

Sermon: “Changing the End of the Story”

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But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb...

— *John 20: 11-1*

We are a storytelling species. Storytelling distinguishes us among the animals. We pass down family stories. We tell stories of our nation. We tell stories of the gods. Myths and Adventures and Mysteries and Family Sagas capture us.

Oral stories became written ones so that they could be preserved and passed down and continued. Written stories became printed, and through large global literacy efforts, words and stories permeate the globe. We can read a book, a story, by someone we have never met, whose life is wholly different from our own, and yet we feel we know these characters. The plot of the book intersects with the plot of our lives. We understand our existence through the stories we encounter. They provide purpose, direction, comfort, and hope. They become a script for living.

How many teenagers have found themselves as Holden Caulfield?¹ Who hasn't stood in rapt silence, awe, and fear when Boo Radley stands in the corner of the Finch house after rescuing Jem and Scout from the drunken Bob Ewell?² Who can read without weeping as they hear of Little Anne laying down upon the grave of Old Dan, the two inseparable hounds, and giving up her life?³ You know these stories. They sting you. They hold you. They mold you. They enchant the world. Through them we begin to see our own lives as something precious, maybe even sacred. “Once upon a time ...”

There is rising concern, however, that an attraction to stories that define us is fading from modern life. In a recent article in *The Atlantic* magazine, Katherine Marsh highlights how the statistics of children ages nine to thirteen who read for fun has dropped by double digits since 1984. There are many explanations, but as Marsh says, “One of the most compelling—and depressing—is rooted in how our education system teaches kids to relate to books.”⁴

Analytic reading has become the measurable standard. Books are to be dissected, evaluated, critiqued, and recalled. These are necessary skills, especially in a generation of students who are bombarded with true and false information every day. But to read a story and be shaped by it, this is harder to evaluate. It is emotional, psychological, mythic.

A similar story came out in February in *The New Yorker* magazine called “The End of the English Major.” The piece chronicles the almost 50% decline in Humanities majors in colleges and universities since 2007. They credit the pre-professional

emphasis of college education as one reason. Another is a bias against engaging with old ideas because they represent outdated worldviews and contain prejudices we cannot tolerate now. As a result, some schools are trying to integrate the *Iliad* into business classes or bring in other ethical ideas of literature into medical ethics courses so that the humanities are not lost entirely. Other schools are simply moving toward eliminating those programs.⁵

What's the risk of losing our connection to great stories? We lose the enchantment of life, the possibility, the myth for living. We are left with utility. Money, security, legacy, leisure—these become the “story” we live with shrunk imaginations devoid of stories that draw us beyond statistical analysis and measurable results. The only story we have is the one we write for ourselves, and a “successful” story must meet the Standards of Learning or the income bracket we want to reach.

Mary Magdalene knows a world devoid of story as she stands in that garden on the first day of the week. She has lost the story for her life. The great story of love that she entered through Jesus and his teachings had died. It was cut off. It ended in tragedy. She witnessed him arrested, tried, crucified, and laid in the tomb. She has come on the first day of the week to prepare the body for burial, but she finds the stone rolled away and the body missing. How much worse could it get? Couldn't he be left alone in death?

She weeps outside the tomb, unable even to recognize the angels who speak to her, “Why are you weeping?”

I'm weeping because the story has ended as all stories end, in death.

I'm weeping because life is only survival of the fittest.

I'm weeping because those with the power make the rules.

I'm weeping because wealth and prestige are all that matter.

I'm weeping because analysis and data and convenience are the only things to strive for.

I'm weeping because there are no stories worth telling. Life is only what can be touched and tasted, smelled and heard, observed and harnessed and manipulated and abused.

I'm weeping because my life is only what I make of it, and then I die, so what's the point?

Mary knows this world without a story, without imagination, without possibility beyond what she can make for herself. We, too, have been trapped in that story, and it is only through a new story, imagined and resonating in a depth we rarely acknowledge, that a new future arises. Something from beyond must come to re-enchant our existence. Gospel arrives in such stories that entwine themselves with our own.

And in such a story, a weeping sufferer realizes there is a future beyond what she makes for herself. People of faith look for echoes of this enchantment around us, those who find their futures changed from a power beyond them. One such character is Ms. Honey in the classic children's book *Matilda* by Roald Dahl.⁶ You may remember this story. A young girl from a horrible family is sent to a terrible school

run by a tyrant, known as The Trunchbull. She reigns with an iron fist, despising the children in her classrooms and hallways and regularly abusing them physically and verbally. Matilda's one saving grace is that she gets to learn with Ms. Honey who teaches with kindness and respect and joy.

You learn through the story, however, that Ms. Honey is the niece of the Trunchbull, raised by her abusive relative after her parents died, and upon her adulthood, the Trunchbull handed her a bill for the expenses she incurred in raising Ms. Honey. It is an astronomical sum, and so she must work at this terrible school until she pays the debt, but she will never be able to pay the debt.

Ms. Honey lives in a disenchanted world, weeping, hopeless, with no possibility of freedom or joy until Matilda, who has been gifted from some power beyond herself, is able to use her telekinesis and her cunning to overthrow the power of the Trunchbull and send the tyrant running for the hills.

The book was adapted into a musical several years ago, and in the final song, right after the Trunchbull has abandoned the school, leaving Ms. Honey free and able to transform it into the school she has longed for, she begins to sing,

"I was sure that I would never escape the story I'd written for me.

I couldn't find a way out.

I couldn't see beyond the clouds that swirled around me.

Then one day I opened my eyes, and looked up to find that the sky had turned blindingly blue.

And right by my side there was you.

Quietly taking a stand, and you were holding my hand."⁷

Do you hear Mary Magdalene in those words? A story written *for* her. No way out. No one to rely on. Just learn to survive. Do you hear yourself in those words? In a disenchanted world marked only by spreadsheets and formulas and pharmaceuticals and artificial intelligence and war mongering. Just survive. Rely on me. No way out.

The story of the Gospel, however, invades a story-less world. And the one who by observation could only be a gardener is revealed as the one who created the first Garden of Eden. And the woman weeping in despair, in a depth of suffering she can never pay off, in a future that is gray and bleak and with no possibility other than her own life, she hears him speak her name, "Mary."

And she opens her eyes, and she looks up to find that the sky had turned blindingly blue.

And right by her side there was you.

Quietly taking his stand.

And holding her hand.

"You were just holding my hand.

You were just there for me.

Quietly taking a stand.

Changing the end of my story for me.
 You were there as I battled my fears.
 I fell and you helped me to stand.
 When the storm finally cleared
 You were there.
 You were still holding my hand.”⁸

“Changing the end of my story for me.” That is the gospel. Jesus speaks Mary’s name, and the end of her story changes from death and hopelessness to a love without fear, a belonging without performance, forgiveness instead of retribution, eternity instead of just mortality. We do not come to that place on our own. It takes God’s resurrection, and we can only know it in the power of stories, the biblical witness and those other stories which knowingly or unknowingly keep reflecting that ultimate truth back to us again and again.

We live in an enchanted world, for we claim and cling to this story of Easter, that we are not the ones who define our own life, and we thank God for it, for the Master and Savior is the one who has changed the end of our story *for* us so that a bright and joyful future invades the present. We are not beholden to our debts, trapped in fear and conquest, riddled by anxiety and purposeless wandering. We are claimed by God’s love for love and our names have been spoken anew. So wipe your tears, brothers and sisters; the impossible is now possible. Keep telling the story. The Lord is Risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen!

Notes

1. J.D. Salinger, *Catcher in the Rye*, (Boston: Bantam Books, 1969).
2. Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1960), 317.
3. Wilson Rawls, *Where the Red Fern Grows*, (Boston: Bantam Doubleday, 1997), 246-248.
4. Katherine Marsh, “Why Kids Aren’t Falling in Love with Reading” in *The Atlantic Monthly* (March 22, 2023), <https://www.theatlantic.com/books/archive/2023/03/children-reading-books-english-middle-grade/673457/>.
5. Nathan Heller, “The End of the English Major” in *The New Yorker* (February 27, 2023), <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/03/06/the-end-of-the-english-major>.
6. Roald Dahl, *Matilda*, (New York: Viking Books, 2007).
7. Lashana Lynch, “Still Holding My Hand,” Track 22, *Roald Dahl’s Matilda the Musical* (*Soundtrack from the Netflix Film*), Netflix, 2022, mp3.
8. In the original sermon, at this moment, a clip from the Netflix movie was used in the worship space. To see the original sermon presentation, visit: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eYdut-6SUfv8&list=PLyiuJQOfz1n1SB7ASZJLjoSJY8-j_jFnh&index=37