

“Unfinished”  
April 17, 2022—Easter Sunday

John 19:30

I was doing some thinking and researching about this Easter sermon a couple of weeks ago, and I noticed Rev. Dr. Otis Moss III, a UCC colleague in Chicago, used this one verse Scripture lesson from the Gospel of John as the text for his Easter sermon last year. That’s interesting, I thought to myself. Why would you stand in the pulpit on Easter morning and preach a sermon using a passage that’s typically read as one of the seven last words of Jesus during a Good Friday service? In fact, this morning’s Scripture was actually the sixth word we heard on Good Friday in this sanctuary a couple of days ago.

In any case, I wondered, shouldn’t pastors be preaching about the resurrection of Jesus Christ on Easter rather than Christ’s death on the cross? Somewhat curious, I decided to watch the video of Otis Moss’ sermon. And now I understand the connection. In fact, his sermon inspired my Easter sermon this morning...

**(Rev. Dr. Otis Moss, III, “It Is Finished, But It Ain’t Over...”, recorded for Trinity UCC Church in Chicago, Easter 2021)**

Jesus was about to take his final breath on the cross. And John’s Gospel records that Jesus would imminently “bow his head and give up his spirit.” But just before Jesus did those two things, he uttered three words. “It is finished.”

Those three words are fascinating to me. Because if Jesus had changed just one word in that statement, the entire meaning would have been completely different.

For example, Jesus could have confessed, “I am finished.” That would have been clear and easy to understand. I’m about to die on this cross. It’s been a good run for these past three years. I’ve done my best during my ministry to do what God wanted me to do. I’ve taught people and given people hope. I’ve managed to offend a few people along the way as well, but now the end is in sight. I’m done, my life is over, I am finished.

Or Jesus could have looked down from the cross with an accusatory tone and said, “you are finished.” In my mind, that would have made sense as well. Whether Jesus would have been addressing the soldiers who crucified him or the religious authorities who condemned him or the disciples who abandoned him, or all of them together, Jesus could have raised the specter of judgement. You whipped me and you mocked me and you hung me on a cross. But what goes around comes around. And one day, all of you who failed me will get what’s coming. Watch your backs because you are finished.

Perhaps the most foreboding, terrifying thing Jesus could have warned on the cross was, “we are finished.” As though Jesus dying on the cross would trigger a

doomsday scenario where God would be so angry at our human callousness and so bitter about losing God's only son that God would be pushed past the point of no return. God would press the divine button. And the apocalypse would commence, complete with fire and destruction and the end of humanity as we know it. We're *All* finished...

What Jesus said instead was, "it is finished." Which begs an obvious and mysterious question...what is finished? Perhaps Jesus was simply referring to his life ending. It would be a bit odd, though, for someone to be talking in the third person when they're in the process of dying. "It is finished" in that context sounds to me like Jesus looking on as a bystander doing play-by-play narration of his own demise.

Could Jesus have meant that all his hard work healing, teaching and leading people was finished? As in his earthly work was finally complete. Or was Jesus referring to the end of his own suffering. There are times when death offers relief and release...an opportunity to let go of earthly pain and embrace peaceful rest knowing it is finished...

But as he neared his own death, there is one thing nobody knew except Jesus. The Roman guards who nailed Jesus to the cross didn't know it. The women who wept at the foot of the cross didn't know it. The religious authorities who had it out for Jesus didn't know it. Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor who pronounced the death sentence, didn't know it. Even the disciples didn't know it, despite the fact that Jesus spelled it out clearly for them more than once.

All those people who surrounded Jesus and kept vigil for Jesus and heard Jesus cry out on the cross figured the story was finished. On the other hand, Jesus trusted God's promise that the end of the story had not yet been written. It was only one chapter, this chapter, that was finished.

Yes, Jesus said it is finished...but that doesn't mean the whole thing was done. To put what Jesus said on the cross in the vernacular, it would sound like this. "It is finished...but it ain't over..."

It might be finished but it's not over. Can you hear the good news in those words? Every night we see pictures on our TV screens of entire Ukrainian cities reduced to rubble. We watch Ukrainian families boarding trains and fleeing to neighboring countries. We hear about the lack of food and the lack of water and not enough hospital beds and supplies to aid those who are wounded. And we think to ourselves, it looks and sounds like the people of Ukraine are finished. But as devastating as this chapter may be, the Easter story of the Ukrainian people and their land rising again has not yet been written. It's not over by a longshot...

And some among us come to Easter today with heavy hearts, grieving and remembering loved ones who have died. Spouses, children, parents, dear friends. Easter is supposed to be about joy and hope, but what some of us feel is a sad and lonely emptiness that was once filled by someone special. We echo the pain of Jesus and we

ponder if our lives will ever be the same without the one we miss. Still, though our earthly chapter with the ones we love is finished, the story has not ended. Because there is part of that beloved person deep inside us that continues on. And over time we pass that deep part on to those who come after us. Easter is the story of love that never ends.

Relationships we treasure strain and it looks like there's no way to forgive or reconcile and we think they're finished. Our lives meet unforeseen roadblocks and we have to defer the dreams we once cherished because we assume they're finished. The diagnosis sounds ominous and our fear of what lays down the road keeps us awake at night. We've already started to question whether it's finished.

Even coming to church for worship on this Easter morning. For many of us there have been points over these last couple of years when we've been discouraged and disappointed. We started to doubt whether church and community and places where we're welcomed with open arms would ever feel the same. We worried about church, the way we've always known it, being finished.

But the story is not over. The final chapter has not been written. Easter reminds us that things don't always end when and how we presume they're going to...

On the first Easter morning, I'm struck by the fact that in John's Gospel everyone was running. Mary Magdalene set out while it was dark, thinking she would pay her last respects to Jesus. When she found the stone rolled away, she ran through the early morning darkness to report to the disciples that the tomb was empty.

As soon as they heard the news from Mary, Peter and the beloved disciple sprinted all the way to the empty tomb to see for themselves. And later on, after Mary came face to face with the Risen Christ, she ran back to the disciples and her friends and her entire community, about ready to burst, to report the amazing news. "I have seen the Lord!"

From that morning on, the Easter message spread like wildfire. And most people who heard the news couldn't get over it. Some people heard the message about the Risen Christ and still didn't believe it. What's finished is finished, they decided, and you can't convince me otherwise.

Meanwhile, some people were puzzled recalling conversations they shared over the prior two days and the way it was reported to them about Jesus crying out on the cross that it was finished. A few people were actual eyewitnesses at the cross and they heard Jesus say the exact words, "it is finished", out of his own mouth. Those folks might have been the most surprised of anyone...

Still from that day forward, the ones who believed in the resurrection and spent their lives trying to be faithful followers would never tell the story of Jesus the same way again. They'd always add a few extra words at the end.

Yeah, at that point it sure looked like it was finished. But GUESS WHAT? It wasn't over! Alleluia and Amen!

