

It is Finished

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St. John's Gospel 19: 28-30 and St. Mark's Gospel 16: 1-8

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“Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the scriptures would be fulfilled, Jesus said, ‘I am thirsty.’ A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus’ lips. When he had received the drink, Jesus said, ‘It is finished.’ With that, he bowed his head and gave up the spirit.” — St. John’s Gospel 19: 28-30

Those of you who have the most sophisticated taste and the most refined critical sense of English literature, will know that neither Jane Austen, for all her wit, nor George Eliot, for all her brilliance, nor Anthony Trollope, for all the sweetness of his inventive genius, nor Dickens, nor Forster, nor Wolff, nor even Thomas Hardy, represent the high water mark of accomplishment in English literature, the writing of the classic of classics for which English will be remembered when Trafalgar Square is but a heap of dust.

No, my dear friends, at the apex of English literature one novel stands alone: Douglas Adams, *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*.

Where else in literature can we learn the answer to the question “what is the meaning of life, the universe and everything?” The answer is 42, in case you didn’t know.

Where else can we plumb “the long dark teatime of the soul” or discover that reality is almost always wrong.

And, most to the point, where else can we find ourselves teetering on the edge of the narrow ledge at the brink of immanent disaster, again and again, only to find ourselves in an unimaginably wonderful new place. As when our hero Arthur Dent discovers unexpectedly one Thursday morning that the Intergalactic Highway Planning Commission has slated the planet Earth to be demolished so that a bypass could be put through.

With the end of the Earth only twelve minutes away and the final curtain about to drop on terrestrial life, our hero is snatched up, finding himself suddenly floating in the vacuum of space with a towel and a copy of the “Hitchhiker’s Guide.”

And, it is then, that we make our greatest discovery in the novel. Whenever doom hangs by a single thread over Arthur Dent’s clueless head, a door to another dimension, or a wormhole to a glittering space craft, suddenly appears from nowhere to rescue him. Which is why, of course, printed right across the cover of the “Hitchhiker’s Guide” are two words: “Don’t Panic.”

Sometimes, even long after the fabled Fat Lady sings, “it ain’t over.”

I wish I could find in what sermon it was that the long-time senior minister of the Riverside Church in New York City, the late William Sloane Coffin, recalled the comic Gracie Allen's most memorable line ever: *"Never put a period where God puts a comma."* I would be willing to bet it was in an Easter sermon. *"Never put a period where God puts a comma."*

I want to draw our attention this morning to the startling end of the Gospel According to St. Mark, to that passage that tells us the disciples had in fact placed a definitive period at the end of Good Friday, but God did not. Just when the disciples could not imagine a way out, God made a way through.

The Lord Jesus has died upon the cross and been buried. He has been laid in his grave just prior to the beginning of the sabbath. And as day breaks on the first day of the week, women come to the tomb to anoint his body properly to lie forevermore in his grave. But his body is not there. To the astonishment of these women (his bravest and most resolute followers) his body is gone. And the Gospel of Mark ends with these words: *"Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone because they were afraid."**

The expectations of these and the other disciples were not unrealistic. In fact, that is all they were. They were merely realistic.

Their expectations were entirely based on their past and partial experiences of reality. That's not a sin. We might try to make light of them, even condemn them for their lack of faith. But which of us sits by the gates of the cemetery expecting to meet Uncle Bill out for a Sunday stroll or to ask Grandmother Ruby for her secret recipe for rhubarb pie?

When Jesus said, "It is finished," he didn't mean it was the end to his story, just that he had completed that specific errand of incarnation on which his Father sent him.

He had lived, taught, healed, loved, poured himself out for humanity, showed us what a real human being is, even to the point of not returning evil for evil when ignorant and wicked and power-crazed and frightened human beings falsely convicted him of sedition, beat him, and tortured him to death. That task of incarnation, that sacred task only he could perform in our flesh, was finished. He said so. "It is finished." And he died.

Comma.

Comma. Not period. Not a full stop.

He died, carrying through the will of God to show humanity the full loving heart of God for God's unruly and rebellious creatures.

Then, he was buried.

Comma. Not period.

Comma.

And then, and then, God said, "Amen! Yes! This is what I intended all along by speaking the word Human and bringing these creatures into existence."

God said "Amen! So be it! Yes! And he raised Jesus from the dead to place his own eternal divine stamp of approval on the human life Jesus lived unto death."

"It is finished," said Jesus. And God placed that crucial comma at the end of that crucial sentence, and it stood there in the middle of the story for three days, and then God raised Jesus from the dead. And when God did, God enlarged reality for all time.

No. That's not it.

God didn't just *enlarge* reality. God *transformed* the very notion of what is real and what is not real. God in a single impossible act redefined the possible. And we still rub our eyes in disbelief, and we imagine that the little bit of existence we can see and comprehend is all there is.

Why? Not because we are devoted to scientific methodology, but because we know how much it would cost us to believe that God's reality is big enough to raise the dead.

The resurrection is not a challenge for rationality. If I can believe in the existence of a quark I can believe in the resurrection of Christ. But believing in a quark makes no demands on my life, believing in a quark or a neutron or a gravitational wave does not call me to live in such a way that somebody would rather put me on a cross than put up with me.

Many things were finished when Jesus said, "It is finished." But his story wasn't. His gospel wasn't. He had only started a new chapter. His next job, by the power of the Holy Spirit, is to make us human too.

And he's still working on that.

Amen.