

Text: Mark 16:1-8

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, ‘Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?’ When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But 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. 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.’ So 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.

Sermon:

As a father of a seven-year-old, I continue to marvel at the challenges and remember why parents often have children when they’re younger. I also continue to marvel at joys that I never could have expected and think I might appreciate them a little bit more. One of the greatest gifts is to see how Jake encounters things that brought me great joy as an older dad—some of those things that I used to do have had the chance quite a bit since I did them. One of the things that he and I are loving right now, and it pushes back that time even later than the light is already pushing it, and that is a thing called, “*Choose your own Adventure*” book. Anybody here remember those? Is there anybody here who loved to do those?

They were my favorite; they were usually small books and the way they worked is that you were dropped into the middle of an adventure—an escapade—a journey—sometimes with things like pirates, and at other times in hot air balloons, and you would come to the end of a page and it would ask you a question. Are you going to turn this or that way? And if you turn this way, turn to page 64, and if you turn that way, then turn to page 32. Part of the joy was flipping to the page to see what would happen next. Well, Jake now has *Choose your own Adventures* on his I-Pad. And instead of some random or general one, they are now themed. We are currently working on a *Star Wars* one because he loves *Star Wars* right now.

There are so many more choices. And instead of searching through to find that next page—the anticipation is greatly shortened because now you just press the link and there you are, seeing pictures all along the way. I remember how much I loved *Choose your own Adventures* while riding in the car, until I made that choice and then gleefully flipped through the pages, only to see two lines on that page that suddenly informed you that you just made a catastrophic decision; your balloon just crashed, or the pirates just chopped off your head, and then written all in capital letters were the words, THE END. To which, of course, if you were like me and had two sisters, then they gleefully shouted, “Good, it’s my turn!” And there it went. It was devastation—the ending of something that was bringing joy. I can only imagine on so much more of a profound level how the women were feeling that day at the tomb. They had been on such a great life-giving adventure with the one they knew as Jesus, and to them on that morning as they set out and even worse—when they discovered the empty tomb, it had to feel like those same words, THE END or maybe even DEAD END were flashing them in the face.

In clergy circles, I am odd for many reasons, but this morning it comes to mind because I love the Gospel of Mark. It is by far my favorite; part of it is because it is a *Choose your own Adventure* book in many ways. It is fast paced; every other paragraph begins with “Immediately,” or “And then,” or “They set out.” But the real brilliance of Mark’s Gospel is that he leaves out too many details; in fact I mean he leaves out just the right amount of details, while the other Gospels may wax poetic about a story for two chapters describing exactly who was there, what their names were, who they were related to, what the weather was like, what they were wearing, and everything else in order to put you in the picture, Mark’s brilliance is that he leaves all that out in many ways so that we become part of the picture and also that we find the picture in our heads and in our hearts. There is scarce a breath in Mark; every single verse seems to have a choice to be made.

Mark is always eager for you to flip the page, to see what happens next, and the women and the disciples and all of them had been following Jesus—the one who always made the choice—and always made the choice to greater life. Throughout those years of his ministry, there never was an end; instead of tons and tons, there were always new beginnings. There are stories where Jesus healed everyone who came; there are stories where Jesus’ teaching was hugely challenging, and yet the people left astonished. There were those moments where they had a couple of loaves and some fish and thousands of people; you would think that you’d turn the page, and it would say, THE END, and everyone was hungry and they left—thank you, but not even there.

When the waves were rough, he calmed the waters. When he had to get to his disciples in the boat, he walked on them. He welcomed in the outsiders and those who were the most marginalized. And he even was bold enough, if you remember all the way to last week—to ride into Jerusalem on a donkey. Jesus always made the choices, and the disciples were gleeful to flip the page and to see what new adventure, what new life and what new healing was just around the corner.

If you read your Bible, you will know that the words that Jim read this morning are actually the way they think the Gospel of Mark originally ended. The women were bold enough to go out there, loving enough to care—encountered this surprise that was beyond them, and we think that the Gospel of Mark originally ended and they fled—telling no one about anything that they found. You’re smart people; obviously I don’t need to tell you that they told somebody because it appeared in the Gospel, but the brilliance of Mark’s ending is that it begs the question, What would we do? It begs the question that even when we’re overwhelmed—if you heard the story where the angel says, “Don’t be afraid; everything is unfolding exactly as Jesus told you it would. Just keep following this story, and it will be good.” In this moment when they suddenly had to make the choice—when Jesus wasn’t there, and they had to make the choice, we cannot blame them for it suddenly feeling a bit too much; suddenly all those decisive answers and clear boundaries were given way to ambiguity where they had to figure out what was going on; I don’t know if you can relate to any of that right now.

We’re at a crossroads in this wilderness journey of the pandemic. Looking back on it, I found it much easier on the way in. They told us to stop gathering, so we did. We figured out how to stream our service and we did. They told us to wash our hands, and I’ve never washed my hands

so often. They told us to wear masks, and we did, and then I've been overjoyed to see beautiful masks popping forth on people's faces as a sign of blessing. Do you remember—now, you may not have—but I remember the first time when Jon came home with eight hundred dollars worth of groceries, because we were convinced we were never going shopping again? Do you know what we did? We had an assembly line in the kitchen, and we used the Clorox wipes to wipe down everything. We didn't wipe down the fruit because I thought that was gross, but we wiped down everything.

We figured out, or at least we survived remote everything—remote school, remote work, remote Thanksgiving; it was hard, but in some ways the choices were made for us. Today, I wonder if we're feeling a little bit like those women in Mark—new life bursting forth, spring coming and vaccinations are now out there, we seem to be learning more even if the numbers are still climbing. Be safe, people. There is a chance for us to overcome our fear just like those women did. And someday people will tell stories about how we came out of this thing in the right way—with hope and love and purpose and peace.

Jake's books on his I-Pad do two things that I wish mine had. First, instead of saying THE END, it ends with some nice statement, like "This adventure has drawn to a close. Go back and see if you can help Luke and Leah do better next time." It's a little better than THE END, but here's the fundamental thing that I want to leave you with is that if you do well and choose your own adventure, you need to know how Luke and Leah thought. And every time a question comes to them, if you answer the way Luke or Leah would have answered it, you'll be going down the right path. Jakey is much better at it than I am. I watched those movies dozens of times, but his brain soaks up everything, and he goes, "Oh, Luke would have done that." And he's right.

Here's what you need to remember, because I think it's what made the women overcome their fear. They remembered who Jesus was—in their coming out, in their re-engaging the world, in their finding new beginning—what they did was they thought back to what Jesus would have chosen because he always made the right choice. So as we come out of this pandemic, and I hope you'll say these things out loud with me, I want you to remember what Jesus remembered. Jesus remembered the prophets. He remembered Micah and the question, "What does the Lord require of you people? To do—justice, and to love—mercy—and to walk—humbly with your God." If you remember that teaching, you're off to a great start. If in everything you do you remember that teaching, then resurrection is on the way.

If you remember when that young man walked up to Jesus and asked what are the two things I really need to know? And Jesus gave him the two commandments: love God with all your heart and all your mind and all your soul and number two—Love your neighbor as yourself. If you remember that, you will live into resurrection and you will become an Easter people. If you remember when Jesus was so busy with the world and big things going on and there were those kids who wanted to see him, and the disciples said no, don't bother him with things like kids. Do you remember what Jesus said? "Let them come to me for they are the reason I am here." Jesus said, "How you treat the little ones—how you treat the oppressed—that's how you treat me." If you want to be resurrection people, if you want to choose your own adventure the way that Jesus did, then remember that.

In John's Gospel, Jesus said, "I give you a new commandment—that you love one another as I have loved you," and don't just love your friends but love your enemies. If you can remember that, you will be an Easter people; your great adventure will continue long and hard. In every single Gospel when Jesus needed time to gather his thoughts, when he was about to make a big decision or even in places where things were beyond him, what did he do every time? He prayed. So if you don't remember a thing and you are facing something beyond you, the best thing you can do is sit down and pray, and if you do that—you will be an Easter people. Your adventure will go on, and it will be great.

Also, never forget that after today—after the resurrection, when he was leaving, he said, "Friends I will send you my Spirit. I will send you the one to cheer you on and to help you remember all of this. Don't forget it." Like those women, we will face challenges so far beyond us, but I know that if we remember these things it won't just be us making choices in the face of impossible odds; it will be Jesus making those choices right alongside us, holding our very hand.

The pandemic has taught us that this moment right now is a gift. Every breath is a new chance; none of us know how long we have yet to draw breath on this planet, but what we do know is that we need not fear any moment, even and when we stop breathing. Instead we should live every single moment to its fullest because on this day—this Easter day—we know that we will never turn the page to find two sentences with the words, **THE END**. Because with God, there never is. On Easter we are truth-tellers and we know that the impossible becomes possible; even things like this cross stubbornly become transformed. Friends, we know this: Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! We know this: Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Hallelujah!

Amen.

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