

**WESTMINSTER**  
PRESBYTERIAN  
**CHURCH**



SERMON

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# Seeking: Who are you looking for?

Dr. Jo Forrest



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The word to finish has two, almost conflicting meanings.

On the American side of the Atlantic, “to finish” means “to complete.” We finish furniture with stain and sealants to preserve and bring out the woodgrain’s beauty. When we finish the basement, we make the space livable for kids and not just boxes. To finish points forward to something better.

On the British side of the Atlantic, if you ask for steak and kidney pie at a restaurant and the server frowns, saying “it is finished” they do not mean it is fresh from the oven, complete. They are telling you that you’ve lost out. It is depleted. Finished means no more.<sup>1</sup>

In the Gospel of John Jesus’ last words on the cross are “it is finished.”

In what way does the cross become his finish line?

The Roman soldiers who nailed him to the tree give us one possible answer in a rude autopsy: when they pierce his side, they prove to the bystanders that his body no longer lives.

John’s gospel tells us that two respected and wealthy men then claim his body.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Lischer, *Just Tell the Truth*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2022), 32.

They pack it with emollients and fresh linen wrappings fit for a royal's burial, and seal it in a fresh tomb.

Before we can even question the meaning of the resurrection, we need to face the necessary prior step, his death. Before we get to this morning's praises, we must remember that on Good Friday, Jesus finished this life. Nothing remains to be done for his body.

Our gospel reading for today joins us to a few of Jesus' followers as they venture into a graveyard looking for something. Looking for who? Looking for what?

Before I read, please pray with me:

*Dear God, it would have been easier if Jesus' resurrection happened in broad daylight and in the city's center. Instead, he waited for those who loved him to seek after him, to hope beyond reason that you and he are not finished. Quiet the noise that distracts so that as we hear this story, we imagine ourselves seeking him. Seeking life. Seeking ourselves. Becoming believers. Amen.*

John 20

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb.<sup>2</sup> So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to

them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.”

<sup>3</sup>Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. <sup>4</sup>The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.

<sup>5</sup>He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in.

<sup>6</sup>Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there,

<sup>7</sup>and the cloth that had been on Jesus’s head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself.

<sup>8</sup>Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed, <sup>9</sup>for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.

<sup>10</sup>Then the disciples returned to their homes.

<sup>11</sup>But Mary stood *weeping* outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb, <sup>12</sup>and she saw two angels in white sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet.

13 They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.”

14 When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.

15 Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”

16 Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher).

17 Jesus said to her, “Do not touch me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”

18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord,” and she told them that he had said these things to her.

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Six weeks ago, worshippers filled this sanctuary on the dark night of Ash Wednesday. No one recalls such a crowd at Westminster. To mark the beginning of Lent, we traced dust



on the foreheads of two-year-olds and eighty-eight-year-olds, and everyone in between. We spoke the words, “from dust you came and to dust you will return.”

We also lingered over the rabbinic wisdom to live our lives in the tension of two understandings of being dust and ash.

We are to write on a piece of paper and carry in one pocket the statement, “I am merely dust of the earth.” This serves as a cryptic reminder that we all share common matter, such as primordial mud from the plains of Africa, or the trail at Gilfillan.

We come from humus, decomposed leaves and other organic matter that breathes with life until one sick organ or body part fails. Even the fittest among us inhabit a body designed to wear out and perish. This darker truth asks us to accept our limits. When our life is finished, we will return to the earth one way or another, bound in a life cycle of which we have no control.

In our other pocket we are to carry a paper stating another truth, “I am made of stardust.” Trust that your body shares the same cosmic material with the LEDA 2046648 star. Although one billion light years away, the James Webb Telescope just captured an image with evidence of its life. In the grand scheme of God’s universe, we embody this same atomic matter as stars from galaxies far beyond our sight.

The more we seek, with patience and telescopes and science, the more this universe unfolds mysteries and brilliance we'd never imagined. LEDA finished with a blaze that continues to light our world.

You are dust. And you are star dust with a flicker of heavenly light, John's gospel paints a portrait of Jesus as one with God at the cosmic origins in its iconic words, "in the beginning" he was with God and his life brings light into our darkness.

God planned from the beginning to take on human flesh to recreate our lives, placing into Jesus' mouth one of the most beloved statements of all time, "For God so loves the world, God gave his only son that whosoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life."

The Jesus of John's gospel possesses a divine muscularity who never seems to be bothered by mortal pain and suffering. Before his execution, Jesus says, "No one takes it from me...I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again" (Jn 10:18).

So, when he says on the cross, "it is finished," has he completed God's desire to light the world with love? To finish mortal life into a more beautiful existence? Or does he state the reality of being finished, depleted of all life, so don't expect anything more than this earthly toil?

Maybe both.

To begin with the later, we know Jesus' life ends. Just as God weaves the finality of death into the fabric of the universe and our lives, Jesus' life also ended. By going all the way to the cross and tomb, Jesus reveals God's willingness to bear the fullest extent of human experience. He dies. His body lays in a tomb.

On the other hand, when Jesus says, it is finished, does he open the way for believers to see God's capacity to love in ways far beyond their imagination.

Mary's experience may help us balance these two.

In Johns' gospel story, she comes to the tomb, alone, and empty-handed. Since nothing remains to be done for his body, why?

Finding the stone rolled away she runs to find Peter and another disciple. They too look. We don't know much more, only that they leave.

Mary lingers. She weeps. She stares into the worst nightmare of not only his death; she presumes someone defiling his body. Weeping, she continues to seek, questions the angels, and a presumed gardener. Only when she exhausts her expectations of the worst is she able to grasp the possibility before her. Then she hears, sees, and believes.

Of course, she wants to grab ahold. Instead, Jesus commands, “do not,” in other words, do not cling to what you thought you knew about me. Having completed this life, he invites her to their mutual destiny with the promise of my Father and your Father, my God and your God.

The resurrection dawns upon her slowly, one image, one insight at a time.

He taught her in this life the possibility to live far beyond the limits foisted upon her by society, history, culture, politics. He taught her to trust in God’s power to include people, to make a difference in another person’s life. He taught this life matters and leads to a life eternal.

Now he sends her back to live in the confidence that his way leads to God. His way, not the world’s way. His way brings new life. Mary becomes the first among the disciples to state, “I have seen the Lord.” Her words begin to change the world.

When Annaleise was six years, Neil deGrasse Tyson became her personal hero and inspired her to become an astrophysicist. Over the next five years, she grabbed ahold of anything she could study of science, earning a score in the top 97% in a nationwide ranking of gifted students. Through her study of astrophysics, she saw infinite possibilities.

One morning last year, as she raced to catch the school bus, she fell, rolled under it, and tragically died. When this story of

her brief life and her mother's grief reached Tyson, he wrote on her social media wall:

The curiosity of children famously knows no bounds around the house, the backyard, the neighborhood. Any new place. But when that curiosity includes the universe itself, you're in the presence of someone poised to change the world.

To lose Annaliese at age 11, brimming with so much cosmic ambition, will forever leave me wondering what she might have accomplished...Of course, we will never know the answer to that question. But we do know the physics of cremation: the energy contents of her body, itself reduced to ash, actually enters Earth's atmosphere.

It ultimately escapes to space in the form of infrared energy, radiating in all directions at the speed of light filling the voids of the cosmos with her presence. At the moment I write this, Annaliese's energy has extended a half-trillion miles into space more than 100-times the distance to Pluto. Though she will live in collective memories for all our lives, in the universe she lives for all eternity.

Respectfully Submitted, Neil deGrasse Tyson” - April 3,  
2022 New York City<sup>2</sup>

On the bright light of Easter morning, God sets a new horizon.

The drama of ultimate importance that began with God’s incarnation into the life of Jesus comes to a climax when God tears open the fabric of the universe in a way that never closes for those who seek after him.

Jesus’ whole purpose is to bring God into the presence of people. Jesus saw so much promise in this life. All of his teachings held lessons about how to live this life.

When he ascended, Jesus promises an advocate, a spirit, to bring even more energy to our living in this life.

Will you, like Mary, seek after Jesus by getting into the thick of life, loving, caring, forgiving, provoking, and trust that as you do this, you will be telling others how much this life, their life, matters. Will you become a believer of the way he finishes, or rather, beautifies life?

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<sup>2</sup> Neil deGrasse Tyson gives mother of 11-year-old (Annaliese) her first smile since she was tragically killed in Colorado - EIN Presswire (einnews.com)





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