

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, April 13, 2025

Let us pray. Gracious Spirit, you are as close as our very next breath. May we know that to be true in this time. As your word is read and proclaimed, may it comfort us and challenge us. May it speak to us of your love and your calling. For we ask it in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

So, if you've been with us throughout Lent, or if you've been joining us online, you know that we've been moving through the seven last words of Jesus. We move this morning to the sixth word. This is from the Gospel according to John, the 19th chapter, the 30th verse.

When Jesus had received the wine, he said "It is finished." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our Lord endures forever. Amen.

So our word this day is “It is finished.” And you might be a little confused, because I said this is the sixth of seven words. Shouldn't this be the end? You'll hear a seventh word if you come and join us on Maundy Thursday. Each of the gospels speaks to this experience of the crucifixion with a unique lens. Each of them has a different thing to teach us as Mary told us last week. Each of these gospel accounts account for the last words a little bit differently. Of course, we know that our study of scripture is never simple, never straightforward. It's always nuanced. It's always a little complicated. In John, Jesus gives up his spirit silently as we just read. In Luke, in Luke, the spirit is given with a spoken word—released. Jon Meacham in his work on the seven last words wrote this. “So much of scripture is contradictory. It's complex. It's confusing. Of course, the ways of the Almighty are frustrating, sometimes even maddening. It has been ever thus. In the book of Job the author writes "Can you fathom the mysteries of God? Can you probe the limits of the Almighty? They are higher than the heavens above. What can you do? They are deeper than the depths below. What can you know? The measure is longer than the earth and wider than the sea." Later Paul tells the people "The peace of God surpasses all of their understanding and ours." The theologian William Porcher DuBose is famous to have said when asked what he made of the book of Revelation "I have no idea." Scripture can often give us different lenses that might confuse us or perplex us. If you heard the words "It is finished," and you were perplexed by what the ‘it’ is, you wouldn't be alone. The people who were standing at the foot of the Cross a couple thousand years ago would have asked themselves the same things when they heard Jesus's words "It is finished." They would have had expectations for the way it was going to finish. And this certainly would not have fit their expectations. “This can't be the end,” they might have said. "This can't be the end of the story for us or for our Jesus, for this teacher, this rabbi that we've watched and walked and learned from over the last three years." But Jesus says very clearly that “It is finished.” And so if he says it clearly, then there must be

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something for us to explore, something maybe even triumphant or transformative through this finishing. Maybe we can work it out together.

We come to this day, this Palm Sunday, and we understand it in many ways to be the beginning of our Holy Week. We greet Jesus with hosannas. For those of us who grew up a little east and southeast of here, there's another Holy Week. It ends today. It's called Master's Week. It is centered not in Jerusalem but in Augusta, Georgia. I made my way from that holy place yesterday by plane to be with you this day. I've had the pleasure of doing that for the last several years. I have two friends who are, they're married. It's very interesting. One I knew really, really well in seminary. One I knew when I was early in my ministry. They did not know each other at that point, but they ended up getting together. And so it's fun every time I go visit them on Masters' week, and they open up their in-law suite for me. I get to see these kind of two worlds, two seasons of my life coming together in their marriage. Get to sit with them, get to talk about what it is to pastor with them. I love their home because adorning all the walls are all sorts of beautiful art, but they have a particular knack for finding the perfect piece of poetry to place in a frame and hang on a wall, or a saying, right? You spend a lot of time in their home, you'll come away inspired yourself just from what they've chosen to hang on their walls. When you're with other preachers, you're very cognizant that y'all are always looking for inspiration, especially as you approach the 14th Holy Week that you will preach. You've heard the triumphal story, entry story. You've heard and preached Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. You've done the same with Easter. I'm going to do it for the 14th time this year. I'm always looking for new inspiration. I found it in a pretty unexpected place. I'd finished up a can of seltzer water, and I was going to place it in their recycling bin. Their house is very neat, so I cannot leave anything out for too long as a guest, right? So I was going to put it in the recycling bin, and I put it down, and I looked up, and there framed on the wall was a quote from Fred, attributed to, Fred Rogers, which we know together as Mr. Rogers. Many of you all probably know he's a Presbyterian minister as well. He was a Presbyterian minister as well. Yeah. I placed the can in the recycling bin, and I looked up to see his words on newsprint. "Often when you think you're at the end of something, you're at the beginning of something else. Often when you think you're at the end of something you're at the beginning of something else." I think that's part of what is happening here in the text in the Gospel of John when we hear Jesus's words, "It is finished." For Jesus It is not the first step, but another step on the road to the revelation of the power of God that we will come to know through the resurrection of our Lord. But even more specifically for Jesus, "It is finished" is an acknowledgment by Jesus that he has come to the end of himself, his power, his endurance, by his own free will giving it on our behalf. The good news, of course, is that in so doing Jesus opens himself to the possibilities of the power of God. Often, when you think you're at the end of something, you're at the beginning of something else. As Jeanene shared with our children, we

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see it in the natural world, this ending and beginning and beginning again, in the changing of the seasons, in the cloud of 10,000 pollen count that falls upon our cars that we breathe in deeply. We see it as flowers bloom. We see it as azaleas come to life. I think Jesus says this not simply for himself but for those who might hear him at the foot of the Cross, that they might be reminded of the finishing and the beginning that is holy, that they might know that their collective lives together need to come to end in some way so that something new can be born. What will be born, of course, will be full of grace and love, goodness and hope. And I wonder this day about our lives and how we hear this question of Jesus. In your life, in your relationships, in your work, in your journey of faith, in this season of life for you, what is finished? What's over and done? As you reflect on that question, remember that things finish differently. Some things come to a natural ending. Sometimes we sign up for something knowing that it will come to an end. We have a length to the season. The ending is expected. And so when it comes, it feels very natural. Sometimes, however, things die a slow, painful, maybe even public death. That's what we witness on the Cross, that slow, agonizing, painful, very public death.

But if it is finished, then there must be some sort of triumph in it. And I wonder if the real triumph of coming to the end of that thing in our lives, whether it's a natural ending or a slow and painful one, coming to the end of that thing is actually simply us coming to the end of ourselves and believing that our Savior can accomplish that which grants him such a moniker, that he can indeed save us, that he can remind us that when we come to the end of one thing very often we are beginning in another. When we hear Jesus say "It is finished," I wonder if we might hear his words as part invitation this day, inviting us to the possibilities of what God is doing ahead of us, inviting us to recognize that thing that has come to an end and say "It is finished." And that is okay. It is finished. And we knew it was coming. It is finished. And that doesn't mean it's bad. It just means it's finished. Maybe it's an invitation. Or maybe it's Jesus giving us a word of permission. It is finished, and you are permitted to say so. It is finished. And it's not bad for you to say "I'm done." It is finished, and I need to have the permission of my God to lay it aside. I wonder for you in your life, in your relationships, in your work, in your journey of faith in this season what is finished. Here's the brutal and beautiful truth of this day and these last words of Jesus. If you know something has come to an end, if you can see it plain as day, but you are confused by it, you are disoriented by it, you are saddened by it, you are worried by it, you do not know what will come next. If you find yourself in that place this morning, you are exactly where the people at the foot of the Cross were a couple thousand years ago. Confused, disoriented, saddened, worried, unsure of what was to come.

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If you find yourself there this day, may you be assured that as you reach the end of yourself, you will find yourself in the company of Jesus. May you be reminded that often when something comes to an end, it's at the beginning of something else. May you trust the good news that when it is finished, if it doesn't end with grace and hope and resurrection, there is more to the story.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen