



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

"Reluctant Evangelists"

A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church

On April 7th, 2024, Easter 2, from Mark 16:9-20

Our story this morning reminds me of an old joke: What do you get when you combine a Jehovah's Witness and a Unitarian Universalist? You get someone who shows up at your front door with nothing to say. Now I know that joke is not fair to the Jehovah's Witnesses or Unitarian Universalists, but there is some truth in this exaggeration. Unitarians are wonderful, but they rarely make the enthusiastic evangelists. You're not going to see Unitarians going door to door sharing their faith, but you might find them registering people to vote. Perhaps the popular quote applies here, "Preach the gospel at all times, and when necessary, use words."

Progressive Christians have a similar problem. We're not the kind of people who are going to sit down next to someone on an airplane and ask them, "Do you know Jesus?" We progressive people have a hard time sharing our faith. Part of it is we don't want to be associated with the kinds of Christians or Christianity that is constantly proselytizing. We're embarrassed by it, and we have a lot of reasons to be. It has been wildly misused throughout history as a form of emotional manipulation, spiritual violence, and colonial domination masquerading as missions.

The word "gospel," means "good news," which in the first century Roman world was often used to herald the Emperor Augustus Caesar as "good news for the world." But in the New Testament it refers to the "good news" of Jesus and the resurrection. In Greek the word for good news or gospel is *evangelion*, from which we get words like "evangelist" and "evangelical." Originally, an "evangelical" was simply someone who shared the good news of Jesus.

However, over time the term "evangelical" radically evolved in America. During the first and second Great Awakenings, it became synonymous with a peculiar form of Protestant Christianity that emphasized an individual's personal experience of conversion. Later, this conversion obsessed faith evolved into what my parents called "born-again" Christianity a la Billy Graham. Eventually, the term was transformed into a voting bloc in American politics that was loyal to a single political party.



Today, the moniker “evangelical” has mutated beyond all recognition—from its association with one kind of Christianity, to one political party, to a synonym for support of a single political candidate who’s now selling his own Bible priced at \$59.99, plus tax and shipping. Doubling down on Christian Nationalism, the “God Bless the USA Bible” includes a King James version with handwritten lyrics of Lee Greenwood’s famous song, along with a copy of the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, the Declaration of Independence, and the Pledge of Allegiance—all inside the Bible.

None of these documents are scripture but disturbingly, including them in the Bible mean some people will begin to believe they are the word of God. It has the potential to be worse than the Scofield Reference Bible, which contained the notes of a former Confederate soldier turned fundamentalist Bible scholar named Cyrus Scofield in the margins. Americans thought Scofield’s notes were scripture, which is how the ridiculous concept of the rapture was disseminated across the world.

From the Great Commission to the Doctrine of Discovery, from the Easter proclamation to European colonization, and from the Crusades to the Billy Graham Crusade, from “born again” to the “God Bless the USA Bible,” it is truly astonishing that something as simple sharing the good news has evolved into something so monstrous. As progressives, we have two thousand years’ worth of good reasons to be reluctant about sharing the gospel. In fact, it is quite understandable that many of us have become ex-evangelicals, deconstructing evangelicals, or reluctant evangelicals, at best. We don’t want to perpetuate any further misunderstanding of the gospel or more violence toward non-believers or people of other faiths. We don’t want to be a part of colonialism, Christian nationalism, or any movement that confuses the Empire with the gospel. Most importantly, we don’t want to come across to other people as weird, annoying, overzealous, Jesus-Freaks, right?

Our text today hasn’t made things any easier. It has been part of the problem for thousands of years. First, there is no such thing as Mark 16:9-20. As I mentioned Easter Sunday, the original version of Mark ends at v.8 with “So they went out and fled from the tomb, for trauma and ecstasy seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” Everything after v.8 is what we call “apocryphal,” which means it has questionable authenticity. People were so dissatisfied with Mark’s cliffhanger ending they added their own. However, just like Scofield’s reference notes and the nationalist documents included in the “God Bless the USA Bible,” people began reading the apocryphal story of v.9 through 20 as if it was the word of God, as if it was gospel—good news for the world. But it most certainly was not.



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

I know what you're thinking, "But Ben, it's in my Bible. Are you telling me that I should not consider this to be the word of God?" Yes. That's exactly what I'm saying. Scofield's notes and the Constitution are also in some Bibles, but they're not the word of God. There's a lot in our Bibles that are not scripture—the titles of most of the books, all the chapters and verses, every section heading. But what troubles me most about this apocryphal addition to Mark is that it contradicts the theme of Mark's gospel to provide a more pleasing conclusion, which makes the gospel into a different story.

This apocryphal ending simply takes a bunch of stories about the resurrection that were floating around in the first century like the appearance to Mary Magdalene, the road to Emmaus, and the ascension and slaps them together like a poorly made sandwich topped off with a garnish of judgement from the risen Christ himself about our stubborn inability to believe the good news, accompanied by a side dish of magic tricks disciples are commanded to perform as they go out into the world to proclaim the gospel. It is a very unappealing sandwich.

One scholar goes so far as to call this apocryphal ending an "Imperial Rewrite" that domesticates the radical nature of the life and teachings of Jesus into a neat and controllable orthodoxy. In the apocryphal version, the question of resurrection is no longer what the story of the empty tomb compels us to do and be, but what we are supposed to believe about it. One wonders if this was a ingenious way for the empire to persuade the followers of Jesus to imagine, "It's all in our heads and our hearts. Resurrection only changes how you think and what you believe, but not how you live." But the problem with taking jumbled-up stories and mashing them up with judgment and magic tricks is that it surrenders the power of the resurrection and stops being good news for the world.

Mark's gospel isn't supposed to have an ending. The first words of Mark's gospel are, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ." And the writer didn't mean, "This is the beginning of a story I'm about to tell you." No, it's the title of the Mark's gospel. If Mark was a book, the front cover would say, "This is the beginning of the good news." The first chapter is not the beginning. The entire gospel of Mark is the beginning of the good news of Jesus.



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

The resurrection of Jesus is not the end of the story. It is the end of the beginning of the good news. Which is why the original version of Mark doesn't have an ending, because the good news of Jesus Christ is not supposed to end. Mark was using a literary technique to demonstrate the open-ended reality of the good news. The resurrection literally means it's not over. We're not done here. Death is not the final word. Jesus is back. The future is always open. There's more to the story. There will always be a tomorrow. The horizon is endless. Another chapter awaits us. The world has not stopped. The movement keeps on going. The end is not the end. Because love never dies.

In her book *Resurrection Hope*, Kelly Brown Douglas writes, "Fortunately, the gospel story does not stop with the cross...the cross is not the end, but a revelatory point on the way to new life, a new reality. It reveals where the movement toward God's just future begins. It began in crucifying realities, but it does not end there. The cross did not defeat God's promise for a more just future. What lies beyond the cross is in fact what a Black church testifies to in song when they sing, "Weeping may last for a night, but joy cometh in the morning." She writes, "In asking his disciples to meet him in Galilee, Jesus was asking them to imagine a world where life, not death is centered, a world where the cross does not have the last word."ⁱ

Every one of us in the sanctuary this morning has had times in our lives when we feel like life is nothing but crosses, when we feel like the end has come, when we feel like it's all over, when we've felt like there's no hope and no tomorrow. The doctor calls you on the phone with a diagnosis. Creditors inform you your debts are due or else. The IRS says you owe a lot more than you thought. A judge hands down a verdict for someone in your family. People you thought were friends, humiliate you. Family members judge you and reject you. Disaster strikes your household. You are harassed and exploited at work. Abusers take your safety away. The person you love tells you they don't love you or want to be with you anymore. You receive the final pronouncement your spouse, mother, father, brother, sister, or child is dead. Media outlets remind us that war, violence, genocide, and oppression reign supreme and more environmental catastrophes are coming our way.

Yet, as horrible as all these words are, they are never the last word. If the cross is not the last word, that means pain is not the last word. Punishment is not the last word. Sickness is not the last word. Suffering is not the last word. Loss is not the last word. Lament is not the last word. Death is not the last word. Destruction is not the last word.



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

Life is the last word. Love is the last word. Liberation is the last word. Resurrection is the last word, which means the last word is never really the last word anyway, but the first word of a new beginning, a new hope, a new future, a new tomorrow, and a whole new world. It means that every single one of us in the sanctuary this morning has a resurrection story—a story of a time in our lives where it looked like the end had come, and all was lost, and there was no way forward, but God made a way for us where there was no way. God rolled away the stone in front of the tomb, maybe God smashed the stone to smithereens, or maybe God split open a tiny crack that was just big enough for us to slip through, but God made a way for us out of a situation we thought was the end, into a new reality.

Just because we are progressive Christians, that doesn't mean don't have a story. We have something to say. We may be reluctant to share the gospel, but we have a testimony. We may be reluctant evangelists because of all the ways the "good news" has been used to harm, manipulate, colonize, and oppress people around the world. But that's not the only story. We have another story, a counter testimony, a conflicting witness, an alternative narrative; a story that begins with Jesus' definition of the good news. We find it in Luke 4 when he proclaimed, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free." The gospel is good news for the poor, release to captives, freedom for the oppressed. It is justice, equality, deliverance, freedom, and liberation. If it's not good news for the poor, then it's not the good news of Jesus. If it's not good news for the captive, the blind, and the oppressed, then it is not good news.

On November 7, 2015, a year before the 2016 election, Bishop William Barber penned an Op-Ed for the *News & Observer* where he wrote, "The term 'evangelical' is a label that has been hijacked and manipulated by the political establishment in America. When pundits refer to the "evangelical vote," they are leaning on the Cliff Notes of the "far right" extremists who use a perverted interpretation of faith to endorse an extreme agenda. True evangelicalism spoken from the lips and words of Jesus places concern for the poor, the broken, the battered, the imprisoned, the blind, the bruised, and those made to feel unacceptable at the center of our faith. True evangelicalism invites us to care for the least of these, to have a deep concern for justice, love, and mercy as it relates not just the individual piety but to public morality social justice and governmental policies."ⁱⁱ



Barber went on to say, "America's abolitionists were evangelicals as they sought to proclaim the good news of liberty to the captive." He claims the temperance movement was evangelical, the labor movement was evangelical, the suffrage movement was evangelical, and the social gospel movement was evangelical, and the Civil Rights Movement was evangelical. Barber argues that "Dr. King was an evangelical who sought to call America out of racism and away from injustice into God's beloved community." Concluding his essay, Barber states, "I'm an evangelical and I stand with many other evangelicals who do not believe policies that divide, destroy, and have a disdain for the least of these is evangelical. The heart of public evangelicalism is an insistence that our nation must be born again. Our moral witness is to call people to listen to heart of the gospel, which is love, justice, and mercy."

Ten years later, I don't have much hope the word evangelical can be redeemed. Like the word "Baptist," which is nearly synonymous with evangelical, it has run its course as a positive way of identifying with the tradition of love, justice, and mercy we see in Jesus. Those days are gone. But "evangelical" and "Baptist" are just words, and words change meanings all the time. "Facetious" once meant having elegant high style, and wit. "Egregious" once meant eminent and distinguished. The word "bully" was once a term of endearment for a sweetheart or lover. Imagining we have the power to redeem the word "Baptist" or "Evangelical" is as silly as thinking we could redeem the word "Bully." But these are just words, which means they don't define us.

What we must redeem is not our words but our witness. We cannot allow progressive Christianity to be like the joke about the Unitarian Jehovah's Witness. People can hijack whatever words they want, but we cannot allow them to hijack our faith. We cannot surrender our testimony. We cannot abdicate our calling to share the good news of the gospel. We have permission to be reluctant evangelists, but we can't be silent onlookers, quiet believers, or anonymous Christians. We can't be followers of Jesus who do not tell our story or share our faith. We must reclaim our witness, our testimony, our narrative, our story. We must recover our identity as people who have good news for the poor, the captive, the blind, the bruised, the brokenhearted, and the oppressed, which means we have good news for the entire world. No matter how progressive we are, we can share the good news, and there's nothing that the world needs more right now, than good news.



I grew up in a church where we were told that the good news of Jesus and the resurrection was both a story and a song. And while there's a lot of things I grew up with I don't believe in anymore and a lot of words I can no longer sing. There are some that remind me of our calling as followers of Jesus. Words like "We've a story to tell the nations, that can turn their hearts to right, a story of truth and mercy, a story of peace and light." Words like "This is my story, this is my song, praising my savior all the day long." And words like, "I love to tell the story, 'twill be my theme in glory, to tell the old, old story, of Jesus and his love."

Despite the horrors that Christians have brought to the world, this is still my story, this is still my song, and I will cling to this story as long as I can. Because it is the story of truth and mercy, the story of peace and light, the story of Jesus and his love, which is love I have come to know as a love that makes a way where there is no way, a love that resurrects, a love that liberates, a love that delivers, a love that sets us free, a love that creates community, a love that always takes what the world thinks is the last word and makes into the first word of a new beginning. Our story is the story of a love that never ends, a love that is always good news, a love that never leaves us, and a love I hope that you will join me fearlessly singing about now and forevermore.

ⁱ Kelly Brown Douglas, *Resurrection Hope: A Future Where Black Lives Matter*, Orbis, 2021.

ⁱⁱ William J. Barber II, "Evangelicals are Not for Trump or Carson, but for the Gospel, *News & Observer*, November 7, 2015.