a very good movie watcher. Even when I'm watching a movie I really like, I tend to look at my watch and imagine how long until the movie will be over. I've noticed one or two of you doing that in church on occasion!

I think as modern day people, we have kind of split personalities dealing with endings. We both dread the thought of something ending, and yet we anticipate it, at times even rush it. And we're always looking ahead to our endings – no matter what, we want to know when something will be ending. The standard line from television and movies (and maybe from real life) when someone receives bad news about their health is “how long do I have, Doc?”

We tend to focus on endings, whether we're dreading it or looking forward to it. And that's nothing new, as we'll hear in today's scripture lesson. But God doesn't work this way – God uses what we perceive to be an end as a beginning. Let's listen now to the word of God:

The apostles in the reading Jim/Amy just gave to us surely felt they were once again living in an end.

Think of the roller-coaster ride they had been on in the previous weeks.

- They had entered gloriously into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, hailed as though they were the royal party escorting a returning king.
- They had seen Jesus teaching the masses at the Temple, overturning the money changers' tables, and ultimately facing accusations of heresy before the religious court and of inciting revolution before the civil court.
- They had shared the greatest intimacy with Jesus in the last supper on Thursday, only to witness his arrest, and ultimate execution as they cowered far away, trembling with fear.
- They learned of the resurrection at first with doubt, and then with joy as they witnessed it firsthand,

And what a new beginning that Easter must have been for them. Jesus was back, eating with them, teaching them, restoring them.

How long Jesus' post resurrection ministry lasted isn't clear in scripture. But the church has always observed it to be 40 days after Easter.

Which means, last Thursday was Ascension Day. Those of you with a Roman Catholic background probably are a little more familiar with the Feast of the Ascension than most Protestants are. But even in Roman Catholicism, the date has been moved to the Sunday following the Thursday, I guess to make it a little easier to be observed by more people.

Some of you may have noticed that the theme for our Holy Week and Easter worship this year was Unexpected New Beginnings. And as we mark the last Sunday of Eastertide, I want to take our focus back to that theme.

So this Sunday in church we observe:

- Ascension Day
- The Last Sunday of the Easter season
- Memorial Day
- And just for good measure, United Methodist Heritage Sunday

And, oh yeah, graduation weekend for a lot of our youth, including our Sr. Minister Melanie Rosa's daughter Katie.

Next Sunday is easy. Next Sunday is Pentecost. Pentecost is all about beginnings. The birth of the church, the arrival of the Holy Spirit to indwell and empower the ragged band of followers Jesus left behind at the ascension. Pentecost is all about new beginnings.

But today, well today seems focused more on endings.

But I believe God doesn't really see endings as the last word. God operates in beginnings.

It just didn't seem that way to Jesus' disciples that day.

Their joy, their faith, their relationship with Jesus had been restored. But then, after giving them their marching orders to change the world, and rebuking them for questioning God's timing, he disappeared.

Just like that.

And so they wallowed in what seemed to be yet another ending. Not really understanding that an unexpected new beginning was just a few days away. Not knowing that God would come to them at Pentecost in a way that would enable them to fulfill the impossible task Jesus gave to them on their departure. They simply returned to Jerusalem. And they waited.

That brings me to the first point I want to make today about endings. We don't always know when we're facing an ending. Often the ending simply catches us off guard. At the end of the scripture reading Jim/Amy just read we see that – the apostles ask Jesus "Is now the time? Are you finally going to do what we thought we were signing up for?"

I think that for the apostles, the ending we just heard about, Jesus' ascension, was yet another ending filled with disappointment for those followers of Jesus. They stood there. And all they wanted, since it seemed that Jesus wasn't going to establish God's kingdom in the way they thought he should, all they really wanted to know was **when**.

When was the Roman tyranny going to end. When was the misery and oppression of the people of Palestine going to be over, and the era of peace and love that Jesus talked about going to happen? They had one simple question – WHEN?

So they stood there, looking up into the sky, and wondering.

Jesus didn't give them an answer that could have completely satisfied them on that day. But he gave them an answer we would do well to hear today.

"You don't get to know the timing" Jesus told them. That's God's business. And then he left them. He left them in an ending – the time when they could talk with Jesus, question Jesus, walk with Jesus, touch Jesus, was over. But Jesus did leave them a sign that a new beginning was on the horizon. He told them to go and wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit – he promised them a beginning.

And I think this is all an important lesson for us too. We can't always know when the ending comes, or for that matter even what an ending will be. But we need to know that endings too, are part of God's plan, because endings are the seeds from which our beginnings grow.

Secondly, I think we learn from this passage that when we're facing what seems to be an ending, we need to live in and through that ending. That's why the disciples returned to Jerusalem. That's why they waited.

Waiting can be so hard. I think often of the variation on the famous serenity prayer:

"God grant me patience . . . and I want it right now!"

That so applies to me. Even when the end of an ending is in sight, even when we know where a new beginning may lie, we're impatient. But I think a lot of our growth and helpful changes throughout our lives happens during our endings. We could learn a lot from someone like Nick Goddard.

Making the best out of unemployment in New York City, laid off computer programmer Nick Goddard organized an event called the "Unemployment Olympics". Games like "pin the blame on the boss" and the "fax machine toss" allowed people to get out, burn off some steam and have a little fun in the East Village.

After showing event organizers their "Proof of Unemployment" in the form of their Unemployment Insurance benefit letter or a letter from their previous employer, hundreds of New Yorkers entered to compete for donated restaurant and service gift certificates. An unexpected benefit was the networking between contestants not only provided moral support, but was directly linked to many hearing about job openings in the city. Publicity from the event even resulted in Nick receiving several job offers!

One participant noted that the hardest part of being unemployed is just doing something! Nick showed that we can use even difficult circumstances to grow and help ourselves and others.

Finally today, I want to emphasize that God isn't primarily in the ending business. God uses endings as seeds for new beginnings, but God is, first and foremost, the author of our beginnings. We need to remember that our endings, no matter how difficult or painful, are the starting points for our beginnings.

God IS a God of new beginnings. That's why the "It is finished" from the cross on Good Friday is followed by the "He is risen!" of Easter. That's why the final goodbye of the Ascension is followed a few days later by Pentecost.

That's a hard thing to remember though, when we get the news that a parent has died, that our job has ended. When we sit in a doctor's office and hear the news that a husband or wife is facing what is likely a terminal illness. Or we hear the words that signal to us that our own good health is ending.

It's hard to think of new beginnings, the cycle of life, when we hear from family and friends that we no longer should drive, or that our days of living independently must end, when we know in our hearts that a marriage is over.

But, through it all, I think God wants us to know that even in the most painful, the most unexpected, even what seems to us, the most unfair, ending can be a part of God's plan for our new beginnings.

I took the title from today's sermon from a line of a song in our Hymnal. Hymn of Promise has come to be a favorite in our congregation. It's author and composer, Natalie Sleeth, was a Denver resident whose husband was a professor at Iliff. She was a friend of Donita Banks, Melanie Rosa and her mom, Maryann Downs, and others in our congregation knew her as well.

She was by all accounts a lady who faced life's difficulties, life's ending points with strength and grace. Throughout her later life, battling health problems that included Multiple Sclerosis and cancer, she produced some of the most popular sacred choral music of the last part of the 20th century. Several of her pieces appear in both our Red and Black hymnals, and both our Chancel Choir and Marty have done pieces she has written.

She wrote Hymn of Promise at a time when one of her closest friends had received a terminal cancer diagnosis, and shortly thereafter her husband, also facing a terminal illness requested that the song be played at his funeral.

The last line of that song is so meaningful, and I think sums up what I'm trying to say here:

In our end is our beginning
In our time, infinity
In our doubt there is believing,
In our life, eternity.
In our death, a resurrection,
At the last, a victory,
Unrevealed until it's season,
Something God alone can see.

Let's pray.

Forgive us God when we use endings as an excuse to stop. We know you are a God of new beginnings. Lord, strengthen and inspire us to follow your where those new beginnings may lead us.

In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

The tragedy of life is not that it ends so soon, but that we wait so long to begin it.

Richard L. Evans, Bits & Pieces, March 4, 1993, p. 2.