

He Is Going Ahead of You

Mark 16:1-8

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The seven-year-old who lives in my house is turning into an avid reader. *Good Night Moon* led to *The Runaway Bunny* which led to some quirky books his aunt gave him about pet dinosaurs which led to the series du jour, the *Choose Your Own Adventure* collection. What excites my seven-year-old almost as much as being able to read a book with chapters (“*Look Dad, chapters!*”) is the thrill of participating in the outcome of the story he reads.

If you are not familiar with the *Choose Your Own Adventure* series, the concept goes like this: you start reading a story where you, the reader, are the main character, and once the author has introduced enough intrigue into the equation, you are forced to pick between two outcomes at the bottom of each page. The outcome you pick determines the shape of the rest of the story. Sometimes, the story takes a long time to read and ends well. Other times, if you choose the wrong adventure, the book ends quickly and badly. Like my seven-year-old, I, too, was enamored by the *Choose Your Own Adventure* series. And, in the company of the saints this morning, I must confess that as an elementary student, I had the habit of exploring each of my options at the bottom of the page by reading ahead to ensure that my adventure ended well.

In Mark’s gospel account of Easter Sunday, the adventure is wide open. After Jesus’ crucifixion, after his burial, on the third day, after the women arrive at the tomb carrying their spice, after they see that the tomb is empty, and after the angel of the Lord tells them that Jesus is raised, those women run away afraid. What happens next? Where does the adventure lead? Mark doesn’t say. He puts those choices squarely on the shoulders of those of us who hear this story. I know your Bibles show that there are more verses that pick up after I stopped reading the passage. But just about every Bible scholar will tell you that those verses, those endings, were written much later than the original gospel by people who couldn’t handle the kind of adventure that Mark encouraged by leaving the story unfinished. For Mark, the good news of Jesus Christ ends with an empty tomb and with fear. Period.

Have you ever wondered why the women were afraid? Sure, it’s not every day you see an angel or a vacant grave where there should be a body. I get that. Maybe that was the cause of their fear. Or, maybe it was because the women were worried that someone—the disciples, the Roman guards, the temple authority—would suspect that they were responsible for the disappearance of Jesus’ body. It could be. That would also make sense.

But today, on this reading of the Easter story, I’m convinced those women were afraid for a different reason. Along with one of my seminary professors, Cam Murchison, I think the reason the women were afraid upon seeing that empty tomb was because they knew that if Jesus wasn’t there, dead, laid out in the tomb, they knew that if Jesus really was ahead of them in Galilee like that angel told them, they knew that if this was the case, then their lives were going to be completely different than what they expected as they set out that morning.¹

Earlier that morning, before the light of the sun had painted the edges of the Jerusalem sky, Mary, Mary, and Salome started out for the tomb where Jesus was buried with their hearts full of grief. But, as anyone who has ever grieved can tell you, a heart full of grief is also a heart full of a lot of other emotions beyond sadness. It's not something we talk about much in polite company, but often one of those feelings wrapped into the grieving process is relief:

relief that our loved one no longer has to suffer,
relief to have closure,
relief of being free from the financial stress that comes along with caretaking, and
relief to have our lives back.

During his ministry, the life that Jesus laid out before his disciples, men and women, was demanding. Shot through Mark's gospel is evidence of this. Jesus encouraged his disciples to

deny themselves,
take up their crosses,
consort with the wrong kinds of people,
love the unlovable as well as the enemy,
practice forgiveness,
turn the other cheek,
reject the idolatry of money and possessions, and
display a radical obedience to God in the face of persecution and rejection.

Mark's gospel is clear that a life spent following Jesus was not for the feint of heart. This kind of life that Jesus called his disciples to lead was predicated upon a dream—a dream that one day the world would conform to God's vision. That vision is what the prophets wrote about. It was what Jesus talked about when he described the Kingdom of God. A commitment to that vision was the reason that Jesus went willingly to the cross and was crucified. And one reason why leading this kind of life demanded so much is that the world was a far cry from what God intended. One reason it was so difficult for the disciples to follow Jesus was that they had trouble seeing beyond the broken world right in front of them to the Kingdom about which Jesus taught. So Jesus' death, beyond being tragic and horrible and saddening, also meant that this dream was dead too, that what Jesus worked for and yearned for and believed was for nothing, that the dream had been defeated.

You can see how the death of that dream could lead the disciples to believe that they were off the hook; for if their teacher and Lord had failed at bringing about that dream, then certainly there was no point in their effort. That, I think, is the relief the women felt on the first Easter morning, the relief of knowing that their lives were, once again, their own, that the demands of Jesus' claim on their lives were gone, closed, locked away in the tomb, a tomb that much to their dismay was empty.

Instead of a body which they expected, these women who arrived at Jesus' tomb received a message: "You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He

has been raised. He is not here. He is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him.” But the women had been to Galilee. They knew that Galilee was full of disappointment. They knew that Galilee had problems, problems with injustice and bad schools and moral decay and poverty and violence.

The women had been to Galilee. They knew that in Galilee, being a disciple and being committed to God’s dream for the world would be demanding, almost impossibly so. So when the angel told them that Jesus had been raised and was ahead of them in Galilee, those women fled from the tomb and said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

We’ve been to Galilee. Even on Easter Sunday we know the world out there is full of problems and disappointments and despair and complicated questions and reasons to believe that God’s dream really has been defeated. So what is our response going to be to that angel? “You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised. He is not here. He is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him.” What will our response be?

Brian Blount says that fear is to be expected. In fact, he says that if we are not afraid of what is being asked of us as followers of the resurrected Jesus in the world that you and I live in, then we are not paying attention.²

A friend relayed to me a story about a community organizer in New York named Mike Gecan. Mike tells of meeting Icie Johnson—a tall, trim and regal young African-American woman who belonged to St. Paul Baptist Church in East New York. When they met around a challenge to the community one warm evening, with the streets loud and edgy and angry and threatening, Gecan asked Icie why she wasn’t afraid. “I *am* afraid,” she said, as she prepared to leave an evening training session and head for the bus stop two blocks away. “I *am* afraid,” she repeated. “Then why not wait for a ride or call a cab?” Gecan asked. “Because I’m not fearful,” she said, “not *full* of fear.” With that, she headed out into the street. “About an hour later,” Gecan writes, “after a training session, I [headed into the street] too. And, in a [way], I’ve been following Icie Johnson ever since.”³

So often we believe (and we preach) that Easter is about understanding, about knowledge, about whether we can wrap our minds around this mystery that is the empty tomb and what that means about the nature of God and the depth of God’s love for us. And that’s all right. Yet I want to tell you that Easter is also about courage. It is about risking participating in the adventure. Because that is what it takes to really follow Christ. Easter is about looking at the world clear eyed, full-force, with all of its wonder and all of its problems and remembering that the tomb is empty, that Jesus is alive; he has gone on ahead of us. That the dream is not defeated. That an adventure awaits. And, yes, it will take work. And, yes, it will exact cost. And, yes, it will be worth it. Because, after all, we are a people of the resurrection.

Notes

1 Cameron Murchison, “Mark 16:1-8, Pastoral Perspective,” *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 352, 354.

2 Brian Blount and Gary Charles, *Preaching Mark in Two Voices* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 261.

3 With thanks to the Rev. Jessica Tate (*The Well*, Austin, 2002), 22.