

Message for Good Friday Service at St. Peter's United Church

Friday, April 3rd, 2015 10:30 a.m.

by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman, St. Andrew's United Church

Scriptures: John 19:30 and Luke 23:44-46

"It is finished"

What more is there to say?

"It is finished" seems to be the final word.

We have many ways of saying that, do we not? When honouring the war dead, we play a song that begins: "Day is done, gone the sun." Regardless, that is saying "It is finished" with different words. Without electricity, after all, the end of the day, the descending of the sun, marks the end. It is finished.

Donald Trump has made famous another way to say "it is finished." The show "The Apprentice," which has morphed into the "Celebrity Apprentice," where former media and entertainment stars compete for their favourite charities and so risk hearing those dreaded words from Trump: "You're fired." An inelegant way of saying "It is finished."

I can hardly wait to hear someone proclaim about Trump's Presidential aspirations "it is finished," but that is another matter.

The truth is these scriptural words "it is finished" do not mean what we think they mean, or how they sound to the modern ear. For Jesus, these are not what I have always assumed, words of defeat and finality. If they were, he would not be seen as the Messiah, the chosen one, one worthy of your respect and of my respect, too, not to say admiration and awe.

Maybe that misinterpretation is why I never attended Good Friday services as a child or young youth. I was protected from the death and finality of the day.

Too bad, since "it is finished" is more about completeness than finality. It is more about accomplishment than it is about failure.

Few of us can say, with any degree of confidence, at the end of a task or job or life “it is finished,” for rarely do we accomplish all that we set out to accomplish.

But Jesus did. His mission on earth was complete. He motivated a changed attitude among his disciples. He made a difference, not just within his own time, but for all time.

George Cox, in a folksy book entitled *Stories I have Told and Thoughts Gladly Shared*, tells the story of the Helen Law Singers, a group that began in essence in 1960 when Helen Law, then the organist and music director of Leamington United Church, was asked by a group of Mennonite Singers to rehearse and direct them in a performance of *Hansel and Gretel*.

Three years later the group expanded and became known as the Leamington Choral Society, eventually bringing together singers from a variety of denominations, covering much of that region of Essex County all the way to Windsor.

By 1970 Helen thought the group was ready for an international trip, so they went to Wales where they placed third among 21 choirs. In 1980 they travelled to Varna, Bulgaria, where they placed first in another international competition.

But by 1982 the group, oversized due to its success (it now had 60+ singers), was reduced to 18 singers so that it could fit into most venues for performances, and it then was called the “Helen Law Singers,” twenty years after she began her community choir.

In the early 1990’s Helen Law became ill, and died in 1993 – ironically 33 years after she started this community choir, the same length of time that Jesus lived on earth. An honoured musician, community leader, and recipient of the Order of Canada, she quite rightly could have declared at the end “It is finished,” for she accomplished much. But few of us deserve to think such words, much less say them.

“It is finished.” In those words Jesus declared: “What I came to do and to accomplish is finished, and so it is handed off to you to continue the journey, the tasks of life, the mission God has given to us all.”

The end of Jesus’ life is not the end of the story, the final words of a book, but the end of a chapter – yes, an important chapter, but the end of a chapter in the story of life and the history of the universe.

We are now immersed in one of hundreds of subsequent chapters. And before we jump to write our own obituary and rush to the judgment of “it is finished,” let us hear anew the words of Jesus even as he declared them from the cross, in that time seeking new relationships for those left behind, and so he proclaimed for the benefit of ourselves and others: “It is finished for me,” yet in those words clearly meant: “It has only just begun for you.”

How can we be sure? As TAPS concludes, having begun with the words “Day is done, gone the sun,” so does Jesus’ life remind us: “All is well; safely rest. God is nigh.”

And that is what makes God’s Friday good.