

“Flee or Follow?”
Mark 16:1-8
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But do you believe it *really* happened? That’s a question I get every Easter. Usually, I dodge it. On one side of that question are those of you who want me to say directly, no it didn’t happen. Armed with historical facts that show the many resurrection stories about people other than Jesus circulating in the world around the same time, as well as the scientific worldview that cannot allow for divine loopholes in the laws of nature, you implore me to tell the truth. The resurrection story is a metaphor, you say, about God’s ability to overcome evil or hardship or injustice. The resuscitation of a corpse (or something like it) is not the story. The triumph of love in the universe and in our lives; the triumph of God’s justice over the domination systems of our time – *that’s the true story*.

On the other side are those of you who want me to say, if it didn’t actually happen, then you can’t say that love or justice actually triumphs outside of fairy tales. If God doesn’t win in the real, historical flesh and blood life of Jesus, what makes you think God can prevail in the actual, brutal world that we live in? What good are fairy tale love and justice if they only operate *inside of myths*? You, too, want me to tell the truth, as it comes to us from Scripture.

The problem is that Mark’s Gospel doesn’t seem all that interested in this question, at least not the way we usually ask it. “Do you believe” is a question we ask as if we are located outside of the story, as if we are critics reviewing someone else’s performance: disinterested viewers of someone else’s Gospel act. “Do you believe” is a question we can rate or review, accept or reject. Like or dislike. Swipe left or right. “Do you believe” is a question that solicits little more than our intellectual assent, most often divorced from our action.

Mark’s Gospel is much more confrontational than that. Instead of “do you believe” it asks a question that demands a real-life choice: “will you flee Jesus or will you follow him?”¹ Unlike the question of belief, Mark’s question is one that you cannot answer only once and be done with it. It’s a question would-be followers of Jesus face repeatedly in Mark’s Gospel. From the moment the disciples are called to follow Jesus in the very first chapter of Mark, to the moment the last few of the faithful flee the tomb, it’s the question that haunts us, that unnerves us, that confronts us from inside our own story.

When God attacks not your enemies but the very system of retribution that creates “us” and “them” categories – will you flee Jesus or will you follow him? When God challenges not just our stinginess, but the whole system of fear that drives us to put the security of some above the wellbeing of others, will you flee

¹ Ched Myers coined this question, succinctly summarizing the larger discipleship question that Mark elicits from its readers in *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus*, (New York: Orbis Books), 1988, 2002, p. 401.

Jesus or will you follow him? When God invites us to leave behind the stereotypes that we create about other people because of their race, or because of who they voted for in the last election, or because of their immigration status, will you flee Jesus or will you follow?

I hesitate to raise Mark's question on *this* morning since confrontation is not what most people sign up for when they go to church on Easter. Some of you come because you were taught that Jesus raised from the dead is mostly about hope for an afterlife. Others come because of the flowers, or the music, and the seasonal hope that spring might get here this year. Still others of you are here because someone in your family expects you to be with them in church on Easter Sunday and if listening to a preacher drone on for 20 minutes is their idea of happiness, it's a sacrifice you're willing to make. Flee or follow is a little more intense than what you expected before brunch.

Apparently it was just as intense for the early church, since sometime after Mark was written someone tacked on an entirely different ending that tries to turn everything back into a question of belief.²

But don't be fooled. Flee or follow is the question that Mark puts before all disciples. Will you flee Jesus or will you follow knowing what you know about the suffering that Jesus' way of justice sometimes entails? Knowing what you know about the way of service that Jesus commends? Knowing what you know about the way of forgiveness Jesus commands? Will you flee or will you follow?

And while it's obvious that following Jesus is the right answer in Mark, nobody in his Gospel seems able to live up to the task. The men flee *at the crucifixion* – just when they realize that following might involve suffering. The women flee *at the tomb* – either when they realize that Jesus is not where they left him or that he's back in Galilee where it all began. Nobody demonstrates that they can follow Jesus completely in Mark's Gospel. Everybody winds up fleeing in fear.

Which makes Mark's Gospel completely out of sync with the way we celebrate Easter. There's no actual appearance of the resurrected Jesus - just testimony from some random dude dressed in white. There's no promise of everlasting life. No model disciples. There is only an empty tomb, the command to go and tell that Jesus is back in Galilee - back doing his work in the world, and the fear that no disciple of Jesus seems able to shake.

Which makes me wonder if the real question confronting all of us on Easter is not do you believe in the resurrection but where is your fear causing you to flee Jesus instead of follow him? Does your fear cause you to flee when you realize that God's reign is going to cost you something – the way you've arranged your life around too many things that can't bring you happiness, or around our region's real estate patterns insulating you from relationships that could help free us from our racist past? Does your fear cause you to flee when you realize that new life means leaving behind the life you are currently living – leaving the grief of distant losses that you've become attached to, forsaking the habits that have worn ruts so deep in

² Most scholars agree that this "shorter" ending of Mark (vs. 1-8) is the original. Myers calls the "longer" ending (vs. 9-20) an "imperial rewrite," a case study in the church's attempts to domesticate the Gospel. *Binding the Strong Man*, pp. 401-404.

your path they've become difficult to escape, parting from the routines that have locked you into a prison you're afraid to leave behind? Where is your fear causing you to flee?

It's like Mark believes that fear is the foundational human problem that stands between us and the world Jesus births into being. *It's not death, but our fear of it. It's not suffering, but our fear of it. It's not new life, but our fear of it.* Jesus promises freedom and courage and life to anyone who would follow but our fear causes us to flee instead.

And I don't know if we can even hear Mark's message in the world that we're all living in. Because our world is built on fear. Fear of the immigrant. Fear of the Black male. Fear of the police officer. Fear of the Muslim. Fear of the President. Fear of the person who is homeless, or addicted, or mentally ill. Fear of the next 9/11, the next Parkland, the next Pulse, the next uprising. Fear of not having enough, not being enough, not risking enough. Catalogue any day and note the number of times that fear creeps into your living, flashes across your screens, headlines your newspaper.

I don't know if we can hear Mark's message of following Jesus. I know I've never seen it lived 100% of the time. None of the disciples answer it satisfactorily 100% of the time. But maybe Mark isn't looking for 100% compliance. He certainly isn't adding shame on top of fear that is real for all of us at least some of the time. I think Mark is confronting us with the very real possibility that the fear that makes our world go round won't deliver the safety it promises, can't deliver the security that we crave. Disciples who flee Jesus because of the fear of suffering in his name, just end up huddled together in more fear. Disciples who flee from the knowledge that our work isn't done until the world is changed or we die trying just end up isolated in more fear. *In following Jesus we might risk suffering or even dying, but when we flee in fear we risk never really living.*

And while I've never seen any disciple follow Jesus 100% of the time, I've seen some make that choice when it seemed to count. The child survivors of Parkland and their March for Our Lives allies fearless in their calls for action. The protesters in Sacramento unafraid to demand that we all face the truth of our racial bias, the danger it poses to Black people, the inequality it breeds standing in the way of true community. Malala – a little girl – shot in the head by adults, refusing to stop her struggle for justice for girls and women in Pakistan and across the world, returning home this week in spite of more threats. “I told myself,” she said in her book, “Malala, you have already faced death. This is your second life. Don't be afraid — if you are afraid, you can't move forward.” Dr. King, on the night before he died almost 50 years ago this week, roused from his rest in a Memphis hotel room speaking off the cuff to a congregation of Jesus' followers: “I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. So I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything, *I'm not fearing any man.* Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.” They made the choice to reject their fear or at least not to be held captive by it.

And if belief is useful to Mark at all, it's here at this critical decision-point that we face in big and small ways each day. Can you trust Jesus enough to risk following him instead of your fear? When you know that the life that God is promising to you

and to the world is not without risk, is not without danger, may not come without suffering, can you trust Jesus enough to risk following?

Mark doesn't tell us what happens to the disciples – the men who flee the cross, the women who flee the tomb. Mark doesn't finish their story and I think that's intentional. This is our story now. We can't remain outside of it. We have to decide whether to flee Jesus or follow him.

We don't have to wonder where to find him. Mark tells us. Not in a tomb. Not in some distant heaven, according to Mark. But Back in Galilee. Back at the healing. Back announcing a different way. Back with the poor. Back agitating the rich to leave behind their fear. Back with the outsiders. Back offending the keepers of the status quo. Always with an invitation to come and join him there. Join him in real loving, real hoping, real living freed from fear.