

Fools for Christ – Mark 16:1-8 – April 1, 2018 (Easter)

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When I was in junior high I started to play the role-playing game Dungeons and Dragons. I enjoyed taking on the persona of a medieval warrior or spell-caster fighting against all manner of strange monsters and seeking out treasure in broken down old castles. Now at the same time, I was also an avid reader of fantasy novels. I relished being transported into a world of dragons and mythology and following the characters as they fought to overcome the powers of darkness.

Now one day while at the bookstore, I discovered that my favorite pastimes, reading fantasy novels and playing fantasy games, were combined in a series of books entitled "Choose Your Own Adventure." In these books you'd be introduced to a storyline, and then after a few pages, you would be confronted with some kind of crisis, such as this: your party of adventurers has come face to face with a group of trolls, choose what to do next. And your choices would be something like: run away from the trolls, attempt to bribe the trolls with treasure, or fight the trolls. Depending upon what choice you made, you would then be directed to another part of the book where the adventure would continue. Each choice led you off into a completely new direction. I think today there are apps you can get on your smart phone that do the same kind of thing.

Now you are probably thinking that I was in geek heaven. And you would be wrong. As exciting as this concept was to me initially, when I started reading my first, and only, Choose Your Own Adventure book, I was disappointed. When it came to having to make the choices, I didn't want to choose just one. And here's why. I wanted to know what ALL the possible outcomes could be for every choice. I thought I was missing out on something by just picking one storyline. I figured I had bought the whole book, and I wanted to know what was in the whole book. I didn't like the possibility that I might miss something or some storyline might go unread. For me, it all seemed too ambiguous. When it came to reading a story, I wanted complete story lines. I didn't want choices. I wanted the tale to be spelled out and definite. Nothing left to chance.

The Choose Your Own Adventure books were stressful to my junior high brain. There were too many "what ifs" and "might have beens." I wanted to know exactly what was supposed to happen next and not have any loose ends.

Apparently, the later editors of Mark's Gospel felt the same way. Did you notice the way our gospel lesson ended this morning? Listen to it again. "So the women went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." And so ends Mark's gospel. Mark includes no appearances

of the resurrected Jesus to his disciples, no tearful reunions, no shouts for joy, no feelings of relief and wonderment. Just three terrified women, who come face to face with an odd messenger, at an empty tomb, and who run off, fearful and silent. Now isn't that a strange way to end a gospel?

So strange that later scribes decided to fix it. If you look at the end of Mark's Gospel, you'll find two additional endings – the shorter ending of Mark and the longer ending of Mark. These two different endings came later, in an attempt to make Mark's gospel more like the other gospels. It was as if some early editor came along and said, "We can't have this type of ending. We need a solid conclusion. Something to wrap up all the loose ends." As it stands, it sounds like a rather lame April Fool's joke.

Yet Mark ended his gospel there for a reason, and it is our challenge this morning to discover why. We have an advantage in that we already know the entire story. Isn't that why we are here today – to celebrate the greatest day in our Christian calendar, to sing for joy about the defining moment in our faith story, to experience all the wonder and excitement of the very first Easter morning?

But suppose we didn't know the end of the story – what if we experienced it from the perspective of the women in our story? They had every reason to run away from the tomb terrified and confused. These three women had watched in horror as the man they loved, admired and respected was subjected to a barbaric form of execution, his body placed in a tomb just before the Sabbath. And so, in their grief, these women came early on the morning following the Sabbath, having purchased spices for the anointing of his body. Facing great loss head on.

We can relate to moments like this, having experienced them in our own lives. Moments of shock, grief, disappointment, loss, betrayal? Midnight in the ER. The police showing up at your house. The voice of the doctor telling you it's not operable. The text message that simply says "It's over." Showing up to work to discover you no longer have a job. Oh yes, we understand these moments.

And so, in their great distress, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome came early to the tomb. Upon arrival, they discovered the stone, which they had worried about moving, had already been rolled away. Perhaps this added to their distress. Who was here, who moved the stone, what was going on here?

They entered the tomb and were greeted by what appeared to be a young man dressed in a white robe. He was a heavenly messenger, and they were alarmed at the sight of him sitting there. The messenger recognized their fear and attempted to calm them. And then

he told them some shocking news – three bits of information that would change their lives forever.

The first message focused on what had already happened. “He has been raised. He is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him.” The women were told, you’re looking in the wrong place. You are looking for him among the dead, but death could not hold onto him. This spot where they laid him, it’s empty. The tomb is empty. This is the key statement of our faith as Christians. The reality of human sin resulted in death, but Jesus changed all that. He conquered death, and we no longer need to fear it. Death does not have the last word. Jesus does.

So if Jesus is not here, where is he? The women wonder, we wonder. And the strange man gives the second message, the message about what is happening at that moment. He instructed them, “Go, tell his disciples that he is going ahead of you to Galilee.” Jesus is going ahead of you. His work is not done, it did not end at the cross, it did not end at the tomb, it did not even end at the resurrection. Jesus still has work to do in the world, and he is going on ahead, paving the way for all those who would follow him.

And then a third message – a message about what would happen later. He said, “There you will see him.” This is a message of hope and assurance. Whenever we see justice realized, wherever oppression is overturned, each time poverty is conquered, or when the marginalized have finally found their voice – on those occasions we will see Jesus at work in this world. “There you will see him.”

The message from the empty tomb this morning encompasses past, present, and future. Jesus has been raised, he is going ahead of you to Galilee, and you will see him. What we have discovered here today is there is no end to the Good News of Jesus Christ.

The women heard the words of the messenger, but still they ran away, terrified, and they kept silent about what they heard. But in light of their grief of having watched Jesus die, their confusion at arriving at an empty tomb, and their encounter with a strange young man who gives them a strange message, is it so surprising they react as they do?

And so I think that perhaps the way Mark chooses to close his gospel is not so strange after all. It is a story that has no end. Instead it’s a story that demands a response. What seems to be ambiguity on the part of the gospel writer is really a question to us. What do we do in light of what we have heard? Does it matter that Mark doesn’t tell us what the women do later on? Of course not. They didn’t remain silent. We know that. If they had, there would be no church, and you and I would not be in this place this morning or on any morning.

Mark gives us a gospel with an open ending, an ending that requires us to fill in the blanks. Like the Choose Your Own Adventure book that I read as an adolescent, I had to decide what came next in the story. Some poor choices might lead to the death of the adventurer. Other choices led to life. Though not overly profound, this little book helped to teach me that at many times, life is ambiguous, and what happens next is based on the choices we make, for good or for ill.

As much as you and I might dislike ambiguity, isn't that what we are faced with so often in our lives? Our lives are full of uncertainty. Full of choices which are often difficult to make. Full of choices where there are no simple answers. Full of choices that don't always lead to happy endings.

But the promise that we have this Easter morning is, Christ has been raised and he goes ahead of us, preparing the way for us. Whatever difficulties lie ahead, he is already there, and if we go to where he is, we will see him.

Mark's gospel closes with a choice, but not an ending, because there is no end to the good news of Jesus Christ. It's not about what these three women will do. Will they remain silent? Or will they tell the disciples and Peter? It's about more than that. It's about what we will do. Each one of us has been given this same message by the young messenger there at the tomb. Jesus is not there. He has been raised. He is going ahead of us to work in the world and we will see him if we follow him.

And that's the choice. We have been given the message, so what are we going to do about it? It's time to Choose Your Own Adventure.