

And the Beat Goes On©

Luke 24:36-49; Acts 28:11-31

September 23, 2012

Sharlyn Gates

Have you ever read a book – an exciting, engaging story – just to come to the end and find that it is left open for you to decide how it ends. In other words, there is no real ending to the story.

I used to love to write short stories when I was growing up and I would often leave the ending open for my friends to create their own conclusion, although I think, for the most part, it just made them crazy!

Here we come to the end of this long summer of sermons on the Acts of the Apostles – beginning with the disciples waiting faithfully in Jerusalem for this promised gift that Jesus said would come – the Holy Spirit.

And we saw how the Spirit came upon them on the feast day of Pentecost when thousands were gathered from other countries and how suddenly Peter and the others were able to preach about Jesus in the languages of all those gathered there. We heard how 2,000 people became believers in Jesus as the Messiah on that day and how the church was born and taken to other countries.

We met people along the way – Stephen – who was stoned to death because of his speaking out about faith in Jesus. We met Barnabas, John Mark, Timothy, Silas; we met Cornelias, a Roman centurion who became a believer and he and his entire household were baptized.

We met Aquila and Priscilla; we met Lydia and other women who were instrumental in the ministry and growth of the early church. In other words we met ordinary people like you and me, who were empowered by the Holy Spirit and allowed God to work through them for the sake of the church.

And of course, we met a young Pharisee name Saul who was so sure that the people who were following “The Way” as the Christian movement began to be called – he was so sure they were being blasphemous to God and were going to destroy the faith as the Jewish people had been taught over the centuries, that he was determined to hunt them down, put them on trial and have them executed. And he did. Many new believers were killed because of Saul’s zeal in keeping the Jewish tradition.

One of the most memorable stories in Luke’s book – The Acts of the Apostles – is the story of how Saul was on the road to Damascus, heading there to have new Christians arrested and taken back to Jerusalem for trial and how he suddenly was blinded by a bright light, struck to the ground. He heard the voice of Jesus asking him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”

When Saul realized it was the voice of Jesus that was speaking to him, he knew he had been wrong. He was led to Damascus where he ended up receiving his sight again – this time not just seeing with his eyes, but seeing as he perceived what the truth really was.

God changed his name from Saul to Paul, symbolizing the new person he had become. And Paul became one of the greatest missionaries the church has ever known. The same zeal and passion Saul had for ridding the world of Christians, Paul now exhibits for building up Christians, for increasing the number of believers in Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God.

And we have followed Paul on his journeys from Jerusalem throughout the world in his day – to some of the great cultural centers in the Greco-Roman world: places like Athens, Corinth, and Ephesus. We traveled to Macedonia.

We went with Paul into communities where he was welcome and the young, struggling churches grew and we went with him to prisons where he was in chains, beaten and wondering if he would survive.

All for the sake of the Gospel – the good news that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, sent because of God's great love for the world, sent to die for the sins of the world and to be resurrected to show God's power to save.

Finally, Luke tells us that Paul ends up in Rome, remains a house prisoner there – that is, he is a prisoner under guard but he has much freedom and has many visitors who come to him and who become believers because he continues preaching even in that situation.

We know Luke is with Paul for much of this journey just because he uses first person narratives like “we traveled on ... we did this or that.”

The point is, Luke knows very well the end of this story. Luke has a front place seat on this journey and he knows exactly what happens to his friend, Paul. Yet he chooses to leave the story open-ended. Why?

Since this is a true story, a close account of Paul's journeys and of the start of the early churches, we don't really have the choice of making up our own ending, as we might in a writing of fiction.

We know that writings from historians have shown us that the times became more and more violent as Nero, took charge of the government. We know that hundreds and hundreds of Christians lost their lives in the year A.D. 67. It is the same year that it is believed Paul died.

Paul was arrested and in prison more than once in Rome. Eventually he was martyred although we don't have all the details.

The thing is, Luke wants us to see the fruits of Paul's labor were much more important and reached way further than the fact that he died.

Which brings us back to the beginning again. The Acts of the Apostles was written for a main purpose. We are privileged to be able to have an account of how the church grew and how disciples were formed and where Paul journeyed.

But the greatest purpose for this book was to encourage Theophilus and the little congregation he was serving. We don't know who he was or where he was and really that isn't important.

The fact is, we are all Theophilus. We are all part of his little church who struggles and meets head on with discouragement and difficulties. They may not be the same ones.

We don't have a government who is persecuting us for being a church, for worshipping in public.

We don't have an old traditional community of faith who wants us killed because we are threatening them. (Well, that may be debatable as we think about Terrorism.)

But, the truth is, we do struggle and we do feel discouraged at times. I know there has been discouragement with how slow our progress is moving with the repair of our building.

I know our property committee has felt discouragement at times. I know that the church in general can get down when people leave or someone dies, or we hear about the non-denominational churches growing.

But, just like the early churches – just like Theophilus – we are given great encouragement and empowerment to do whatever we are called by God to do. Those early churches had so much against them, yet look at how fruitful they were!

We are here today because they were faithful then and they allowed the Holy Spirit to guide them and work through them no matter what they were up against.

The Holy Spirit is the gift we have been given still today. The beat goes on and on and on. The church will be alive and moving and faithful years from now because we, the contemporary followers of Jesus have remained open to the Spirit's leading and we are making a difference every day.

As Paul Harvey used to say, "That's the rest of the story." The rest of the story is that the ending has not yet been written because it goes on and on in us.

May God's Holy Spirit continue to work in us here at Holly Presbyterian Church – because with the power of the Holy Spirit, anything can happen – and it definitely will! We may not know what at this moment, but the story continues to unfold.

Thanks be to God!

© Copyright 2012. All Rights Reserved.