“Off the Hook?”

Mark 16:1-8

April 1, 2018

Have you ever prepared for something for a long time and it didn’t work out? Perhaps it was a sport you excelled at in high school and you tried and tried to get better. You were decent at it and wanted a shot in college. You trained and you trained for hours. You showed up early and went home late. You watched film. You went to camps. Did everything you could. Maybe you got injured in your senior year and you could no longer compete. Maybe no college offered to take you. It was all over. You sat there taking off your gear and the end of the last game and it all sinks in. You would no longer play the game again. There were mixed feelings. You were devastated that you could no longer play the game that you love. Then some time goes by. A sense of strange relief sets in. It surprises you. Where did this come from?

Maybe you are or have been a caregiver for an ailing spouse or parent. You have to take care of every need of theirs 24/7. Need to help them get dressed. Need to help them go to the bathroom and bathe. Perhaps need to feed them with a spoon. You need to take them to various doctors appointments and keep track of all the overwhelming information. This is your life. Then while caring for them, you watch them slip away. Sometimes slowly and sometimes unexpected. Then the day arrives that they die. You arrange things one last time. You call the funeral home. You call all the relatives and friends. You buy the flowers, you talk with the pastor and arrange the funeral. You are in much grief. Your loved one is gone. But then, maybe a strange feeling sets in. You have a sense of relief. It makes you feel guilty. Now you have all of this time that you didn’t before. You don’t know what to make of it. Where did this come from? Why do you feel this relief?

On a cold Sunday morning in the fall of 1964, two white college students waited nervously on the edge of their college campus in Memphis for the arrival of an African American student from another college. The day before an interracial group participated in a nonviolence training class. From that meeting a series of interracial groups planned to attend worship in all-white congregations that Sunday. The two students stood there waiting for the arrival of their African American friend with whom they would attend worship, unannounced and most likely unwelcome. In a small way, it represented a youthful intention to take the cost of discipleship with new seriousness amid the justice challenges of the civil rights movement.

For reasons unknown, the African American student never showed up. The cost of discipleship for the African American student was much higher than the two white students. But the white students felt a shameful relief as he didn’t show. They could refocus and attend worship without risk. Where did that feeling come from?

The disciples had been summoned and had followed Jesus for three years. They never knew what was going to happen. They had no idea where they would go. They had no idea what Jesus was going to do, what miracle or teaching. They didn’t know where they would sleep. They didn’t know where their next meal would come from. Then Judas betrayed Jesus. Peter denied knowing Jesus. Then they heard that Jesus went to the cross and was executed. Will it happen like he said it would? Mary Magdalene and the other Mary had seen where the body was laid. He looked pretty dead to them. They were all trapped in this period of waiting. Doubt crept in. Jesus said all of this stuff about how he was the savior and he would rise again. Did it really sink in for them? Perhaps they started to waver. Not because they were tired. Not because they didn’t think it could happen. Just because of the waiting.

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary brought spices so they may go and anoint Jesus. They were caring for their dead teacher and friend. Caring for the dead was very important for the Jewish people. They would have done this for other friends or family who would have died. When the sun had risen they made their way over to the tomb. “Who will roll away the stone from us from the entrance of the tomb?” Who is going to handle the stone for us? They looked up after their wondering and saw the very large stone had been already rolled away. They entered the tomb and saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side. It scared the you know what out of them. A young man. In the other resurrection accounts in Matthew, Luke and John, those speaking to the people who came to the empty tomb were angles. Here it is just a young man. This word for young man shows up one other time in Mark. In Mark 14 after Jesus was betrayed by Judas a young man was following Jesus wearing nothing but a linen cloth. The group capturing Jesus caught ahold of the young man, but the linen cloth fell off and he ran away naked. The young man is now here in the tomb wearing a white robe. A nice allusion to Jesus wearing a white robe during the transfiguration. It as if this young man had a resurrection himself. Like a baptismal candidate he enters the rite naked and afraid, but comes out of the waters rising with Jesus, robed in a fresh gown and ready to proclaim the promise of Christ.

The young man proclaims, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised, he Is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” 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.

That is the end. According to most scholars. If you look at your bibles you can see that there are two alternate endings. Most scholars believe that these were added later to tidy up the passage. The way it ends now, it is unsatisfying. They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. We like nice endings. We watch romantic comedies for the ending, for the title couple after all the trials and tribulations they go through to fall in love and get married. That sort of ending is not what we get here. Don Juel, a former professor at Luther Seminary, was having a discussion about the ending of Mark in class. Many students were arguing that the ending of Mark was actually upbeat. One student raised her hand and said, “I read the ending over several times last evening in preparation for class. I thought about it and I cried.” There was something about that experience, an honesty, an ability to read with defenses down, a willingness to acknowledge disappointment that changed the course of the discussion.

There are no satisfying endings in life or in Mark. This passage ends with hope and disappointment. Obviously, the women had to tell someone, or we would not have the story of the resurrection. Hear this parable from great author Franz Kafka. A man comes and begs for admittance to the Law, but is kept out by the doorkeeper, the first of a long succession of doorkeepers, of aspect even more terrible, who will keep the man out should the first one fail to do so. The man, who had assumed that the Law was open to all, is surprised to discover the existence of this arrangement. But he waits outside the door, sitting year after year on his stool, and conversing with the door keeper whom he bribes, though without success. Eventually when he is old and near death, the man observes an immortal radiance from the door. As he dies, he asks the doorkeeper how it is that he alone has come to this entrance to seek admittance to the Law. The answer is, “This door was intended only for you. Now I am going to shut it.” The outsider though someone had intended to let him in, or anyway provided a door for him, remained outside.

This story and Mark’s gospel have some similarity. Mark’s gospel generates much expectancy. Apparently insignificant beginnings drive toward big conclusions despite the obstacles that stand in the way. As in Kafka’s parable, there is disappointment. The world where the reader is invited is one where people fail. Longed for endings don’t happen. Loose ends are not tied up. The difference between the stories is closure. In Kafka’s parable. The door is shut. The ending is clear, we will remain outside the door forever. Mark prohibits that closure. There is no stone at the mouth of the tomb. Jesus is out and on the loose. The door is open. There is disappointment as the women flee but hopes that the group of followers will be faithful.

We have a need for closure, structure and control. Mark’s gospel argues that out lack of enlightenment and bondage arises from attempts to box God in or out of experience. Jesus cannot be confined by the tomb or limited by death. Throughout Jesus’ ministry he is tearing away the boundaries. God cannot be kept at arms length. We don’t even have Jesus at the end of the story. There is no guarantee that we can have a nice promise from him. Our defenses will prove insufficient and we will not have the last word.

He is going ahead of you to Galilee, there you will see him, just as he told you. The disciples wouldn’t expect this, or maybe they just tried to put it out of mind. Perhaps after those three years with him, they are exhausted. They can now return to their families. They can stay in one place for a period of time. Maybe they planned to go back to their previous lives, fishing or collecting taxes. They felt guilty. Peter feels extremely guilty for denying Jesus. Imagine if he had gone back to the Sea of Galilee and was fishing. He feels guilt, but also relief. Then walks up the women. They were terrified and amazed, but they went and told Peter. Jesus is coming here. A moment of hope and fear. Peter is on the hook. What will Jesus say to me? I betrayed him. How can we ever be reconciled?

How can we ever be reconciled? There are times in our lives where we doubt Jesus. We doubt what happened. How can this be? And when we realize it, we are silent. And that is okay. That is exactly what the women did. What words could the women have said in their experience? What words could we have said? There are none. And that is okay. This is the greatest mystery of our faith. That Christ has died, Christ has risen and Christ will come again. God is on the loose. The tomb is open. There is nothing we can do about that. Can we sit in the awe and wonder of what God has done? This resurrection account from Mark is not the triumphant trumpet blasting account we are used to. It is filled with confusion and fear. But maybe that makes it more palatable. More realistic. How can there be resurrection where there is still death? That is the question that we will always grapple with. But here, we have the strange story delivered by a mysterious young man to a couple of women. Will anyone believe them? Will we? The door is open, he is risen. He is going ahead of us to Galilee. Will we meet him there? We are still on the hook. The hook that God can never be trapped by our own feelings and wants. God will not be put in a box or in the tomb. See the open door. Can you see it? God is on the loose. Amen.

**Isaiah 25:6-9**

6 On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples  
   a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines,  
   of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wines strained clear.   
7 And he will destroy on this mountain  
   the shroud that is cast over all peoples,  
   the sheet that is spread over all nations;   
8 he will swallow up death for ever.  
Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces,  
   and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,  
   for the Lord has spoken.   
9 It will be said on that day,  
   Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us.  
   This is the Lord for whom we have waited;  
   let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

## Mark 16:1-8

## The Resurrection of Jesus

16When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. 2And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. 3They had been saying to one another, ‘Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?’4When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. 5As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. 6But he said to them, ‘Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. 7But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.’ 8So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.