

4-5-09

## An Unfinished Ending Matthew 27: 11-54

Today is Palm Sunday. We are gathered here to celebrate and affirm the faith of God's final victory. The palm leaf is a symbol of eternity and nobility. The palm leaf implies typified grace, elegance and uprightness. It was also a symbol of victory and rejoicing, and the use of palm leaves (branches) during Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was very significant. (Rev.7:9)

In today's scripture readings, we read a passage that covers the passion story of Jesus. From a mother's point of view, like that of Mary, the life of her son, Jesus, who finished his life on the cross at the age of thirty-three was sad, terribly painful and tragic. For most mothers, witnessing her son dying like this would be an unspeakable, unwatchable scene bringing unbearable pain.

There was an eye witness, a Roman centurion who watched the scene of Jesus dying on the cross. The Roman centurion saw the truth as he stood at the foot of the cross. Jesus had just breathed his last, and as the Roman looked up at the Nazarene, his mind darted back over the dramatic crescendo of events that had taken place during the last few hours and days.

The centurion had seen Jesus from the time he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, with palm branches strewn before him. Jesus was recognized as a King, honored as a King, and yet he was not interested in earthly kingdoms. The centurion had heard Jesus teaching with keen insight and authority in public places.

He had seen Jesus arrested, falsely accused and convicted, mocked, cursed, jeered, slapped, and spat upon. He had watched as Jesus was brutally crucified, and he noticed that Jesus never struggled. He had seen Jesus say a prayer of forgiveness for his executioners, console the thief on the adjacent cross, and make provisions for his mother, even as he hung in anguish on the cross. As he looked up at Jesus hanging there, the centurion said it for all of us: "Truly this man was the Son of God!" Actually, this would be an unfinished ending of Jesus' life, if we couldn't see behind the scene God's sign of salvation and final victory on the cross.

Do you know what this "V" symbolizes? It is a Nike logo. Guess who might say this?

"Fear of failure, fear of success, fear of losing your health, fear of losing your mind.

Fear of being taken too seriously fear of not being taken seriously enough.  
Fear that you worry too much, fear of that you don't worry enough.

Your mother's fear that you'll never be marry, your father's fear that you will. Fear of the unknown? Forget it. Fear of too many roads and not enough time? Maybe! But, go ahead, put one foot in front of the other. And just do it."

These are the words from a Nike commercial. These words have very little to do with athletic shoes. The writer of that ad knows that fear is real, that we are a fearful people. But we are Nike people. Nike (pronounced nee-kay) is the goddess of victory in Greek mythology. Therefore, nike, in Greek, has come to means victory, which we symbolize by the letter "V," like the Nike shoe logo. However, the letter "V," in Greek is the letter "nu." The sound associated with the Greek letter "V," ("nu") is like our letter "N." Therefore, Nike. Just do it, regardless of fear.

However, fear is real. I have a story of fear, despair and frustration to share from my early history as an immigrant to the United States. After I came to United States, I wished to study more. I stayed in California for one year where brothers were already settled. Then, we moved to Denver and I studied at Iliff School of Theology. It was very challenging and stressful for me to study and maintain my school work while I started my ministry in Denver. In the first quarter of school I took a Greek class and finished well. During the second quarter, I took an advanced Greek class and another class named "Social and Personal Transformation".

The class, "Social and Personal Transformation" was taught by three professors; one from the psychology faculty, one from sociology and one from American history. Actually, it was a unique course in theological school. The purpose of the course was to explore how the agency of God can change the world as a whole. This course required three term papers. One from a psychological point of view, one from a sociological and one from a methodological viewpoint. The professor who initiated this course invited person who were working at various agencies, like social workers, community developers or peace makers to make presentations to the class. And the professor required a paper reflecting on the guest speakers or on-site visits, reporting where transforming activities were taking place.

My first paper, the psychological paper was an A. My second sociological paper was an A-. The third paper was a problem. Since I had a problem with listening to the lecture, I missed much of the content of the presentations of the guest speakers. And I ignored the assignment of visiting the agencies which were engaged in community changing activities. I submitted my third paper, relying on my reading and my own insight. But, the professor did not accept the paper as fulfilling the requirement. He returned my paper with a note, "Mr. Cho I need another paper which fulfills the requirements of this course. I appreciated your insight but, please reflect the guest speakers and reflect on what you found from your on-site visits."

Consequently, for the course, "Social and Personal Transformation," my grade was neither A, B, C nor F. It was incomplete. However, within three years, I had enough credits for a Master of Divinity degree and I graduated from the school. I appreciated the professor who gave me grade an incomplete, because it became my main subject on my life and ministry and I learned what the incomplete meant.

A French philosopher, Pascal, once said, 'If some asked me which one you would choose between completion and incompleteness, I would choose incompleteness rather than completion.' There is no hope or room to grow in completion. In life there is not completion. Life is continuing. Life is not a period but a comma. The Lord's death on the cross was not a period but a comma. After the death of our Lord, there was resurrection.

Don't try to complete your life. Don't be frustrated when you feel you have failed, because your life is not finished yet. You are now taking a breath for a comma. Your life will be continued even if you feel it is finished. There is always hope that the Lord showed us in his resurrection. Your writing on life is on continuing. Until God puts the period on us, there is no completion in our life.

In the Easter story, Simon Peter is a dramatic symbol of victory over defeat. Peter had been so brash, so confident, so cocky. And then, at "crunch-time," he failed. He had denied his Lord. He was so shamed and so defeated! But there was a chance when the risen Lord came and resurrected him and gave him another chance: "Simon, do you love me? Then feed my sheep!" The risen Lord was saying to Simon Peter, "You have a job to do. You are not defeated. You can bounce back. You fell down, but you can get up. You can rise above it! Don't quit on me."

Have you heard the beautiful children's story about the three trees? The trees were talking in the forest one day about their dreams for the future. The first tree said it would like to be made into cradle, so that it might go on living as a support for the fragile life of a tiny new baby. The second tree wanted to be made into a big ship, so that it might go on living, carrying important cargo and influential people to exotic new lands. The third tree longed to stay right where it was, existing only as a tree, but growing ever taller, and pointing ever higher, to remind everyone that there is a God in heaven who loves them. Those were their dreams: One wanted to be a cradle, one wanted to be a mighty ship, and one wanted to be a tall tree, pointing people toward God.

But then one day the woodcutters came and chopped down the three trees, and destroyed their dreams. The first tree was not made into a cradle, but into a simple feeding trough, a manger for animals. But the manger was sold to a family in Bethlehem, and on the night Jesus was born, that simple feed box became the cradle for the Christ Child.

The second tree was built into a boat, but not the kind it had dreamed of – not a mighty ocean-going vessel- but a tiny inexpensive fishing boat. A man named Simon Peter bought the boat, and on one warm afternoon when the crowds pressed in, Jesus himself climbed aboard that small fishing boat so that he might preach good news to the multitudes.

The third tree also was deprived of its dream. It wanted to remain standing tall and pointing toward God. Instead, it was cut down and shaped into a horrible instrument of torture, a cross. But it was on that very cross that Jesus was crucified, transforming a symbol of cruelty into a powerful reminder of God's eternal love for all people.

The three trees' dreams were crushed and they might have felt that their lives were finished when the dreams were crushed. But, the crushing of their dreams was not a period, but a comma. God completed their dreams differently, but these were exalted by God's plan. That's the way it works: When we, in humility, give ourselves to God, our Lord can do greater things through us and for us – greater than we can ever imagine. That is the story of cross of Jesus our Lord, the unfinished ending.

Winston Churchill planned his own funeral, which took place in Saint Paul's Cathedral in London. Churchill included in the service many of the great and triumphant hymns of the church and many of the victorious passages of Scripture, but then came a surprise ending. Following his instructions, as soon as the benediction was concluded, a bugler positioned high up in "Now the day is over."

Then came the most dramatic turn. Churchill had directed that as soon as the bugler played the final note of "Taps," another bugler, on the other side of the dome, would begin to play "Reveille" – "It's time to get up! It's time to get up!" What was Churchill trying to say? Simply this: For Christians, the last note will not be "Taps"; it will be "Reveille"!

This is one of the greatest promises of the Bible – as Christians nothing can defeat us, because God is with us. Nothing –not even death – can defeat us, because God gives us the victory! So, trust God, and let him play his song. Let him play in you his song of forgiveness, his song of confidence, his song of victory.

Yesterday is history; tomorrow is a mystery; today is a gift from God. That's why we call it the present. The present is comma, not a period. Don't be nervous, or frustrated just because of incompleteness or what you feel to be lack of success in your life at any one time. We are people who believe in the final victory of God!