

The movie *Rudy* is an inspirational story about a young man whose dream is to play on the Notre Dame football team. The only problem is that he's not not very smart, not very strong, not very rich. But he has heart. Lots of heart. The movie, based on a true story, ends with Rudy (mostly) achieving his dream. He becomes a student at N.D. and gets a place on the team. He never actually plays in a game until the closing seconds of his final year. The game's outcome is already decided. There's no drama on the scoreboard, but on the final play Rudy tackles the opposing quarterback. And the final scene shows him being carried off the field in triumph.

With that triumphal moment frozen in time on the screen, we're told that Rudy (a nobody, who never really accomplished anything noteworthy) is one of only two players ever carried off the field in triumph at N.D. In that one moment you could say he's given a name which is above (almost) every other name (at least on his team). He's transformed from humiliation to exaltation. It's a picture-perfect ending.

Except I was there. Not the original game in 1975. I was there in 1992 when the movie was made. That closing scene was filmed during halftime of a real game and I witnessed everyone's favorite Goonie, Sean Astin (before *Stranger Things*) being carried off the field in triumph. It was fun. But I can tell you, despite the movie's ending, the action never froze that day. The action continued, both for the actors and for the real-life characters they portrayed. Rudy's life continued beyond that exalted moment — including his humiliating role in a stock fraud after the market crash of 2008.¹

¹ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nathanvardi/2012/06/11/rudy-ruettiger-i-shouldnt-have-been-chasing-the-money/>

That's the tricky thing about triumphal moments. They leave us on a high note that's not always true to life. If we're not careful, triumphal moments create an expectation that our lives are meant to build up to a single accomplishment. But life never works that way. Because the action of our lives never freezes. And as the action of our lives continues it may never live up to those picture-perfect moments we long to capture.

It's a good reminder on Palm Sunday. Because Palm Sunday begins with triumph. Before anyone dreamed about the possibility of Jesus' resurrection, the crowds of Palm Sunday had already given Jesus a name that was above (almost) every other name (at least in his nation). He's one of only a few people ever ushered into the city of Jerusalem with a triumphal procession. For lots of people in the crowd that day, his picture-perfect moment created an expectation that just wasn't true to Jesus' life.

It wasn't true. Because Palm Sunday doesn't build to an accomplishment that we can freeze. Not to burst your bubble, but this year not even Easter is going to offer a picture-perfect triumph for Jesus. Next week Mark's Gospel is going to offer a couple of surprised women an invitation to meet the risen Jesus —and their response is fear. The Gospel is going to present fear as the climax of Easter. Because the Gospel writers knew as well as we do that the action of our lives never freezes. It always keeps moving. What we need is not some technique to freeze the triumph of our faith. What we need is a faith big enough for all the action of our lives; all the ongoing, messy, fearful, action.

Here's how Mark offers a faith that big. In today's Passion Mark offers a series of different stories. He layers contrasting stories creating a kind of unified sandwich that

includes both triumph & failure; both exaltation & humiliation. Then he invites us to live with the whole sandwich, sometimes seeing ourselves exalted in acts of devotion, other times seeing ourselves humiliated in acts of betrayal. Because we need all those stories for a faith big enough for all the action of our lives.

These are the stories we get:

We get 2 stories about meals. One story is about devotion. The other is about betrayal. At one meal a stranger “did what she could” by anointing Jesus for burial. At another meal Jesus announces that “one of you will betray me.” One story is about faithfulness. The other is about failure. Together they include both exaltation and humiliation. Together they include all the action of our lives.

We get 2 stories about people on trial. Jesus speaks truth to power. Peter buckles under the lightest pressure. At one trial Jesus confesses “I am” the Messiah who’ll be vindicated by God, “coming with the clouds of heaven,” (Mk. 14.62). At another trial Peter denies even knowing Jesus. In the courtyard of the high priest he, “began to curse, and he swore an oath, ‘I do not know this man’,” (Mk. 14.71). Together they include both exaltation and humiliation. Together they include all the action of our lives.

Connecting these 2 stories about 2 meals and 2 trials we hear Jesus asking his friends to pray with him 3 times. But 3 times they fall asleep. Jesus’ 3 faithful prayers echo their 3 faithless failures. It’s only when we keep Jesus’ faithfulness & our failure together that we can include all the action of our lives.

Then we get 2 more stories about people on trial; this time before the Roman

governor, Pontius Pilate. Pilate is a symbol of violence & oppression but he wants to release Jesus because, “he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over,” (Mk. 15.10). The crowd is desperate for liberation, but they curse Jesus. Pilate washes his hands, while the crowd embraces a murderer. We need to hear these stories together to include all the action of our lives.

Finally the crucifixion offers two contrasting stories. But this time Mark outdoes himself. This time both stories happen to the same person, Jesus. In the crucifixion we get two stories about a single event that reveals both the depth of humiliation and the height of exaltation. After Jesus is whipped & beaten within an inch of his life, soldiers dress him like a king. They hail him as master. They strike him, spit on him, and strip him before forcing him to carry the instrument of his death. The mockery continues with bystanders ridiculing him on the cross (Mk. 15.30). In each act of mockery the Gospel invites us to see that for all of the cruelty and irony, each act of mockery is also a confession of true faith because —shockingly— this is what it looks like when God's glory is revealed. God's love includes all the action of our lives. Everything.

Between now & Easter we're invited into all these stories — 2 meals, 2 trials, 3 faithful prayers, 3 faithless denials, mockeries that are also confessions of true faith. We're invited into these stories because when you get right down to it, we don't just need these stories to make *sense* of our lives. We need these stories to *transform* our lives. Our faith isn't just about understanding Jesus. It's about being transformed into the image of Jesus. That's how these stories work. They transform us in two ways. First, they prevent

us from thinking that we're ever defined by a single moment of triumph or failure. We're never defined by a single moment. There's never any triumph that we can freeze. There's never any failure that can freeze us. The action of our lives always keeps moving. As long as it does, we're invited to become like Jesus.

So, second, these stories transform us by inviting us into a life of worship. In worship we're transformed. In worship all of us "nobodies" in the eyes of the world are transformed from humiliation to exaltation. In the repeated & ongoing act of worship, all the action of our lives is gathered up in the exaltation & humiliation of Jesus himself:

who though he was in the form of God didn't consider equality with God something to exploit, but emptied himself, becoming humble to death; even death on a cross.

Therefore God exalted him, giving him a name—a status—above every name so that every knee should bow and confess this humbled & exalted Jesus as Lord.

We're never defined by any single moment of our lives; any triumph or any failure. As Christians we come to learn that we're defined by the humiliation & exaltation of Jesus himself. And if we're following Jesus in a life of worship, we can trust that God will use every moment of our lives—all the action—to reveal God's glory in the world.

Amen.