

**Sermon preached at Grace Epiphany Church, Philadelphia
22 March 2008**

*Easter Vigil: Gen 1:1—2:2; Ps 36:5-10; Exod 14:10—15:1; Cant 8
Isa 4:2-6; Ps 122; Ezek 36:24-28; Ps 42:107; Zeph 3:14-20; Ps 98
Rom 6:3-11; Mt 28: 1-10*

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It's been a good long while since I've looked at my books on literary theory, but I seem to remember that the primary distinction between tragedy and comedy is uncharacteristically simple: it's the plot, or story line. More specifically, it's the ending. If a story ends happily it's a comedy, if it ends sadly it's a tragedy. And so all the boy-gets-girl, or boy-gets-boy, or girl-gets-girl stories are comedies, even if they're not particularly funny—which is how we get comedies like some of Shakespeare's somewhat dark later plays, like *Measure for Measure* and *A Winter's Tale*. And all those where everyone winds up dead, no matter how cartoonish or surreal, are tragedies. Don't ask me about those life-goes-on endings, or about the ambiguous endings like "The Graduate." And if there are any English professors out there who need to tell me that literary theory has progressed since I learned it, let me check my schedule and get back to you—maybe by next Easter.

By this definition, I suppose we could look at the story in scripture of God's relationship with God's people, especially once Jesus Christ enters the picture, as a comedy. After all, as we Christians understand it, there is the awful, dark story of Christ's passion, which we have just finished telling ourselves through Holy Week, but then it all ends in the joyful story of the resurrection.

So it's a comedy, right? Forget the fact that the jokes are pretty hard to come by. Not that there are no jokes—I personally think Jesus' wordplay with Nicodemus is pretty amusing; I think the story of Jonah is hilarious, and you can't read aloud the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, the three men in the book of Daniel who get thrown into a fiery furnace, without figuring out that the story teller has tongue firmly in cheek. Check it out: Book of Daniel, chapter 3.

But our salvation story? A comedy? Just because it ends well? I'm reminded of something Desmond Tutu likes to tell people: "I've read to the end of the book, and the good news is, God wins!"

If you're getting used to my preaching, you will sense that I'm leading you down the path of a false choice. As powerful as the story has been and is

-- from the beginning of God's magnificent gift to us of the impossibly beautiful, abundant earth, the air, the water the soil, the trees and plants and animals that not only nourish our bodies but feed our spirits;

-- to the dreams and ideals and sometimes even the reality of liberation, the crossing over the turbulent sea to gain freedom from the systems of oppression that for some reason we humans can never stop devising for other people;

-- to the ever-renewing presence of God's self among us, as a people and as individuals, restoring us to wholeness, giving us a new heart and a new spirit;

-- and at last to bring us to gather with all God's people, diverse beyond our wildest imagining, coming to God over many different paths, bringing us together in peace and justice, lifting up the lame and the outcast, uniting all in righteousness, equity, mutual understanding, and love;

⌘ As powerful as this story has been and is, the story is not finished, nor can it be as long as God is willing to abide with us, abide in us, and as long as so many of us persist in separating ourselves from God, separating ourselves from our better nature, our divine nature that is at constant war with our less noble qualities—our fear, our selfishness, our greed, our arrogance, our casual cruelty, and our despair.

The story is not yet finished; the resurrection is not the conclusion but only a beginning. The story is only a comedy or a tragedy, we only see that it has a happy or a sad ending if and when we choose to end it somewhere by an arbitrary choice. The story is only a comedy now, it only has a happy ending now, if we focus on the prosperous few, if we choose to ignore all those who do not live in the fullness of God's abundance; if we ignore all those who live under the oppression of others and have yet to cross their Red Sea; if we conveniently forget those who are broken in body mind or spirit; if we fail to remember that the story is not just about us, but must include them as well.

And the story is only a tragedy if we think that continuing desecration and destruction of God's gift of creation is our inevitable destiny; it only has a tragic ending if we shrug our shoulders and accept that war and strife must be our permanent fate, or that nothing awaits us in our collective future but a mushroom cloud.

Christ's body was broken and his earthly life was ended, but as light and joy have returned to this holy space, so he was raised up again and made whole, and so we also can look forward to being made whole. Christ's body in the world, the church, is the re-incarnation of Christ in the world of the resurrection. However imperfect a re-incarnation it has been—and it has often been most imperfect—the church—WE—are now the bearers of the story as well as its hearers. We carry the story in our actions, in our relationships, in the whole of our lives. We continue the story with every new baptism; with every renewal of our baptismal promises; with every commitment to continue, to persevere, to proclaim, to seek, and to strive; with every move we make toward repentance, service, love, justice, peace, and human dignity.

The challenges are great. The darkness that surrounds us is certainly thick and threatening. We may often find it difficult to think that all will turn out well, that the story will have a happy ending after all. But that is where our faith comes into play. Our faith is what propels us to take our part in the story. And if we act on our faith, if we live by our faith, if we rejoice and share and forgive and serve out of our faith, then we can say, along with Archbishop Desmond, "We have read to the end, and the good news is, God wins!"

Christ is risen! Alleluia, alleluia!