

# **“Joyful Love: God’s Final Answer”**

Psalm 31:9-16, Mark 11:1-11, Philippians 2:5-11

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Is that your final answer? Thirteen years ago Regis was a master at asking that question on “Who wants to be a millionaire?” It didn’t matter if the answer was obvious and came quickly or unsure and slow. The lights would dance with ominous music. Regis would lean in, look the person in the eye and ask, “Is that your final answer?”

Almost everything during Holy Week appears to be final. Palm Sunday was bursting with happiness. Unlike joyful love which is eternal, happiness is always fleeting for happiness depends on health, wealth, political power, the economy, parades, your favorite weather or festivals which are all fleeting. The happiness of Palm Sunday in just four days was overcome with distrust, gloom, fear and was persuaded into hate. It appears that the final answer of those in the crowd was the despairing cry “crucify him”.

In an upper room the disciples were distraught agonizing over what seem to them to be their final supper with Jesus. It was made even worse by Jesus words, “You all will become my deserters.” Do you know how hard it is to heal a relationship after deserting someone or being deserted by someone? A breach is there that is hard to get past. Desertion is abandonment. It is not being there when someone needs you most. It creates pain, distance and suspicion. Betrayal seems so final. It conjures up images of permanent separation and lasting animosity. It seemed to the disciples that they were teetering on the point of no return. They were caught between death or betrayal with no way out.

The high priest first interrogated Jesus, and then Pilate asked the questions. For the most part Jesus made no reply. In Jesus silence he was sealing his fate in crucifixion. There was a way out. If Jesus had backed down, if he had promised not to continually be bold in joyful love, if Jesus would have vowed to fade away quietly, Jesus would have saved his life. Rather Jesus was silent letting his joyful loving actions be his final answers. Joyfully loving notorious sinners, enjoying dinner with them; Joyfully loving all who were hurting, healing their pain; Joyfully loving, forgiving people of all their sins; Joyfully loving, providing nourishment for each person’s unique hunger. Joyfully loving, empowering each person with an identity as a beloved child of God. Joyfully loving, serving his disciples. In Jesus joyful love was on trial. Joyful love was condemned to death. It seemed final.

Jesus was crucified beside a criminal. He had been condemned, hung on the cross so everyone could see his guilt, the finitude of his life.

Jesus died, then was pierced with a sword to make double sure he was dead. Jesus lifeless body was sealed in an air-tight tomb to make triple sure he was dead. What could be more final?

So many things about our own lives seem final as well: The lost game, lost sleep, lost house, lost vitality, lost dreams, lost love; The Finitude of a failed test, failed career, failed relationship, failed life; So much seems so final, mistakes, injuries, regretful words, disease, death. Sadly we can easily get stuck in what appears to be the final answer thinking nothing will change.

That's where the psalmist is praying: **Psalm 31:9-13 "Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress; my eye wastes away from grief, my soul and body also. For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my misery, and my bones waste away. I am the scorn of all my adversaries, a horror to my neighbors, an object of dread to my acquaintances; those who see me in the street flee from me. I have passed out of mind like one who is dead; I have become like a broken vessel. For I hear the whispering of many-- terror all around!-- as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life."** Often we read the Psalms to fast missing the anguish of what appears to be the final answer of all that is wrong. In the next verse the Psalm takes a radical shift praising God for the saving, delivering, transforming power of God's steadfast, joyful love. Before we go there let's look at the dilemma of the Psalmist. He or she is in distress, grieving and sorrowful. Their health is rapidly failing. Their faith is wasting away. With every breath they are becoming weaker and more miserable. Co-workers see them as useless. Neighbors hate them. Friends abandoned them. Hurtful gossip about them is rampant. They feel completely broken, like they are already dead. Their fear has overwhelmed them causing them to live in terror. Listen again to the psalmist's pain this time from The Message translation. **Psalm 31:9-13 "Be kind to me, God—I'm in deep, deep trouble again. I've cried my eyes out; I feel hollow inside. My life leaks away, groan by groan; my years fade out in sighs. My troubles have worn me out, turned my bones to powder. To my enemies I'm a monster; I'm ridiculed by the neighbors. My friends are horrified; they cross the street to avoid me. They want to blot me from memory, forget me like a corpse in a grave, discard me like a broken dish in the trash. The street-talk gossip has me 'criminally insane'! Behind locked doors they plot how to ruin me for good. Desperate, I throw myself on you: you are my God!"** Obviously this is more than a bad week. The psalmist is much worse than Murphy everything is going wrong, probably for all of their life. The psalmist believes sorrow, pain, hate, darkness, death are the final answers. In the depths of their anguish they are transformed, redeemed, renewed by God. The psalmist is way beyond pulling themselves up with positive thinking, self help, the help of others or even being bolstered by faith. The psalmist is saved by God. The psalmist continues. **Psalm 31:14-16 14 "But I trust in you, O LORD; I say, "You are my God." My times are in your hand; deliver me**

**from the hand of my enemies and persecutors. Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your steadfast love.”**

Many of the psalms have this type of progression. When you are in a dark place and all looks hopeless read the psalms. Stop in the depths, before the pivot point, where all seems final. Ponder how the psalmist got stuck there perhaps for years, maybe for most of their life. Connect with the Psalmist’s longing then complete the psalm. Every Psalm ends with forgiveness, renewal, transformation, redemption by God’s steadfast joyful love.

Much to our surprise no aspect of pain or longing is ever final. Let’s go back to Holy Week. Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross is more than enough to save everyone, even every person in the crowd that yelled crucify him, even Judas who betrayed Jesus, even the religious leaders and Roman authorities that crucified him. God’s joyful love abounds with so much grace that it can bury all that hate and resurrect even the most miscue specs of tarnished love, joy and beauty.

It was not the final supper, rather Jesus and the disciples right now are joyfully feasting at the eternal table of God’s glorifying love. Today as we celebrate the Lord’s Supper imagine the eternal, future joyful, glorious loving meals you will have with Jesus and all you love.

The resurrected Jesus appeared to the deserting disciples to forgive them, to heal and renew their relationship to empower them with overflow joyful love that has renewed millions with God’s love. Peter, the worst offender of all, denied Jesus three times which he swore he would never ever do, even once. It appeared that Peter’s final answer was an adamant “No, I do not know Jesus” After Jesus death Peter feared that he had forever cut himself off from Jesus. The denial wasn’t the final answer. The final answer was God’s joyful love that forgave Peter and declared, "I still love you. You still belong. You are my cherished beloved child. I trust you to be the rock upon which I will build my church of forgiving, joyful love."

The condemned, crucified joyful, loving service of Jesus flourishes on and is exponentially multiplying through disciples, touching us. Our joyful, loving service will continue to ripple out forever.

The condemned dying criminal crucified beside Jesus was told by Jesus that your life is not final, your crime is not final, for "today you will be with me in paradise."

So many seemingly final declarations were made about Jesus. “Jesus breathed his last," "it is finished," “they pierced Jesus with a sword,” "they laid Jesus in a tomb” and “they sealed Jesus in the tomb with a big stone" They seem so very final. Yet we know that Easter came. Jesus rose to glorious life. Jesus lives today and will live forever. Every aspect of joy and love is eternal. Joyful love is the final answer.

Hopefully you have experienced some faint precursors of God’s eternal joyful love overcoming what appeared to be ominous final answers in your life. Success after failure, a rewarding career after being fired, a new home after a lost house, a recovery from an

illness, a healed relationship, a renewed marriage, passionate purpose after apathy, courage after anxiety, peace after grief, joy after depression, belonging after loneliness, radiant light after a dark season of the soul.

Hopefully you are making the journey from the dust and mortality of Ash Wednesday, through the despair of Holy Week to the glory of Easter. Hopefully you have discovered that your identity does not come from your circumstances. You are not defined by your mistakes, a disease, a shortcoming or any of the many forms of death. Your identity is a beloved child of God. You are defined by the goodness of God's image within you, by the resurrecting joyful love of God.

The Apostle Paul wrote, **Philippians 2:5-11** “**Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, Jesus humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.**”

It is tempting to read this scripture quickly going right to the final answer of resurrection glory. It starts with Jesus becoming human, taking on all our pain and burdens. Jesus humbled himself to save you and me. Jesus allowed himself to be betrayed, condemned and crucified. The humbling was so dark and horrible that Jesus fervently prayed, sweating blood in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus' anguish and depression was so intense that even Jesus who was fully God and fully human for awhile believed all hope was lost, that pain, sin, darkness and death was the final answer, that God had abandoned him. From the cross Jesus cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" It doesn't get any more final than that. It's a terrible thing to be abandoned by anyone, but to believe that God has abandoned you, that all that is left is death is horrible.

We know the end of the story so we can jump right to resurrection. It only takes a few seconds to go from “Jesus humbled himself” to “God highly exalted Jesus”. According to our calendar it took Jesus a week to make that transition. For Jesus that week had to seem like several lifetimes. Every second most have seemed like a year. If Jesus could not see past what appeared to be final answers to God's eternal joyful love then it is likely that all of us will find ourselves at some point in a similar hopeless place. That's why we need each other to keep proclaiming the real final answer, God's eternal joyful love.

Despite all the seemingly final pain, horror, darkness and death of this week God's joyful love will bury all the ugliness and resurrect all the beauty, love and joy. However our lives are unfolding. Regardless of the dilemma and questions we are struggling with,

despite the pain, sorrow and fear we will at some point experience, God's final answer is eternal joyful love. Jesus brings to full abundant life the potential of the entire cosmos. In time we will emerge on the other side of death to eternal glorious resurrection life. Every spec of our goodness, every kind thought, every loving action, every delight of joy is magnified, glorified and eternal. Thanks be to God for God's ultimate final answer, joyful love. Amen.