Go the Distance
Easter Vigil, Genesis 22:1-18
April 16, 2022
The Rev. Paul McLain

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Amen*.

In the 1989 movie, "Field of Dreams," Ray Kinsella, a former '60s hippie, now a reluctant farmer in Iowa, hears a voice in a cornfield that famously says, 'If you build it, he will come.' The voice persists and he is given the vision of a baseball field. Ray is convinced that, as insane as it sounds, he needs to take a large part of his cornfield out of cultivation and go to all the extra expense of building a baseball field, complete with lights. He talks to his wife Annie and she tells him that, if it is something he feels strongly about, he should do it. So, he does.

One night when Ray and Annie were trying to sort through their dwindling finances, their daughter lets them know there's a man in the field. It turns out to be the long-dead baseball player, Shoeless Joe Jackson, a hero of Ray's father. Shoeless Joe asks if he can bring his friends to the field, and they begin to appear in the ballfield and then disappear to his nearby cornfield.

Then Ray hears the voice again. It says, "Ease his pain." He's not sure what this means. Annie tells him that this non-specific voice is really beginning to hack her off. Ray is convinced that he needs to travel to Boston, find the '60s writer Terence Mann, and convince him to go to a ballgame in Fenway Park, where something important will happen. Again, as insane as this all sounds, Ray follows the voice. He takes off in the van for Boston, finds the reclusive Terence Mann, and after much cajoling and consternation, convinces him to go to the ballgame with him. About halfway through the game, they both see a vision on the scoreboard of a player from the early 20th century, Archibald "Moonlight" Graham. And they both hear the voice, saying, "Go the distance." Like the other times the voice speaks they are not sure exactly what this means, but they both know that part of it will be driving the distance from Boston to Minnesota to find Archibald Graham.

"Go the distance" is the mantra of Abraham. He's not a flawless character, but he is a faithful one. In the first of our Old Testament lessons, he answers God the way he always does, "Here am I." He lets God know that he is not only present, but he is one on whom God can depend. The test that God proposes to Abraham is terrifying – to take his long-awaited child of promise up a mountain and then kill him as a burnt offering.

This story is not just horrific, it is insane. After uprooting his life from his homeland at age 75, Abraham goes through famine, danger, and narrow escapes. He has one son, Ishmael, by his wife Sarah's slave Hagar. But God tells him that Sarah will have a son herself. Both sons will be the

fathers of great nations. And, at the age of 90 years old, Sarah gives birth to Abraham's child of promise, Isaac.

So, why would God want Abraham, now over 100, to destroy this child, on whom the future promise rests? Abraham seems confident that something is going to happen to prevent the death of Isaac. He tells the two young men helping them on the first leg of their journey that both he and Isaac will be coming back to them. He tells Isaac that God himself will provide the animal for the burnt offering. But he doesn't fully know what's going to happen or exactly how it's going to happen. He follows God's voice and he trusts. Dave Bland writes, 'What God wants from Abraham is not Isaac's death but Abraham's heart.'

At the moment when Abraham holds the knife over Isaac with fear and trembling, the angel calls out to Abraham from heaven. Abraham again responds, "Here am I." The angel tells him to stop. He passes the test. Abraham goes the distance. He looks up and sees a ram caught in a thicket by its horns. The horns of the ram are significant. The ancient Hebrew people saw ram's horns as similes for that which in humans aspires toward the highest. The horns, while they reach up to the sky, are rooted in the animal. They are signs of joining together heaven and earth.

That is what this night is all about. We have brought the heavenly light of Christ into the darkest corners of our world. We have heard the stories of God saving us from death – time and time again. We have arisen to new life with Jesus as we renewed our baptismal vows. We have seen how God has joined us in the mire through the life and death of Jesus, and lifts us all up to new hope through his resurrection.

In the movie, "Field of Dreams," Ray and Terence go the distance by finding the long-dead Archibald Graham, known as Doc Graham, in Minnesota. He's had a successful career in being a caring physician to the people of his small town. Yet, Doc Graham shares with Ray his deepest dream to have one more chance to stare a major league pitcher in the eye, and get a hit. Later, Ray and Terence pick up a hitchhiker, who turns out to be the younger Archibald Graham. When they get back to Iowa, they cheer as Archibald fulfills his dream on the ballfield. Terence, who had become a cynical recluse, finds his life and passion renewed by this unlikely journey. Terence is even invited to join the players in the cornfield. His and Archibald's involvement in the story remind us of how God's dream is big enough to encompass all our stories, no matter how unlikely or disjointed, in the overall story of resurrection.

When Ray's daughter falls out of the stands, Ray has a crisis of faith much like Abraham's. He leans over his daughter and then sees young Archibald in the field. Ray knows there is a doctor present. He nods to Archibald. And young Archibald crosses the boundary of the field to reemerge as old Doc Graham and saves Ray's daughter.

The movie suggests that there is a porous boundary between heaven and earth. Players move in and out of the ballfield and the cornfield. I believe that's closer to the way it really is. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus shows that God is not confined to the heavenly realm. God comes to earth and enters our humanity. We are not completely confined to the earthly realm. There are transcendent moments, perhaps even lifetimes, in which Jesus takes us up to the heavenly realm in the midst of the here and now.

Ray gets rewarded at the end of the movie by learning who the 'he' is for whom he built the field. He is reunited with this father, from whom he had been estranged, to fulfill Ray's deepest dream - a game of catch with his Dad.

As Abraham and Ray Kinsella learn, we know not where the path of resurrection and new life will lead. We do know that their examples reflect the sheer persistence of God and the humble, step-by-step walk of Jesus. All we know is to go the distance. Because God always goes the distance for us. *Amen*.