

God Changes the Ending

Easter 2023

On the evening of May 14, 1998,

all across this country,

millions of people stopped what they were doing,

ran to their living rooms, and turned on their televisions.

76 million people all glued to their sets.

Was it breaking news? No.

A sporting event of some sort? Nope.

A royal wedding, a royal baptism, a royal anything? Uh-uh.

It was the finale — not just the season finale — but the *finale* finale of Seinfeld.

Some among you were not yet born on that fateful day.

Some among you are wondering what on earth

a now-ancient sitcom is doing in an Easter sermon.

But others may remember what it was like to be one of 76 million people who all, simultaneously, got really really crabby.

Because everyone *hated* the finale. Ha-ted it.

Nine years of a beloved show and nobody liked the ending.

All any of us could talk about the next day was how we would have ended it better.

You might not have been part of that particular cultural moment,
but you've had it happen to you.

You invest yourself in a book, and you get to the last page and say "wait, what?"

You sit through a movie, and two hours later you say "*that's* who she ended up with?"

You dedicate every Sunday night to a series only to say, repeatedly, "are you kidding me? but I loved *that* character!"

And Monday morning you, too, are telling folks how you would have ended it better.

How you would change that ending if you could.

So now to our story.

The story that has drawn us all here this morning.

Which is a story, originally, with a really bad ending.

The ending that no one liked,
that everyone wanted to change.

It's the story of a carpenter,
who left home when he was about 30,
who came upon his cousin John baptizing people in the River Jordan
and who joined them in the waters and was himself baptized.

Who came up out of the river
empowered by a Spirit, the Holy Spirit,
and began to tell anyone who would listen
that there was a God who loved them,
and that all God asked of them was to love one another.

It's the story of this man traveling from town to town
for three years,
preaching love in everything he said
but also in everything he did.

This man listened to people who had never been heard before,
and understood their deepest longings.

He spoke with such tenderness to each person,
he was gentle with the sick, and forgiving of those who'd done wrong.
And in his presence, those who were hurting found themselves healed.

Healed of their doubts, healed of their sins,
and just healed —
the lame walked again, the blind saw, the dying were restored.
And then, the story says,
after three years of journeying through the villages of Israel
and creating a movement built on love,
the man and his followers headed to Jerusalem
where thousands were waiting to be cared for by him,
thousands who were ready to join this movement.

And the story was going so well —
there was such joy wherever he went,
and hope — hope like it had never been felt before.

The story was going so well.

Until...

Until the people in charge decided it was going a little too well.

Decided there were too many people following this man and his talk of love.

And so those people in charge, they put an end to it all.

On Good Friday,

we gathered in this room to hear **that** end of the story.

To read the last page, to see the season finale, to watch the end of the movie.

We gathered here and we heard the end.

And none of us liked it. None of us liked it at all.

The bad guys win?

The good guy is killed?

It was the *wrong* ending.

Yes. It was the wrong ending.

Which is why we're here today.

We're here today because God changed the ending of the story.

God changed the ending.

This is the ending as God re-wrote it:

Early in the morning, the story says,

the women went to the tomb. But the stone had been rolled away.

And the tomb was empty.

And the voice of the angel said

“Why do you seek the living among the dead?”

God changed the ending.

God changed death into life,

sorrow into joy,

grief into laughter.

God changed defeat into victory,

evil into good,

and Love as the final winner.

God changed the ending, and Love won.

And God keeps doing it.

God is at work in this world right now, all the time,

changing the endings of stories.

God is at work in this world, right now,

looking for endings that are just wrong, and rewriting them.

God is at work in this world right now

to keep sorrow from ever being the last word,

to keep despair ever from being the last chapter,
to keep what is worst from ever being what is final.

Changing the ending is what God does.

I have been here a long time now —

when that Seinfeld episode aired I'd already been here 9 years!

And one of the great joys of being long-serving pastors,

as David and I are,

is that we have had the extraordinary privilege

of seeing God change the endings in people's lives here again and again.

We have been with people in the depths of sorrow.

And we have witnessed God over time rewrite the story and change the ending,

so that grief is no longer the last page – so that joy comes back in.

We have been with people in times of profound discouragement,

and we have watched God rewrite the story, and change the ending,

so that hope is on the next page.

We have journeyed with people through the struggle of addiction
and affliction of every kind,
and have watched God rewrite the story, change the ending,
so that recovery gets the last word.

We have seen a lot of endings changed,
and new stories written.

Because that's what God does. That's what the God of Easter does.

Takes our Good Fridays and changes the endings.

The God of Easter writes for us a much better story,

where all things are possible again,

where all is forgiven and all is made new,

where love never ends

and life never ends.

What God did then, God does now, whenever we ask.

God changes our endings.

Happy Easter! Amen.