

Calvary Episcopal Church
Ashland, Kentucky
Sermon for April 8, 2012 ~ Easter B
The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

“They said nothing more to anyone, for they were afraid” (Mk. 16:8). This abrupt ending of the Gospel of St. Mark has compelled endless speculation. The feeling that the gospel must have been carried to a more fitting completion, that it could have not been intentionally ended with the anticlimax of silence and fear, has been strong and continuous.

What was the final page of Mark’s gospel? Was it lost? Perhaps he never finished the story. Everything about the rest of the gospel suggests that originally there was more. Scholars have searched for generations and will probably search for generations to come for that lost page.

In the meantime, however, I think there is something fitting in the fact that this is an incomplete gospel. Really, when you think about it, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is always unfinished because it is an ongoing story meant to be completed in individual lives and the lives of communities of disciples of Jesus. Paul added his page to it. In writing to the Corinthians, he said, “Last of all...he appeared also to me” (I Cor. 15:8). And in writing to the Romans, he says, “According to **my** gospel...” (Rom. 2:16).

The idea is a simple one; each of us is writing a gospel, whether we know it or not. The poet, Leroy Brownlow, put it like this:

You are writing a gospel, a chapter each day;
By things that you do; By things you say.
Others read that gospel, whether faithless or true!
Say! What is the Gospel According To You?

On this Easter Morning, the incomplete Gospel of Mark suggests several factors involved in the writing of “The Gospel According to You.”

The original gospel was a personal witness, not a written document.

Contrary to the popular impression, these gospel writers were not stenographers sitting at the feet of Jesus. That which Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John wrote existed for forty or fifty years, at least, as oral tradition. The Gospel consisted of many incidents remembered and repeated by Peter, James, John, and the other Apostles, who were witnesses to the Resurrection. It was an oral telling about the transforming power of Jesus in the lives of individuals and the reality of his Resurrection.

When I was a young clergyman in Houston, Texas, Rabbi Hyman Judah Schactel was a prominent figure in that city and made an impact upon me. One day, I had the opportunity to sit beside him at a luncheon and I learned that before coming to Houston, he had been rabbi of a congregation in New York City near the Riverside Church. Harry Emerson Fosdick was the pastor of that congregation and was considered by many to be the greatest preacher of his

generation. Rabbi Schactel told me that he knew Dr. Fosdick and that they used to take long walks down Riverside Drive. I had studied Dr. Fosdick and read many of his sermons. How it fascinated me to be in contact with one who had known him intimately. As the rabbi spoke of his insight into the ministry of this great preacher and his personal respect and appreciation for him, I began to feel, in a way, that I was being personally introduced to Harry Emerson Fosdick.

On a much more profound level, in the deep matters of the spirit, this is how the Apostles remembered their Master and introduced others to him. Their gospel was not a doctrine or a set of facts about an historical incident. It was a personal experience in which the Son of God had encountered them with saving grace. As a result of this encounter, these Apostles knew they had a story to tell to the world. That is how every gospel must begin and the gospel is never complete unless it becomes a personal witness in and through you.

Only you can write “The Gospel According to You.”

Unfortunately, most of us tend to underestimate ourselves. We cannot convince ourselves that our efforts make any real and lasting difference in the total scheme of things. In one of his poems, Edwin Markham reminds us of how important each person is to the whole fabric of human experience:

To everyone is given a day and her work for the day,
and once and no more, she is given to travel this way.
There is waiting a work that only her hands can fill,
and so if she falters a chord in the music will fail.

That is particularly true in the process of completing the Gospel!

Most of us assume that if we do not perform a task, if we do not fulfill a potential, if we do not realize a dream, someone else will do it. Perhaps, or perhaps not. Consider technological advances alone. Would the mass produced automobile, the electric light, the airplane, the internet, the cellular telephone, GPS, air conditioning, or manned space flight have happened without the individuals and teams of individuals who pioneered them? There is a part of me that says, “Probably.” But there is another part of me that says millions of people were living when these pioneers lived, yet they were the ones who dreamed and believed and hoped and risked.

If you apply the same principle to matters of the spirit, you come to the same conclusion. There was someone, perhaps long forgotten, who introduced Samuel Seabury, Mother Theresa, six Bishops of Lexington, and YOU to the Risen Savior. There is a task, a responsibility, and a witness that only the unique YOU can fulfill.

Only you can complete “The Gospel According to You.” It may not seem to be the most important gospel at the time, but what you do only YOU can do.

Then, finally, there is the promise that every Christian can live a gospel that draws other people into a vital relationship with the Risen Christ.

W.E. Sangster, one of England's greatest preachers, died of progressive muscular atrophy, an incurable disease that attacks the muscles of the body and paralyzes its victims gradually until vital organs cease to function. When his vocal cords ceased to work, he would communicate with his wife by writing messages on a pad of paper. She said to him one day, "How awful it must be to have a message and not be able to speak." And he wrote back to her, "Yes. It is an awful thing. But it is more terrible to be able to speak and not to have a message." Another great cleric of that era, Leslie Weatherhead, had this to say about his friend Sangster's book, *He is Able*: "No chapter finishes by making you say, 'What a clever writer Sangster is.' They all make you say, 'What a wonderful Savior Jesus is.'"

I imagine that most of you here today are professed Christians. You have a gospel. But I wonder, have you completed it? What have you written on that last page concerning what the Risen Christ has done in your life? Is your gospel drawing others into a vital relationship with him? What hopeful potential, what an opportunity this is for you.

In 1924, the great Italian operatic composer, Giacomo Puccini, was told that he had cancer. He was at work on the score of the opera *Turandot*. When the opera was about half finished, Puccini's cancer became critical and death stopped his writing. His disciples finished the scores. One of his pupils was Arturo Toscanini, who consented to direct the orchestra and opera the first time it was performed.

Toscanini stopped the orchestra on the last note that Puccini had written when death interrupted. Turning to the audience with tears in his eyes, Toscanini said, "Thus far the master wrote and he died. But his disciples finished the master's music."

The Master's music is in our hands today. His music is in our hands. Each of us and each community of us adds a unique resonance to the chord. We are Easter People who know a Risen Savior and we have the blessed opportunity in word and actions to introduce him to others in the mission field in the world at our doorstep.

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