

Jon Hauerwas – March 27, 2016 – “God’s Gracious Response”  
Isaiah 65:17-25 and John 20:1-18 – Easter Sunday

Telling a good story is hard. But, getting other people to perk up and listen to it is even harder. In 1989, John Grisham was a practicing trial lawyer and a member of the Mississippi State House of Representatives. Somehow, he also found the time to complete his first novel. It took him three years. Grisham called it *A Time to Kill*. The book was initially rejected by 28 publishing houses before an unknown company relented, and agreed to offer the first-time author a modest, 5,000 copy printing.

“When *A Time to Kill* was published,” he once explained to *Newsweek*, “there was not a good bookstore in my small hometown. My idea was, I’d buy a thousand books, have a big book party at the local library, and all of my friends would come. I’d sell all these books and it’d be easy. I could buy the books at wholesale, sell them at retail, and make a few bucks. That was my grand plan.”<sup>1</sup>

Grisham recalled how, one day, a tractor-trailer pulled up and the books were unloaded in front of his tiny law office. But, the publisher made a mistake, and sent

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.newsweek.com/john-grishams-favorite-mistake-giving-away-first-editions-64013>. Access date March 26, 2016.

500 extra copies of the novel – for a total of 1,500, in all. As Grisham remembered, “there was no room to store them, so we stacked them in the reception area, around my secretary’s desk, in the hallways, in my office.” Then, after negotiating with the publishing house, the author shipped 500 copies of the novel back to New York before hauling the rest to the local library where he hoped to turn a profit.

But, Grisham’s party did not turn out as he had planned. And when the sun eventually set that day, the author still “owned 882 copies of *A Time to Kill*.” He notes, “I had this invoice that was due to pay for them wholesale, so I started giving books away. We took them back to my office and packed them in the reception area... If one of my clients wanted a book, I’d try to sell it. If not, I’d give it away. I’d sell them for 10 bucks, five bucks. I used them for doorstops. I couldn’t get rid of these books.”

In the months that followed, Grisham’s publisher released the book as promised, but it didn’t sell and no other first editions were ever printed. Still, he immediately began work on his second novel, and this time the response was very different. *The Client* remained on *The New York Times*’ bestseller list for 47 weeks in a row and went on to become the best-selling novel of 1991.

To date, readers have purchased more than 250 million copies of Grisham's books. And following the success of his later works, fans began to reconsider his first novel. Grisham has now sold more than 20 million copies of *A Time to Kill*, and each copy of those first 5,000 books is now worth somewhere in the neighborhood of \$4,000. That's not bad for a novel that was once used as a doorstep.

Looking back, John Grisham now regrets his eagerness to part with that original shipment of his first book. After all, if he still had 1,500 original copies of *A Time to Kill*, priced at \$4,000 a piece, he would collect a paycheck of roughly 6 million dollars. But how was he to know that things would turn out so well?

John Grisham already knew what it was like to serve as both an attorney and a legislator. But, he really wanted to be an author. So he took a risk and poured himself into that first novel.

Like John Grisham, Jesus' first disciples had other day jobs. They had professions that paid the bills and titles by which they were known. They were fishermen and tax collectors, for instance. And while scripture gives us no indication that they were looking for a way out, it is clear that they were willing to put their existing business on hold to pursue the call to follow Jesus.

Telling a good story is hard. But, the disciples already had some really great material. They had watched Jesus heal the sick, and feed the 5,000, and claim to have the power to forgive sins. This story was worth telling, and they knew it.

I think again of John Grisham, and the feeling of pride that must have overcome him when his second novel surged to the top of the best seller's list. And I imagine the joy of his closest friends. Those who knew him when he was just a simple man from a small town with a great story that was worth telling. How great it would be to watch him emerge from relative obscurity and take his place among the bright lights of prime time. This was his moment.

Holy Week is a celebration of Christ's moment. And yet, the plot lines leave much to be desired, as the long-awaited Messiah of Palm Sunday re-emerges as Thursday's criminal. The intensity of prime time is overwhelming. In quick succession, there is a trial for blasphemy, a conviction, and the sentence of death. Appeal is not an option. Justice is swift, and he is crucified by noon on Friday. Three years of work and ministry come to a grinding halt.

Three years, as I said earlier, is also how long it took John Grisham to write that first novel. And for that kind of commitment, all that resulted was a great story

that he could hardly give away. I wonder if the now-famous author ever felt embarrassed, or maybe even a little bit ashamed. All of that effort for so little immediate return.

I try to imagine him there, sitting behind the desk in his law office – this guy who wanted nothing more than to quit his practice and become a full-time author. Did he ever wrestle with creeping doubts and inner demons? The kind that say, “I spent three years of my life writing this novel, and now my friends won’t even buy it.” How difficult that must have been.

And now, like a novelist who can hardly give his message away, Jesus’ closest followers are facing their own crushing valleys of doubt. In our gospel lesson this morning, Mary Magdalene is the first to come to the empty tomb. Quickly, she rushes to tell the disciples, and then, she spends the rest of the day at the graveside - weeping. Hear again these words, spoken by Mary and saturated with doubt: “They have taken away my Lord,” she says, “and I do not know where they have laid him.”

May God bless you all in the difficult journey to find hope, meaning, healing, and freedom. And all thanks be to God both now and forever. Amen.