

A sense of ending

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by [Richard Lischer](#) in the [March 10, 1999](#) issue

You have probably noticed that modern medicine does not excel at endings. When a terrible illness begins to take its course, medical technology throws every weapon at its disposal into the fray. Standard treatments give way to newer treatments, which spawn innovative treatments, which produce "the latest" treatment, after which comes the territory ahead--an ominous experimental treatment whose only name is a government number.

Finally, when the end comes, we have no words with which to greet it. It is as if we have spent all our language on trying to secure the future and now, in the face of death, we are dead broke. The wrap-up at the hospital is terse and ordinary, if not defensive. You leave a multistoried Temple of Medicine with a plastic bag of personal effects, and hope you can remember where you parked. Death is an anticlimax.

The literary critic Frank Kermode once said that narrative plots, and life itself, are like the tick and tock of a clock. We construct this rhythm because we need an identifiable beginning and a meaningful ending and something of significance in between. In fact, he said, only the tock makes sense of the interval between beginning and end.

Christianity is preoccupied with the tock of Jesus' death. In the 2,200 pages of Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, the protagonist's death is dispensed with in 36 pages. In the New Testament, on the other hand, the events surrounding Jesus' death constitute between 50 and 60 percent of the narrative. At the end we count out his words as if they were silver dollars. The whole church presses its ear to his parched lips to hear the legacy.

Our questions are like those of any grieving survivor in a hospital waiting room: Was he conscious? Did he suffer? What did he say? Did he mention me?

The clinical report is clear: He died more quickly than those who know about these things had expected. During his six hours of dying he showed extraordinary kindness toward those who attended him. He expressed the full range of human anguish-- from the absence of God to the absence of water. When he died, it was as if he was handing over his life to someone else. Oh yes, and at the end he said, "It is finished."

In the English language the word "finished" has a double meaning. It can mean "completed." We finish a chair to bring out its beauty; well-to-do young women were once sent off to finishing schools. When you finish building a house you have something to show for it.

In Great Britain they have a way of saying "finished" to mean the opposite, namely, that something is all gone. When you dine out and ask for some kidney pie, your server may say, "Sorry, luv. The kidney pie is finished." She doesn't mean it's complete and ready to eat, but that it's all gone. Not completed but depleted.

When mourners gather at a grave, a silent debate is raging within them. The widow wants to know, "Is my husband finished, like a meal that has been consumed, or is he finished, like a runner who has completed the course?"

Ever since Jesus cried, "Finished!," Christians have trusted in the hidden possibility of completion. We trust that Jesus meant more than "I am a goner" or "Thank God, this ordeal is over." For in John's Gospel the Christ is in command of his own destiny to an extent not found in the synoptic portraits.

Our culture has lost John's authoritative sense of ending. Our neat little tick-tock narratives no longer work. Many of us, if not most of us, find ourselves living in the arrhythmia of tocktick time, caught between stories, seeking some greater significance for our lives.

Some of us are plagued by a surfeit of time. We have too many endless days. The quality of life is so attenuated by suffering or infirmity that some of us long to get away, as if to escape a dry lecture or a boring party. One day I visited a woman on her 85th birthday. When I began to drone on about the blessing of long life, she cut me off. "Oh, dear, dear," she said cheerfully, "I had a sister who lived to be 90. What if that should happen to me? Enough is enough."

But many of us have convinced ourselves that we do not need the tock of completion. We want to strive and grow and make and know--more. Augustine said

the only thing that will satisfy the human race is more and more being. We are on the make for more, and we simply don't have time to ask what it all means. The most boring word in the English language and the one most out of place in an acquisitive technocracy is "finished." If you can play in this market and think you're finished, well, my friend, maybe you are.

For those whose life (or death) fits no orderly pattern, Jesus' triumphant cry offers completion in the midst of whatever messy business we find ourselves. We meditate upon his death and hang upon his last words because, despite our posturing and protests to the contrary, there is nothing we want more than a life of wholeness.

"Did Papa mention me?" the ne'er-do-well asks, as if his sorry life might be sobered up and rehabilitated by the word of a dead man. "Did he say my name?"

To all of us who can't stop looking for more, Jesus' cry is a promise. It reveals his final assessment of his own life and his final disposition toward us, his sons and daughters.

Sure enough, he did mention you. He said you can stop running. "It is finished."