



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

3rd Sunday of Easter: April 18, 2021

Sermon Title: “The Beginning, the Middle, and High Noon”

Gospel Text: Luke 24:36b-48

One of my all-time favorites movies is “High Noon,” starring Gary Cooper. The picture is set in 1870 in the New Mexico Territory. It’s 10:30 in the morning, and Marshal Will Kane is marrying his bride, Amy Fowler. At Amy’s urging, Will has agreed to resign as marshal, but he’s troubled because the new marshal has not yet arrived to take his place.

The plot thickens when news comes that Frank Miller, an outlaw Will had arrested for murder five years earlier, received a pardon and will arrive in town on the noon train. Three outlaws are at the station, awaiting Miller’s arrival. The wedding guests urge Will and Amy to leave town immediately, but after only a few moments on the road, Will turns the wagon around and heads back even though his bride threatens to leave on the train by herself.

As Will makes plans for the town’s defense, all the people he thought were his friends and supporters decide to flee town or sit on the sidelines. As the clock relentlessly ticks toward noon, Marshal Will Kane is all alone. He writes his last will and testament and enters the deserted street. The train arrives with Frank Miller onboard. He and his three-man posse walk toward the center of town, where Will awaits.¹

For those of you who *have* seen this movie, can you imagine if it stopped *right here*? You’d be missing the culmination of the entire film! And for those of you who *haven’t* seen this classic, aren’t you just dying to know what happens? Well, I won’t spoil the ending for you here. Suffice it to say though that if you don’t see *every minute* of High Noon, you can’t fully understand or appreciate the *entirety* of the movie.

The Gospel is sort of like that too. We can’t grasp the whole story of Christ’s love and hope for us simply by sampling a little of the *beginning* or just a taste of the *middle*. For example, if the only thing you knew about Jesus is what happens on Christmas Day, then all you have is a cute little story about a baby born in a manger. And if that’s *all* you have, then you haven’t *really* gotten the story at all.

What if all you knew about Jesus is the Holy Week story of his betrayal and crucifixion, or maybe the Easter story of his resurrection? Those are important *parts* of Jesus’s story but, again, that’s not everything. At best it’s the *middle* of the story, and if that’s all you have, then you haven’t *really* gotten the story at all.

So what parts of the story *are* we missing? Well, for that we can turn to today’s Gospel lesson, which helps us see the *wider* story of Jesus Christ and *our place* in that story. It’s Luke’s

version of the Easter Day appearance of the resurrected Jesus to his frightened disciples. There are lots of curious details, like the risen Jesus eating broiled fish. But I want us to push past those peculiarities and notice what Jesus teaches us. He tells us that the *real beginning* of his story isn't that manager in Bethlehem. Instead, it's everything written about him in the Old Testament. Jesus is teaching us that his story predates creation and all of recorded time, and that if we want to understand the *entirety* of his story and mission we have to begin in the Hebrew Bible.

What about the *end* of the story for Jesus? That's where Easter comes in, right? Christ has died and Christ has risen. Well, turns out that's *not* the ending. The story immediately continues on with the *disciples*. Their calling from Jesus was to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in *his* name to *all nations*. Everyone. No exceptions.

So you see, Jesus isn't merely telling his disciples about where *he* fits into God's plan; he's also telling the disciples about *their* mission within God's plan. Friends, we are the inheritors of that mission. So you see, the story of Jesus didn't end on a cross or in an empty tomb – it continues onward, today, with *us*.

As Jesus invites us into this broader story of salvation, he calls us to be honest about our limitations. We all fall short. We all drift off course. His purpose is not to shame or discourage us, but to help us turn back, come home, and course correct. That's what it means to repent. What a beautiful invitation. It's a gift for us and for all peoples. It's a gift of such abundant love, mercy, forgiveness and grace that it not only fills *us*, but can't help but spill over into every aspect of our lives. It's a gift that cannot be contained. In that gift, Jesus invites us – US! – to be part of *his story* – a story that's bigger than a manger or an empty tomb. It's a story of love – the love of our God who wants the entire world to be saved.

I think this invitation to proclaim repentance, forgiveness and the Good News of Jesus was a little overwhelming to the disciples. Is it for you? Often times it is for me. As a Christian I often feel like Marshal Will Kane, standing all alone on a dangerous street, ill-equipped and unprepared, wondering what terrible thing is arriving on the noon train.

But God has not left us on our own. Further on in Luke's Gospel, Jesus assures the disciples *and us* that in this work we will be "clothed with power from on high." In other words, the Holy Spirit is *with us*, lifting us up, guiding us, equipping us, and inspiring us in this work. *We are not alone.*

Remember something else from today's lesson too. One of the first things the resurrected Jesus did when he appeared to the disciples was to show them the wounds in his hands and feet. Those wounds on *his body* healed the wounds in *their hearts*. Those wounds did more than identify *who* Jesus was; they also identified the very *nature* of his mission. Everything in his story – especially those wounds - is grounded in *love for us* – a sacrificial, unselfish love that knows no bounds.

Jesus likewise invites us to share *our wounds* as we share *his Good News*. We all have our scars and vulnerabilities. Like *his* wounds, ours are also marks of our willingness to risk

loving and being loved. Jesus hasn't called us into this work because we'll never make a mistake; he's inviting us because we'll always lead with *our love*... and when we do fall, we'll feel secure enough in *his love* to get back up and try again.

A wise theologian was once asked what heaven and hell looked like. He responded that hell is like a room with many people seated around a table. In the middle of the table is a pot filled with food. But all the people are hungry because they are unable to eat. They each hold a very long spoon in their hand. They are able to take food *out* of the pot, but can't bring the spoon to their mouth. And so some complain, some shout, and others weep. Heaven is also like a room with many people seated around a table, just like the one before, and in the middle of that table is - again - a pot full of food. These people also hold the same kind of long spoon in their hand. But every one of these people is full and happy, because each dips his spoon in the pot and feeds the person near him.²

Friends, it's really that simple. This is our call – to lovingly feed others and to likewise be lovingly fed.... because Jesus's mission is the salvation of the whole world. That mission started before the dawn of time and isn't finished yet. We're in the *middle* of the story, and Jesus is calling us to be part of it. With the help of the Holy Spirit and hearts brimming with love, may we fulfill Christ's call to share his Good News - here at High Noon in State College and throughout the world. Amen.

Citations

¹ High Noon description derived in part from <https://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/title/24083/high-noon#synopsis>

² See https://www.reddit.com/r/Christianity/comments/8142li/a_description_of_hell_by_st_paisios_of_mount_athos/