Year B – Easter Day  “God’s Unfinished Symphony”

“And going forth they fled from the tomb, with much trembling and bewilderment; and they told no one anything; they were afraid for . . .” (Mark 16:8, my translation)

In 1828, the Austrian, Franz Schubert, died at the young age of 31, most likely from typhoid or syphilis. Apparently he knew that he was deathly ill as much as 3 years before. Schubert had an incredible gift for music composition that he showed at a very early age. The music simply poured out of him. One commentator of the time suggested that “God is writing music through him.” He left behind a voluminous portfolio of piano music, songs, string quartets/quintets, and 8 full symphonies. After his death, his family discovered among his music an “unfinished symphony”. (This was actually number 8, since #9 was completed prior to his death.)

Schubert’s Unfinished Symphony has inspired much conjecture and research on the part of musical scholars. Did he not like it and therefore stop work on it? Did the rest of the music go with him to his grave? Were the last two movements simply lost somewhere in the vast piles of manuscripts and somehow tossed inadvertently? Of course, unless the music is found buried somewhere, the answer will never be known. What we have left is two very deep and complex movements of a symphony that invite us into perhaps his darkest times and his cling to hope and life in the midst of his darkest trials.

Mark wrote his Gospel in dark times, too. Scholars are unsure about the exact date – either just prior to the destruction of the temple in 70 CE or as it was occurring. Christians had begun to take root in the region but were scattering. Christians were being persecuted and some were dying for their faith. It was time to write down the Good News of Jesus Christ so it could be shared more widely. Some have conjectured that Mark placed himself in the narrative as the young man who fled from the Garden in Gethsemane when Jesus was arrested, leaving behind his garment, and as the young man who greeted Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James, and Salome as they came to the tomb that morning.

What I want to suggest to you this morning is that Mark’s gospel is the “unfinished gospel”. And, in some ways it is similar to Schubert’s Unfinished Symphony, because it takes us through the darkness of despair and sin and points us to the new possibility of abundant life.

Mark’s book is not intended to be an historical recording of the events of Jesus’ life. He says that right up front, at the very beginning: “The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ”. This is a new genre of writing. It is about Good News, transforming news, life changing news, which has come about as a result of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, now recognized as the anointed one, the Christ. And the Gospel begins not with Jesus’ birth but in Galilee, at the River Jordan, with the calling of all to repentance, metanoia in Greek. We are called to a bigger mind, the mind of Christ in which heaven and earth are joined and the whole creation is seen and lived in a new way by those who follow Him and pattern their lives after His. “The time is fulfilled,” says Jesus, “the kingdom of God has come near”. Mark’s whole purpose in writing his book is to draw us into the present, active, ongoing reign of God.
This morning’s reading from the Gospel is, of course, the scene at the tomb in the early morning on the 3rd day after Jesus’ death and burial. As in all the versions of the resurrection, it is the women who were closest to Jesus who witness the empty tomb and hear the voice of angels (or in this case, a young man) telling them that he is risen. And they flee from the tomb in fear.

The earliest manuscripts of this Gospel stop right there at the conclusion of the reading you heard. And the most common English translations of the Greek do not do it justice, so I have provided my own.

“And going forth they fled from the tomb, with much trembling and bewilderment; and they told no one anything; they were afraid for . . .”

For is the last Greek word in the text. The sentence is left unfinished. There are no appearances of Jesus in the earliest version of Mark’s Good News – nothing to tie it all together in a neat package. Later writers and transcribers added their own endings and in fact, there are two of them provided in most Bibles. But my point is this: The Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ, is unfinished for a reason.

In The Brothers Karamazov, Fyodor Dostoevsky’s character, Father Zossima, tells the story of his conversion at the early age of 9.

It was Lent and his brother, Markel, who had a weak constitution and was inclined to get sick, did not believe in God and laughed at the notion of fasting and observance of the season. Suddenly in the 6th week of Lent he became very ill with what was called in those days, consumption. The doctor declared that he would not live through the spring. Father Zossima’s mother became very upset and angry that Markel would not fast or receive communion and thereby pleading to God for help in his weakness. In Holy Week, he finally relented, and for the sake of his mother, kept the fast and went to church. By the end of the week he was bedridden. But his spirit has changed from darkness and depression to light and love. He blessed all who came within his reach and acknowledged them with faith and love. He shared words of wisdom about life: “Mama, do not weep, life is paradise, and we are all in paradise, but we do not want to know it, and if we did want to know it, tomorrow there would be paradise the world over.”

The whole family, servants and friends were moved by his words and presence at his death bed. Father Zossima’s most vivid memory came not long before his brother’s death:

“I came into his room alone, no one was with him. It was a bright evening; the sun was setting and lit up the whole room with its slanting rays. He beckoned when he saw me. I went over to him; he took me by the shoulders with both hands, looked tenderly, lovingly into my face; . . . “Well,” he said, “go now, play, live for me!”

The young man at the tomb says something very similar to the women: “But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” (Mark 16:7)

The young man (Mark?) points us back to the beginning, to Galilee. “The time is fulfilled,” says Jesus, “the kingdom of God has come near”. The Gospel is left unfinished because we are to
complete it in the living out of our lives. All of us, each of us, are to become movements of this unfinished symphony of God by walking the path that Jesus walks, the path in which the kingdom of God is very present.

And this is not only the Kingdom of God – in which the transforming love of the Divine Life provides harmony and dissonance in your life and mine. It is the Kingdom of God, in which our life together as a community and a society is transformed by the various melodies of our hearts into one in which peace and justice go hand in hand.

Easter, says German theologian Jurgen Moltmann, is God’s protest against death, and the announcement that we are freed from the powers of death. That freedom is not freedom to do anything we want for ourselves, it is freedom to be love for others, the reign of God’s love for all. It is freedom to work for justice and peace in the face of resistance of an ego/self-centered world.

Moltmann says, “The resurrection faith is not proved true by means of historical evidence, or only in the next world. It is proved here and now, through the courage for revolt, the protest against the deadly powers, and the self-giving of men and women for the victory of life.”¹ It is that self-giving which plays God’s music in us.

Mark’s Gospel begs the question: What does the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ mean for us? And how are we going to engage in this unfinished Good News of God?

Do we grasp the enormity of what happened two thousand years ago, outside the walls of Jerusalem, and how our living of Jesus’ path will transform our hearts and minds and our communities? Will we not only play the harmonies of God’s love in our lives, but become the protestors of death in our culture? Will we live into the reign, the Kingdom of God, for which Jesus lived, died and rose, so that we become a part of this music of God in creation?

Resurrected life is a life that is free from the tyranny of cultural expectations, definitions of self, and value. Gospel is unfinished because each of us has part to play. The Good News is unfinished because God wants to write music through us to carry out God’s mission of love for the world. You are God’s unfinished symphony! Let the music continue!

Alleluia. Christ is Risen!

Patricia Rome Robertson+
The Parish of St. Mary and St. Jude
Northeast Harbor, Maine
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¹ Quoted in Bread and Wine, readings for Lent and Easter, chapter 60.
² Quoted in Bread and Wine, readings for Lent and Easter, chapter 66.