



Midway School in Mobile, Alabama, in 1918. Rosa Young on left. Courtesy of Concordia Historical Institute

Living a God-sized Dream By Christine Scheele Weerts

Rosa Jinsey Young had a dream so big only God could make it happen. And He did.

Rosa was born in 1890 in Rosebud, Alabama, a tiny backwoods community in the heart of cotton country, the fourth of 10 children. Rosa always knew she wanted to be a teacher, to educate “her people.” But what may seem an “average” dream for hundreds of women and men her age was nearly impossible for Rosa: an African American woman living one generation out of slavery, in an impoverished and isolated rural community in the sin-sick, segregated Deep South.

With absolute faith in the almighty God, Rosa overcame inconceivable obstacles to keep her dream alive. Poverty, segregation, discrimination, illiteracy, isolation, Klan violence, sickness, and even a cotton-destroying insect couldn’t stop her.

“If you ask me anything in My name, I will do it’ seemed to have been written in large print upon my heart, she once wrote. Whenever I wanted anything or undertook anything, I prayed to God. I would steal away and talk to Jesus. I believed in prayer, prayer, prayer.”¹

Lutherans answered her call for help educating her people, resulting in the establishment of 35 churches and 30 schools in some of Alabama’s poorest counties from 1916 to 1940.

Children who had never owned a “pretty book” before received a Christ-centered education, while thousands of “her people” who heard the Gospel of salvation were baptized and confirmed. Ex-slaves, who had lived long, hard years, heard the Good News of salvation and rejoiced in the freedom of Christ eternally. Today hundreds of pastors, teachers and lay leaders — second, third, and fourth generation — serve in LCMS churches and schools across the United States.

Opening: Say or sing together verses 1–4 of “Rejoice, My Heart, Be Glad and Sing,” (LSB #737; LW #424; TLH #535), closing with “Amen.”

Have you had a dream so big only God could make it happen? Describe it in light of the verses below:

Philippians 4:13 _____

Job 42:2 _____

Jeremiah 32:27 _____

Name one person you know who has forged a God-given gift/ministry. _____

Can we help others realize their God-given dreams? _____

How often obstacles and hardships stand between our dreams and us. Rosa faced overwhelming odds: Most families were illiterate and still living on the plantations where their families had been enslaved, farming as dirt-poor sharecroppers who could barely keep ahead of the rent. Because of Alabama’s odious Jim Crow laws of segregation and discrimination, at that time, there were few schools for blacks to attend.

Rosa, who didn't go to school until she was 10, taught herself — and her siblings — with nothing but a bluebook reader and the Bible. She picked cotton for the fees to attend a teacher training school; she started each school year late and left early to work in the fields, yet graduated at the top of her class. After graduation, Rosa taught her people in isolated schools around the state, returning to Rosebud when she was 21. Using her money and donations from blacks and whites, she built her school in 1912. Within a few weeks of opening she had 200 students.

Two years later, the boll weevil arrived. The dream-busting insect devoured the cotton crop and destroyed Alabama's economy. Rosa had to close her school, shuttering her dream.

What are some of the obstacles you have faced in pursuing God's will in your life? _____

How did you keep going? _____

What is the importance of prayer in facing tough times? How can you encourage others who are struggling?

Isaiah 41:13 _____

Romans 5:3–5 _____

But God.²

Rosa knew she needed help. With encouragement from Booker T. Washington, she wrote the Lutherans in St. Louis. Rev. C.F. Drewes heard her "Macedonian call" and sent pastors to serve her mission field. Rosa was the first African American Lutheran confirmed in rural Alabama — at Christ Lutheran Church in Rosebud on Palm Sunday 1916. Her Bible verse: *And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ* (Philippians 1:6).

Her life reflected the beauty of Paul's letter: As she heard the pure Gospel message, she was deeply committed to sharing this Gospel light with her people.

“ *I had an ambition to work for the Lord and my race. I had great enthusiasm to serve my people; my heart was overwhelmed with compassion for them. This compassion for my people has remained with me throughout life. Every morning I rose early, prayed the Holy Spirit be with me that day and through his Word to cause the pure Gospel message to touch the hearts of all I see ... So I set out on my mission tour, seeking souls for Jesus all along the way.* ”¹

She walked hundreds of miles every summer: through dense swampy forests, flooded creeks, and rain to reach the simple homes of elderly ex-slaves deep in the piney woods; through steamy-hot cotton fields that stretched for miles, to “reach my people and deliver a Gospel message.”

Often the poor she visited had no food, nor bed for sleeping. She walked on.

“ *My desire to work for Jesus grew stronger. My mental picture of all the little neglected children of my race was in my memory, and the Great Commission.* ”¹

Read: **John 20:21; Acts 13:47; 2 Thessalonians 2:14; 2 Timothy 4:5.**

What can we learn from Rosa about the importance of sharing our faith? _____

What “formula” did she follow? _____

What can we do to prepare to share the Good News? _____

What is the importance of prayer and Bible study through it all? _____

Rosa's love for her people transcended her physical illness, discomfort, and distress. Her love of the Gospel compelled her to share the Good News in the community and in her schools, where she encouraged her students to become pastors and teachers. She helped start a college to prepare Lutherans for service.

“ *Having a burning zeal to be a witness for Christ wherever I was needed, I answered the call. With all the hardships, I knew that I was about my father's business and Jesus was with me. Since the Lutheran Church has come ... with the pure Gospel and lighted these dark places, people's eyes have been opened to the true way of salvation. Just think what would have become of the 3,211 souls listed on our mission records if He had not sent the Lutheran Church!* ”

Just think ... what happens when your dream is so big only God can make it happen.

Closing: Say or sing together the final two verses of the opening hymn, followed by the Lord's Prayer.

¹Rosa Young's memoir, *Light in the Dark Belt*, is available from Concordia Publishing House (CPH). A children's book about her life, *Heroes of Faith: Rosa Young*, is also available.

²An African American religious saying. When talking about impossible odds, they remind others that they are counting everything.

Christine Scheele Weerts, a fourth generation Lutheran, is a member of the LWML at Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Prattville, Alabama. She has a Master's degree in Religion from Concordia University–Chicago and is the author of the June 2018 Portals of Prayers devotions, published by CPH.