



Senior Minister: Rev. Thomas G. Carr  
Minister of Music: Mr. Bruce M. Hector

90 North Main Street, West Hartford, Connecticut 06107

Tel: (860) 521-9460 Fax: (860) 521 1855

## **On the Loose**

**Mark 16: 1-8**

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In her book, *An American Childhood*, Annie Dillard tells the story of the time she was seven years old, growing up in suburban Pittsburg, on a winter morning when six inches of snow had fallen. She was with a group of neighborhood kids, standing in a front yard on a well traveled street, making snowballs and throwing them at the cars passing by. A black Buick slowly came down the street and the group quickly spread out, waited, then fired away. "A soft, fresh snowball hit the driver's windshield," Dillard writes, "right before the driver's face. It made a smashed star with a hump in the middle." They had often hit their target, but this time, much to their surprise, the car pulled over and stopped. "It's wide black door opened;" says Dillard. "A man got out of it running." Here's a slightly edited version of the rest of the story in the author's words:

"He didn't even stop to close the car door. He ran after us and we ran away from him. He was in city clothes: a suit and tie, street shoes. Any normal adult would have quit. But this man was gaining on us. All of a sudden we were running for our lives. Wordless, we split up; everyone for himself. And every one had vanished except Mikey Fahey. Poor Mikey, I trailed him. And the driver of the Buick sensibly picked the two of us to follow. The man apparently had all day.

"He chased us around the yellow house and up a backyard path . . . under a low tree, up a bank, through a hedge, down some snowy steps, and across the grocery store's driveway. . . through backyards and porches and over woodpiles; he kept coming. He chased us silently, block after block, over picket fences, through thorny hedges, between houses, around garbage cans and across streets. Every time I glanced back, I expected he would have quit. . . [but] this ordinary adult evidently knew what I thought only children knew: that you have to fling yourself at what you're doing, you have to point yourself, forget yourself, aim, dive.

"He chased us through the backyard labyrinths of ten blocks before he caught us by our jackets. He caught us and we all stopped. We all stood staggering, half-blinded, coughing, in an obscure hilltop backyard: a man in his twenties, a boy, a girl . . . The chewing out was redundant, a mere formality, and beside the point. The point was that he had chased us passionately without giving up, and so he had caught us – this sainted, skinny furious redheaded man who wished to have a word with us."

There are some people who imagine God to be like that man in the black Buick, relentlessly pursuing us to have a word with us because of something evil we have done. In fact, some believe that the only time God would be in pursuit of us and is involved in things in your life is when you've done something wrong; God chasing us down for lobbing snowballs at life, ready to brain us, one way or the other.

But at Easter, we come face to face with One who, instead of chasing us, eager to chew us out and condemn us, actually provokes us into chasing God. While we're bending over, sticking our noses into the tomb, Jesus takes aim and tosses a snowball at our backsides – and then he runs, hoping that we'll chase him, hoping that we will enter the pursuit, that we will go the Way he's going, and that we'll take the news of his resurrection to a hurting and broken world.

Did you hear that in Mark's version of the story of the first Easter? The first followers of Jesus – all women, by the way, the only ones with the guts not to go into hiding during and after his crucifixion – were looking into the tomb. But their dead friend wasn't there, and that certainly isn't what they had planned. What they had planned was to anoint a dead body, say goodbye to their dearest friend, continue the grieving process. But it turned out differently as their expectations of him had, once again, been turned upside-down. "Jesus isn't here; he's on the move," says the young man dressed in a white robe. "If you want to find him, you've got to go up north, to the place he's on the move again. If you want to be with him, you've got to chase him down because Jesus has broken out of this stone prison and is on the loose."

That's what Easter's about. I know I'm taking a risk saying this today, in this place, but if you came here looking for Jesus this morning, I've got some bad news: he's not here! That's the truth – and it's also one of the great mysteries of Easter. It's also the whole point of the risen Christ: you may be looking in the wrong place for Jesus this morning. It may be, that the only thing I can do for you this morning - or any Sunday morning, for that matter – is to do what the young man in the white robe did: point you in the direction where Jesus is on the move and encourage you to make all haste to meet him there. He is not here; he is risen and he's on the move.

That's what the gospel says, at least: he's broken loose. The Romans had him for a while – empire tried to snuff out his dangerous life because he was too busy waking up the world to its violent, oppressive rule. The religious authorities had him for a while, trying to cram him into a box called conformity - to doctrine and creeds and ways things are to be done. Rome and religion nailed him to the cross, locked him in a tomb and threw away the key. But Easter cries out that Jesus broke free and now he's out in the world, doing his thing, beckoning us to find him and follow his Way.

If we are honest with ourselves, we church-goers, over the years, so much of what the church has done has imprisoned the risen Jesus. O, we've done some wonderful, miraculous things in his name and Spirit, too, but we've also tamed him, domesticated him to make him more acceptable to our own ways of doing things and believing and our life-styles. We've put him in cages in order to make sure he fits all our doctrines or all our ways of being in the world and how we order things in the world and our ways of solving disputes. We've crammed him into the tombs of our justifications for war and for excluding the very people he came to heal, and locked him away, saying there are certain ways to pray or certain styles of music he prefers. Sometimes, we forget that on Easter, he blew all of that away. Jesus finds the cracks in the walls we've created to keep him in. He crawls through the pain and suffering, the death and absolute darkness in order to break free, not only for you and me but for the whole world.

Easter says that Jesus is on the loose. The question is: Will we get out there and find where he's working? Theologian Harvey Cox once wrote, "The first thing the church must

always do is to find out where God is on the move today and make all possible haste to be there with him.” Will we get out there where Jesus is on the loose today?

You know, a lot of times, it's the so-called “secular” people who are on the move on the Way of Jesus. Take, for instance, Bono, lead singer of U2. There's a guy in hot pursuit of God. He's no stereo-typical saint; he'd be the first to admit it. But he does know that God is on the move in the world today and he's making all possible haste to be there with him. In a single week, Bono will appear at the World Economic Forum, meet with the President of the United States and Secretary General of the UN, advocate with Bill Gates for AIDS relief, fly over to Africa, meet with the Pope and the Secretary of the Treasury. In his spare time he hangs out with his friends and band mates and the people he loves. Bono is on the move, as a U2 song says, “I know it aches/and your heart it breaks/and you can only take so much/Walk on.”

Walk on. Walk on. Jesus isn't in the tomb anymore: he's out there, walkin' on, on the move, on the loose, beckoning us to join him in his Easter life of Spirit and healing and hope and compassion and peace-making. Can you see him? Take a look. He's sitting in a wheelchair at a nursing home, lined up with the rest of his friends who are lonely and yearning for someone to visit, someone to talk to. Can you see him there? Are you willing to go where Jesus goes?

Can you see him on the move? He's lined up for lunch at Loaves and Fishes, and at Shiloh Baptist Soup Kitchen, waiting for a meal, waiting for a piece of clothing, waiting for a warm smile and hands that care. Can you see him there? Are you willing to go where Jesus goes?

He's on the loose. Can you see him? He's next to you in your cubicle at work and he's sitting there as you pass him by, hoping you'll stop to say hello, just for a moment, to ask him how his day is going, if his wife's cancer is in remission, if his children are doing OK in all of it. He's out there, on the loose. Can you see him?

He's out there, you know, standing in a wilderness among the clear-cut forests, waiting for you and others to join him to speak for the trees who have no voice? Are you willing to go where Jesus goes?

He's across town, too, sitting in a bar, head in hands in despair because he's just lost his job in another round of layoffs; he's pushing a shopping cart collecting nickel cans and bottles to make a few bucks to get something to eat; he's in your car, in the voice you sometimes hear whisper “Hey, friend, do you have a minute? We haven't talked in a long time. Can we sit for a while and just be together?”

He's out there, Jesus is, on the loose. And he's lobbing snowballs at you right now. He's taking aim, I am certain, hoping to nail you and egg you on enough to provoke you to commit to the chase, to follow his Way and move on.

He's out there, Jesus is, and thanks be to God that he is. Open the door, take a deep breath and run. I guarantee you won't regret it.

Christ is risen; he is risen, indeed.