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Good Friday, Noon Service  
March 25, 2005  
John 19:13-30

In the second stanza of his poem, *The Four Quartets*, TS Elliot wrote the following:

*What we call the beginning is often the end  
And to make an end is to make a beginning.  
The end is where we start from.*

At the beginning of his Gospel, John says this: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him . . . and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”

Today is March 25<sup>th</sup>. The sun is shining brightly. The still cool air is filled with the fragrance of spring. It is not so different from any other late March day except that it is Good Friday, and it is March 25<sup>th</sup>. March 25<sup>th</sup>. Nine months to the day before Christmas, December 25<sup>th</sup>. And thus it is not merely Good Friday. It is also the day of the annunciation, the beginning of the Christian story. This is the day the angel Gabriel appears to Mary and announces to her that she will bare a son, who will be called the Christ, the messiah of the world. This is the same tender loving courageous Mary who now weeps at the foot of the Cross – when most of the other disciples have fled in fear on this Good Friday.

It was to her that Jesus was born. And now she stands, with two other women and a lone male disciple, beneath her son where sorrow and love flow mingled down. John Donne, in 1608, another rare year when the movable Good Friday and the fixed day of the Annunciation coincided on March 25<sup>th</sup>, wrote the following:

*The Church, by letting those days join, hath shown Death and conception to mankind is one; Twas in Him the same humility. That he would be a man, and leave to be. So in Christ's mother, love and grief are one.*

In other words, to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from.

Every year at noon on Good Friday the contrast is stark. The beauty of the day outside, rubs raw against the darkness of the mood inside. In the evening it is easier. Night has already fallen. There is no bright sun shining its not so subtle life-giving lies of sunshine and hope. But John's Gospel tells us that Jesus was crucified at about noon, about now, under a bright Galilean sun. A violent, bloody, unexpected end, an unjust death, a criminal's death at the hands of a government and religious institution that had become bedfellows. It was the end. In fact, the crucifixion is about the only thing that historians consistently agree on when it comes to Jesus' life. His death. His end. Some time around the year 30, Pontius Pilate sentenced Jesus of Nazareth to death by crucifixion on a hill in the outskirts of Jerusalem. Historians of the time tell us the cross

was made from two shafts of olive wood. The Christian knows the cross was constructed of more than mere wood, rope, and nails, but of betrayal, loneliness, and a lack of justice.

Of all days, this day has little to do with sappy sentimentality. The end has come. The end for Jesus is a body, a bloody, mangled, broken body. Death on a cross.

How clearly do I remember hearing Peter Storey's words, "the problem with the American church is that the pews are full on Mother's Day and empty on Good Friday." Perhaps that is because we hold death, especially suffering, innocent, unjust death, so far away, watch it on TV screens, hear of it on the radio, debate it in Congress, lock it away in hospitals and nursing homes. Death becomes spiritualized, so sentimental, so disembodied from life.

Last fall, a recent Duke graduate was struck and killed by a Durham bus near 9<sup>th</sup> street late one Saturday evening. Someone commented at her funeral, "now she is a life-force free of the prison that was her body." But the autopsy report said nothing of a life-force. It said she was dead, an innocent young woman, her body, mangled, crushed, broken under the weight of the bus. Death is real. It is often violent. It is the end.

Nicholas Wolterstorff teaches theology at Yale. Some two decades ago, his then 25-year old son fell to his death while mountain climbing in Austria. Wolterstorff says the following about confronting his son's death: "I skimmed some books on grief. They offered ways of not looking death and pain in the face, ways of turning away from death out there to one's own inner "grief process" and then, on that, laying the heavy hand of rationality. I will not have it so. I will not look away. I will remind myself that there's more to life than pain. I will accept joy. But I will not look away from death. Its demonic awfulness I will not ignore. I owe that – to him and to God."

Today is the end. Death, real death, not an existential metaphor for prolonged sleep, or the door that liberates the life-force trapped deep inside each one, or the gateway to the five most important people from our lives who will take us on a tour of our past, but death. The end. God in Jesus Christ is on the Cross today. God is dead, and we dare not ignore it, or turn away from its demonic awfulness.

As far as I'm aware, Christianity is the only religious tradition in existence that makes such a bold claim. The infinite God, creator of all that is, seen and unseen, author of life and death, becomes human flesh and blood and lives a human life, vulnerable to all that makes life so beautiful and so tragic, open to love and laughter and friendship, victim of injustice and betrayal. The Gospel of John says that when we hear the story of Jesus' crucifixion, when we look at the cross today, we are looking at the Word made flesh. We are staring at the mangled body of a crucified God who dies a human death.

And yet, even in the face of all the blood and gore and brokenness, the Church has the audacious faith to call this Friday, Good. Time, like an ever-flowing stream bears all who breathe away, are the words of the famous Isaac Watts hymn. For we, too, even here on this campus, surrounded by the life-pulsing vigor of youth, are headed to the grave. And we desperately need a God who has been there, too, a God who can redeem us, even from death. "For whom does the bell toll? The bell tolls for thee."

Time, we think of it as a one-way street. We have all been victims of time. How often do we open our mouths, or click send, and as soon as the words are out there we desperately want to bring them back, but already it is too late, they have done their cruel work of wounding or sacred healing as the case may be. We stir sugar into our morning

coffee and it is gone, never to return. A candle is lit for the first time and it can never be unlit. A loved one dies and she will not come back.

And yet, for us Christians, time has a different quality. There is a cyclical nature to Christian time. Like the bass-line in a jazz quartet, each year the church beats out a rhythm, and each week, no each day, no each moment of our lives we play our part in the on-going drama of sin and redemption, death and resurrection.

It was not Friday, but a Monday, April 9, 1945. By then, Dietrich Bonhoeffer had done all he could to thwart the brutal Nazi Regime that held his beloved Germany captive, and indeed by that point, much of the Western world. He had done all he could to call his cherished Christian Church to faithfulness, to worship God instead of country. On that spring day in 1945, Bonhoeffer went to the grave. He was hanged at a death camp in Flossburg. As the prison guards led him to the gallows, Bonhoeffer turned, and said: "This is the end, but for me, the beginning of life."