

“On the Run”
May 15, 2022

Mark 16:1-8

Back when I was in junior high, I used to spend a fair amount of time after school hanging out with my friend, Brady, who lived about a hundred yards from my house. Sometimes we'd shoot pool down in his basement. But most of the time, we were outside playing street hockey in his driveway or wiffle ball in his backyard or frisbee golf around the neighborhood.

The two of us were pretty good at entertaining ourselves, often inviting other kids from the neighborhood to join in whatever activity we were doing. Like most young teenagers, however, there were times when the two of us were bored and we couldn't figure out anything worthwhile to do with our time...always a recipe for mischief. And one of those times when Brady and I were bored, it was the dead of winter in the middle of a snowstorm.

Somehow the two of us got the bright idea to build a fort out of snow in the middle of the woods near our houses. Then once we were done building, we started to form snowballs with our hands. And after we had a healthy pile in between the two of us, we waited for cars to drive along the nearest street, thinking it would be fun to throw snowballs at those cars when they passed by.

There were multiple problems with this plan. First, we were a good thirty yards away from the road and while the two of us fancied ourselves having good arms, we weren't particularly accurate. Which led directly to the second problem. In order to throw a snowball from the woods where we were stationed down to the street, it not only had to travel at least thirty yards in the air. It also had to thread a narrow opening between two trees, about twenty yards ahead of us, in order to have any chance.

The third problem was there weren't many people out in their cars driving that afternoon because it was snowing fairly heavily. As a result, Brady and I spent a lot of time making snowballs, practicing our aim and waiting for cars. And not much time throwing snowballs at any actual vehicles.

Anyway, over the course of a couple of hours, a small handful of unsuspecting cars drove up the street. And each car was going just slowly enough for Brady and me to unleash at least two or three snowballs each before they drove out of range. As I remember, the two of us talked a good game about almost hitting a couple of the cars. But the truth is, neither one of us came particularly close.

Stubborn and undaunted, the way young teenagers can be, Brady and I stayed at the ready. And at some point, we watched a car coming up the road. It was one of those gas guzzling sedans people used to drive back in the late seventies. Big car, loud engine, hard not to notice.

The two of us picked up a snowball in each fist. And when the car was about to enter the narrow target window, Brady and I wound up. To this day, I'm not sure who threw the snowball that split the trees and arced majestically down toward the street. But Brady and I watched intently with great pride and amazement, almost like the whole thing happened in slow motion. Until the snowball splatted across the front windshield of that car with a satisfying thud.....pfffff....

Brady and I high fived each other and celebrated our accomplishment...for all of about five and a half seconds. Until we heard the next sound loud and clear. The sound of the car as it slammed on the brakes and came to a screeching stop. Followed by the sound of the driver leaning out the passenger side window, spotting exactly where we were in the woods, and yelling out to us, "Hey, get over here!"

The probability of hitting a car with a snowball was so low, Brady and I never considered the idea that we'd be successful. Never mind the idea that someone might stop. I guess we figured they'd keep on driving while we patted each other on the back. In truth, I'd probably keep on going now as an adult, despite the fact that I might be fuming in the driver's seat.

For the man driving the big sedan, though, continuing to drive was clearly not an option. He was really angry, there were no cars in sight behind him, and he had it out for the two of us. Which brings me to the final problem for Brady and me in a long list of problems I've already identified. Neither of us had an escape route planned out. Plus, there was over a foot of snow already on the ground in the woods. Meaning trying to run through the snow with any speed was next to impossible.

The man in the car quickly realized we weren't about to walk down the hill and surrender. So he rolled up the passenger side window and skidded away from the place where he stopped. Meanwhile, Brady and I simultaneously came to the same dreaded conclusion...if we weren't going to go to him, he was on his way to find us.

The two of us trudged through the snow in the woods a fair distance away from our initial hiding place and found a new place to hide. We tried to cover our tracks. But both of us knew we weren't going back home anytime soon. Because for the next half an hour or forty-five minutes, we could hear the man in his car with the loud engine diligently patrolling our neighborhood streets. Looking for the two troublemakers who had the audacity to hit his front windshield with a snowball.

Eventually the car noise disappeared and Brady and I assumed the man had given up. We weren't sure, but it seemed safe to emerge from our hiding place. Under the cover of impending darkness, the two of us snuck home, cold, wet, tired, hungry and trying to put on a brave face. What we thought would go down as one of our great teenage triumphs turned out to be a cautionary tale. We never got caught, but I believe it was the last time Brady and I chose that particular activity to alleviate our boredom...

I'm curious how many of us, either in our younger years or more recently, picture a God who resembles the man in the loud sedan driving through my teenage neighborhood in the middle of a snowstorm. A God who is easily agitated. A God who waits for you and me to mess up and then the moment we do, God slams on God's brakes and comes to a screeching stop. Calling us out and then, if necessary, chasing us down to teach us a lesson.

What I'm describing is not an uncommon God image. The kind of God who doesn't pay much attention to human beings until we take a wrong turn or make a wrong choice. Whereupon God stands ready to pounce. Or a God who makes us pay for our sins even when you and I can't really figure out what we did to deserve God's wrath.

The roots of this specific concept of God can be traced all the way back to the Gospel of Mark's Easter story. On Easter morning, according to Mark, the women arrived at the tomb, found out it was empty, and ran as fast as they possibly could to get away. The story tells us they were terrified. Maybe they thought the Risen Christ was out to get them so they decided to hide out until it was safe. Or they didn't understand what was going on but they surely didn't want to wait around near the empty tomb and find out.

Mark's Easter story is primarily a story about fear. The sort of deep seeded fear that makes your blood run cold. Yet from the women in Mark's Easter story all the way to you and me today, I wonder if we've gotten the Easter story backwards.

Easter is not about a God who stalks us in the name of the Risen Christ and seeks to punish us for all our sinfulness. Just the opposite, the Easter story is all about a Risen Christ, who winds up and throws a snowball at each one of us. Hoping that he will hit us squarely, cause us to stop abruptly and look around, and then provoke us into chasing after him. (1)

When it comes to Easter and the Easter season that follows, it's not us running away from the Risen Christ. It's about him running away from us. And it's up to us to pursue the Risen Christ diligently in the world until we find him.

Where are we supposed to look for the Risen Christ? I don't know exactly, but I have a few thoughts. The Risen Christ could be standing in line at a makeshift soup kitchen set up near one of the train stations that transports Ukrainian families all day and night out of their homeland and into neighboring countries.

Or the Risen Christ might be over in the Northeast neighborhood of Hartford, playing on the sidewalk with a group of children whose parents don't have sufficient income or enough food stamps to put food on the table for lunch today.

Or the Risen Christ might still be in bed right now alongside a teenager or an adult who doesn't want to wake up and endure the same kind of soul crushing loneliness and depression that weighs on them anew every morning.

If you and I came here to Wapping Community Church this morning, on this fifth Sunday of Easter, hoping to find the Risen Christ here in this sanctuary, we might be disappointed. After church is over, though, that's a different story.

I know it's spring out and there won't be any snowballs to throw on this rainy day. Yet I wouldn't be surprised if the Risen Christ finds some other way to take aim at you and me. Grabbing our attention and agitating us by whatever means necessary until we stop and look around...

And then, after he provokes us, the Risen Christ will wait for us to take up the chase, running after him into a broken world to share his message of hope. Amen.

- (1) Rev. Mark R. Feldmeir, *Testimony to the Exiles: Sermons for GenXers and Other Postmoderns*. (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003) pgs. 137-38.

