

Easter 3, Year C
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St. James, Wheat Ridge

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The Night King has been stopped,
and the army of the dead has been vanquished,
thanks to the heroics of a character
no one would have predicted
would be the savior of humanity.
But the story hasn't ended yet.
We've still got three more episodes to go.

I am speaking, of course, of this final season
of the HBO hit, "Game of Thrones."
Even if you don't watch it,
I'm betting you've heard a lot about it,
because it is the most-hyped TV show in history.
It's set in a mythical medieval world
and combines dragons and magic and zombies,
and some real story lines from Europe's Dark Ages,
and a bunch of strong female characters,
and a very handsome and dashing male lead.
I've been watching through eight seasons now.
I'm sad that there are only three more episodes left,
and there are still so many questions,
so many loose ends that need to be tied up.

Last Sunday night, we were treated to 82 minutes
of nearly non-stop action,
allegedly the longest battle sequence ever filmed,
and I have to tell you,
it was pretty confusing at times.
I think the directors were trying to re-create the fog of war,
as the forces of the living went to battle
with the zombie army of the dead.

I saw what happened on the screen,
but I didn't always understand just what I was seeing.

That's why I'm so grateful
 that for several seasons now,
 the producers have created a segment to run right after each episode,
 an epilogue to sort of explain what happened,
 to remind viewers of what was important,
 to show flashbacks of scenes from earlier seasons,
 and to help us finally connect the dots.

Some people might not need that help,
 but I think most of us do.
 The show has ended.
 Now let's just summarize what happened,
 to make sure we understand.
 Remember that scene from seven years ago,
 when THIS happened?
 You may not have understood that at the time,
 but NOW, you see why it was important, right?
 I, for one, am very grateful for such skilled story-telling.
 Because otherwise, I would be lost.

This morning we have another example of skilled story-telling.
 Slogging through the Gospel of John is not always easy.
 There are a lot of foggy passages in there,
 and it's not always entirely evident just what the author means.

Still, when we finish reading the last verses of the 20th chapter of John,
 it does sound as though we've come to the end of the story.
 Chapter 20 wraps up like this:
 "These signs are written
 so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah,
 the son of God,
 and that through believing you may have life in his name."
 Now, there's a good ending, right?
 But just when we think it's all over,
 here comes one more story,
 this enigmatic 21st chapter of John that we read this morning.

It's almost like the little segment that runs after *Game of Thrones*.
 It's sort of an epilogue,
 a postscript to the drama that has just unfolded before us.

It's like it's there to make sure that
 we understand what happened.
 It calls forth flashbacks of earlier scenes,
 to help us connect the dots,
 to see how certain events are connected,
 and how certain themes keep replaying themselves.

For example, reading that the risen Christ
 appears at the Sea of Tiberias,
 and feeds the disciples fish and bread,
 calls to mind that earlier scene,
 in the 6th chapter of John,
 when Jesus blessed five loaves and two fish
 and fed a crowd of 5,000 on the shores of that same lake.
 If we had somehow wrongly concluded
 that Christ's abundant generosity
 belonged only in the past and not the present,
 this epilogue wants us to realize
 that Christ continues to bless us and feed us.
 The past is merely prologue to the present.

Likewise, when we read that the disciples cast their nets
 on the right side of the boat,
 as the risen Christ has instructed them to do,
 we may remember
 that the disciples never caught a single fish
 in *any* of the Gospels
 without the help of Christ.
 Maybe this epilogue story is trying to tell us
 that if we're going to succeed in our mission,
 we're going to need Christ guiding us.
 Just in case you didn't get that up until now.

When we read that none of the disciples at first recognize Christ
 when he appears on the shore and calls to them,
 doesn't that kind of remind us of Mary Magdalene,
 who mistook the risen Christ for the gardener
 when she encountered him at the tomb on that first Easter morning?
 We might have misunderstood,
 and dismissed that as Mary just being lost in her grief.

But no, the story teller wants us to know
that the failure to recognize the risen Christ
continues to plague the disciples
even after he has greeted them twice behind locked doors.
And if we're tempted to think
that WE would never fail to recognize our Lord,
this epilogue warns us not to be so sure.
There's a good chance we would be as slow as the disciples
to recognize his presence.
That's a theme we need to be aware of.
What if Christ is among us right now,
and we fail to see him standing right in front of us?

How about that scene where Jesus invites them to breakfast and feeds them?
Could that possibly be linked to that earlier scene in John
where he's at table with them,
and he washes their feet?
Could this early morning meal on the shore
clue us in that the Last Supper
really WASN'T the final meal Christ ate with his disciples?
Maybe we're meant to understand
that the risen Christ continues
to share in the table fellowship of the church,
and continues to nurture us
and provide us with the strength we need
for our lives and our ministry.

Finally, we hear Christ ask Peter three times if Peter loves him.
Well, to understand that
let's re-examine the scene
where Christ predicted that Peter would deny him three times.
And then let's look at the scene in which that prediction is fulfilled.
If we have taken away from those earlier episodes
the mistaken impression
that Peter is to be remembered for his lack of faithfulness,
this epilogue corrects that,
and reminds us that what is more important than Peter's denials
is the grace of Christ,
and the divine willingness to entrust this ministry
even to someone whose life so far

has been marked by impulsiveness and denial.

In short, this last short segment of the story John has been telling us alerts us not to reduce the Gospel of Christ to a story in the past, not to leave it in a time and place long ago and far, far away. Rather, it invites us to return to the very beginning of the story, back when we knew nothing of what was to come, and to read again how the story teller sets the stage for us. To remember how we were told that “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

That, in turn, may awaken memories of our own darkness, memories of our own hunger, of our own failure to recognize Christ, the darkness of our own denials. But we are assured that none of this darkness has overcome the light. Because the risen Christ still calls, still feeds, still empowers even doubters and deniers.

The story may have ended, but the real-life drama of Christ continues. Everything John has shown us continues past the last scene and into the present moment and beyond.

The Night King has been stopped, and death has been vanquished, thanks to the heroics of someone no one would have predicted would be the savior of humanity. But the story is not over. And the past is merely prologue to the present. Amen.