

April 1, 2018 Easter Sunrise Service – 6:30  
Mark 16:1-7: Worth Getting Up For

I used to think I was a morning person. I don't mind waking up early, or at least my idea of early. I like the peace, quiet and serenity that the early morning brings. For many years my idea of retirement was to wake up at 6:00 every morning, brew a fresh pot of coffee, and read the morning paper while I drank my first cup. Now the newspaper costs a fortune. And I'm learning too much caffeine isn't good for me. So I am working on another plan.

As I was saying, I used to think that I was a morning person. Until I moved here and got to know so many people involved in farming, or raising poultry or livestock, or dairy cows, or all of the above. They are morning persons. They get up at 4 or 5 am. Long before the sun rises. By 8:00 they have done more work than I will do all day.

I can't complain about being tired any more, at least not around church people. I went to visit a member of the congregation earlier this week. That particular day I had to get up at 4:45, which was way earlier than I usually get up. I was struggling to stay awake. At one point in the conversation he asked me how I doing. I wanted to say something about being tired, but I knew I would get zero sympathy. This individual is almost 90 years old. And he has been getting up at 4 am every day since he was 10.

People like this individual and others like him aside, I have noticed something that I think is true of everyone, whether you are a half-way morning person like me, or not a morning person by any stretch of the imagination, there are things we all consider to be "worth getting up for." I'm not talking about 6:30 or 7:00. I'm thinking closer to 4:30 or 5. I can think of a few examples that I would put in that category.

The church I pastored in Elizabeth City was very involved in competitive bass fishing. Many of the members participated in a nationwide organization called Fishers of Men. And the church itself held its own tournaments once a month for most months of the year. Participating in these tournaments was the pastoral thing to do. I had no choice. How many husbands can say to their wives, "If I want to keep my job, I have to go fishing all day today"?

Of course, this required me to get up very early in the morning. Sometimes as early as 4:00 in order to get to the location and get the boat in the water before first light. But it was just amazing. Hanging out with the guys. Being out on the water. Watching the sun rise. Speeding through narrow canals at 60 mph. And then there was catching the fish. My partner and I even got third place in a tournament once. As tired as I was at the end of the day I often found myself thinking, "This was worth getting up for."

Another part of my job as a pastor is visiting with people before they undergo surgery. For reasons I don't understand, the hospitals around here like to schedule surgeries very early in the morning. It's typical for a person to tell me that they have to be at the hospital at 5:30 in the morning. If it is at one of the hospitals in Greensboro, or maybe Chapel Hill, that is at least thirty-minute drive. So you can expect to get up no later than 4:30. I don't show up until about 6:15. I like to wait until they have the embarrassing gown on and the shower cap looking thing. But that still makes for an early morning.

The conversations I get to have with people during those times are great for building relationships. I don't know what it is about it but you can really get to know someone well in a hospital room. But the thing that amazes me most is God's calming presence. We all bow our heads together, sometimes a nurse or doctor will be there too, and we will pray for God's healing touch, his comfort, and his peace. As I'm walking away from the hospital, starting to feel the effect of getting up so early, I find myself thinking, "That was worth getting up for."

It's pretty early in the morning right now. I'm guessing it is probably about 6:45. The official sunrise won't happen until 7:10, but we can already see the sky getting brighter. Many of you probably got up today at least a littler earlier than usual. I know I did. But being in this place. Being together with family, and church family, and friends. Joining together with all of you in a few moments in singing one of the great hymns of the church. And celebrating the resurrection of Jesus. I don't feel tired right now, but I know I will. Probably around 11:30, right in the middle of my sermon. But I also know I'm going to think to myself, "It was worth getting up for."

I imagine that's what Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome were thinking to themselves as they reflected upon Jesus' resurrection. They went to the tomb, "very early on the first day of week." I doubt they woke up with any excitement on the first Easter morning. If they had alarm clocks in those days they probably would have wanted to hit snooze, many times. They were fearful, anxious, overwhelmed with grief.

But they got up anyway, out of obligation, or a sense of loyalty, or because they just couldn't sleep. And they went. They went to anoint the body of Jesus. The body of Jesus was what they fully expected to find, so long as they could find someone to remove the stone blocking the entrance to the tomb. That was the only thing they were concerned about. But when they got there they saw it had been rolled away. The body of Jesus was missing. They were greeted by a young man in a white robe with the news that Jesus had been raised.

Their first reaction was shock, or fear, or more likely a little bit of both. The truth of what happened took awhile to sink in. But eventually it did. I'm sure they were tired, and weary, and altogether exhausted. But I have no doubt in my mind. They were thinking. That was worth getting up for.

Following Jesus is not always easy. It wasn't easy for these three women. It wasn't easy for the original twelve disciples. It's not always easy for us. Maybe this Season of Lent was particularly challenging for you because you decided to give something up, or take something on, that proved to be quite a struggle. You may be tired, but I hope you would say this morning, on Easter Sunday, "It was worth getting up for."

Every thing you do for God. Every cent, every second you give. Every talent you share. Every selfless act of service. Every discipline you embrace. Every tough decision you make. Every sacrifice you make. It may make you tired, or weary, and altogether exhausted. But I know when you see your risen savior face to face you will say, "it was all worth getting up for."

April 1, 2018: Easter Sunday (Year B)  
Mark 16:1-8: Choose Your Own Adventure

When I was a kid I loved to read. I would read anything I could get my hands on. Cereal boxes while I was eating breakfast. Shampoo bottles while I was taking a shower. Air freshener cans while I was anticipating needing some air freshener. As I said, I read all kinds of things. And of course I read books. Lots of books. There was a certain kind of book I remember reading. Maybe you read some of these yourself. They were called “Choose Your Own Adventure Books.”

Unlike most works of fiction, where you take the position of an outsider looking in, and read about someone else’s adventures, the books in this series were written in the second person. In other words, you would assume the role of the main character in the story; a private detective, or a spy, or something like that. You would read a few pages. Then you would be presented with a choice of two, or even three options. And for whatever choice you made there was a corresponding page you were supposed to turn to. You would turn to that page, read a few pages, and the process would repeat itself, and so on. What this amounted to was a story with a number of possible endings, from as few as eight to as many as forty-four.

There are now at least two different book series that use this format, but the author who is given credit for coming up with the concept, Edward Packard, said the idea came to him one night while he was telling a bedtime story to his two daughters. The stories he told them usually revolved around a fictional character named Pete, and his adventures. But he was running out of things for Pete to do. So on this particular night he asked his daughters what they would do if they were Pete. Both of his daughters suggested different paths for Pete to take. They explored each one, and each one led to a very different conclusion. As Packard observed how excited his daughters were to participate in the outcome of the story, he wondered if other children would feel the same way. And the rest, as they say, is history.

It’s easy to understand why the idea of choosing your own adventure would be so appealing to children. Children have very little say in the direction their lives will take, not to mention even what they do on a daily basis, like what they eat for breakfast, and when they go to bed. Being able to determine someone’s destiny, even a made-up character in a book, probably feels very empowering to them. But adults would not quite as interested in something like that. Or would they?

Even as adults we can sometimes feel like our adventures are chosen for us. Things happen that are beyond our control. Decisions are made for us without us being consulted first. We find ourselves in circumstances not of our own making. The idea of being able to choose our own adventure, or the idea of determining our own destiny, is every bit as appealing to us as it is to children. I think the ending of Mark’s gospel is evidence of that.

If you brought a Bible with you this morning, go ahead and turn to Mark 16. If you didn’t bring a Bible you could probably find one in the pew in front of you.

Each of the resurrection accounts in all four gospels follow the same basic pattern, at first. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome went to Jesus’ tomb early on a Sunday morning to anoint his body. When they arrived they found the stone that was covering the entrance had been rolled away. There was a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting to the right of the entrance, and Jesus’ body was missing. Naturally they frightened by all this. You or I would be too.

The young man tried to reassure them by telling them that Jesus had been raised from the dead. They were to share this news with Peter and the other disciples, and then go to Galilee, where they could see their risen Lord for themselves. Sounds good so far, but then the story takes an unexpected turn. The three women, scared to death and not sure what to make of it all, flee from the tomb, and say nothing to anyone. That's where we stopped reading. It doesn't seem like much of a conclusion.

If you look in your Bible you will notice, after verse 8, somewhere in the margin, or in a sub heading, or footnote, there will be some indication that there are two endings to Mark's gospel, usually identified as the shorter ending and the longer ending.

The shorter ending has the women following through with the young man's request and telling Peter and the disciples. And then there is this flowery description of Jesus sending out all the disciples to proclaim the gospel.

The longer ending describes additional appearances of the risen Jesus and a more detailed account of him commissioning the disciples, including this really strange part about handling poisonous snakes, which, if you are a visitor, is not something we do in our church...on the first Sunday of the month.

My point is, we have two endings to choose from, two options to pick from as far as understanding how the disciples responded to the news of the resurrection. As modern-day disciples we put ourselves in their shoes. This is our kind of adventure. How will we respond to the news of the resurrection? Which option will we choose? Maybe we ought to ask ourselves, "Which option is right one?" According to the vast majority of Biblical Scholars, neither one is the right one. In the earliest, most authentic, most credible copies of Mark's gospel, the eighth verse is the last verse. The other two endings were added much later, possibly decades, if not centuries, later. But why?

It's really impossible to know for certain. But I would suggest to you it might have something to do with our human desire to choose our own adventure, to write our own stories. We prefer nice, happy, riding off into the sunset, storybook endings, over the open-ended, unknown, uncertain, sorry excuse for a conclusion that Mark offers.

It is possible that Mark's actual ending is somehow lost to us, that he did not end his gospel with verse 8. Mark would have known that the women did eventually report the news of Jesus' resurrection to Peter and the disciples. And that Jesus did appear to them multiple times over the course of the next forty days, until he ascended into heaven to be with his Heavenly Father. But the evidence suggests that Mark's choice to conclude his Gospel at verse 8 was intentional, perhaps as his way of communicating that idea that faith in Jesus is itself an adventure, full of unknowns, uncertainty, and doubt, even terror, amazement and fear.

This is consistent with the whole of Mark's gospel. On many occasions, when Jesus heals someone, or when the disciples witness Jesus perform some other miraculous sign, or when the disciples figured out Jesus' identity, Jesus told them to keep it a secret. Why? There were likely several reasons, but at the top of the list was the fact that following Jesus is not about going down the paths that we would choose, but going down the path he chooses for us, embracing life as he defines it, not as we would like it to be.

We do have a choice to make when it comes to faith in Jesus. That was the focus of last week's sermon. We don't follow Jesus on accident. It is something we do on purpose. But the adventure of faith that it leads to, is not a story that we get to write ourselves. The way the story unfolds is not up to us. It is not a choose your own adventure book. It is up to God. And we have no way of knowing where this

adventure will take us. Sometimes the uncertainty can lead to doubt, anxiety, even fear. But we can choose this adventure with confidence, hope, and even joy, because we follow a risen Savior. And that makes all the difference.

There are so many things in life that are completely and totally out of our control. But we can all choose who or what we put our faith in. We can put our faith in ourselves, and in our accomplishments. Another word for this is humanism, which, by the way, is now officially recognized as a religion. Although it has been one all the time. We can put our faith in another human being, or an idea, or a cause, or some other material thing, like money. But all those things will pass away. So we choose to put our faith in the one person who death could not hold captive, and in his love, love that could not die. We cannot choose what the future holds, but we can choose who holds our future. And there is no better person to entrust our future too than Jesus, and his love for us...the one thing that lives forever.

I don't know who or what each of you has chosen to put your faith in. But I hope and pray you would all put your faith in Jesus. And not just today, but everyday.