

Two By Two
Mark 6:6b-13
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So, . . . when I sat down to begin preparations for a word on this fabulous occasion, the first thing I did was go on Bible Safari. That's right, I went searching the scriptures. For good news. Well, not so much good news, as a good story. I wanted a good Bible story. The Bible is filled with good news. But I have found after almost 30 years of seminary teaching that the Bible's good news includes a lot of bad stuff. Bible stories have a habit of not ending well. I wanted to find, for this happy occasion, a happy ending. Is that too much to ask, for a happy Bible story? The kind of happy Bible story with some funny content woven throughout that has an even happier finale. The kind of story that Walt Disney studios might want even to make into a movie.

But the more I wandered through the New Testament on my Bible Safari, as I encountered the big three of Jesus, the 12, and Paul, a book allegedly chocked full of good news, the more I realized that Walt Disney studios would not want to touch any of this stuff. There are no cute animals talking silly nonsense. There are no precocious children cracking wise. There is no bouncy musical score. And there is no calm assurance, even in the moments when the villain is making long speeches about conquering the world, that in the end everything is gonna work out all right. The New Testament is less like a Walt Disney movie and more like an HBO, cable TV series. It's less Snow White, the Little Mermaid, Cinderella, Beauty and the Beast, and Frozen, and more the Sopranos, Breaking Bad, Game of Thrones, and, of course, the Walking Dead.

So, I lowered my search standards. Instead of seeking a bubbly, light, frothy situation-comedy-like-New Testament text, I figured maybe I'd just avoid those texts that involved beheadings, hardness of heart, homelessness, lepers, the sick, the poor, the hungry, lack of faith, pigs charging to their deaths in the sea, garden denials, insider betrayals, and crucifixion.

As my quest wore on, I was starting to feel a little like Thomas Jefferson. You know about the Jefferson Bible, right? Mr. Jefferson did not believe in miracles. He was a man of law and science, and, in his scientific mind set, miracles were not possible. The laws of nature were inviolable. Could not be broken. So, this great thinker thought up a way to maintain the authority of the Bible without having to subject himself to all the silliness of miracle stories. His solution: he took a knife and cut out all the miracle stories. Including the stories about the resurrection. That is, after all, one great big miracle story. So, his gospels had a whole lot of holes in their pages. And a real big, gaping hole at the end. Isn't that just like American politics? Crucifixion gets voted in. Resurrection can't make it out of committee.

I was on the verge of doing something similar with my burgeoning Blount Bible. To appropriately celebrate this celebratory occasion, I was on the verge of spiritually cutting out all of the hard, tough stuff in favor of the light, happy stuff. And I kind of realized that if I kept going on like that my Blount Bible was going to end up with more holes in it than the Jefferson Bible. All I ended up with for the Gospel of Mark was chapter 1, verse 1: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." That's all there was to the Gospel of Mark in the Blount Bible. Because everything in Mark goes downhill right after that. Mark, I realized, has only one Walt Disney-esque verse and he throws it out at the very beginning, gets it out of the way, and then gets down to the business of the good news which has a lot of baaaaad stuff in it.

So, I reconciled to stop looking for happy news and go back to focusing on the good news. What is the good news that could help us meditate on God's Word for us, for Meg and Jarrett, on this very happy day? I ended up in Mark chapter 6, starting at the second half of verse 6, where Jesus was doing with his disciples what God is now doing with Meg and Jarrett—sending them out in twos to proclaim the gospel.

According to Mark, Jesus is sending his disciples out to proclaim the good news in a very bad situation. It is a world situation in the Gospel of Mark, chapter 6 that is not too unlike the world situation into which God has sent Meg and Jarrett in the Gospel of University Church, chapter 2019. And there is trouble in the world. There is trouble in the community of the faithful.

Mark's world is one of moral uncertainty and political chaos. The Romans occupy Palestine. The people of Israel are exiles in their own land. As Mark writes his story of Jesus' ministry, a war rages in Jerusalem. And it is not just between the Romans and the Jews. Conflict has broken out within the Jewish community itself. King Herod represents the political class of Jews who thought to find a way to compromise with the Romans, and thus, to keep the peace that the Romans demanded in the land. The Herodians, with Roman military support, were determined to stamp out all visible protest movements for spiritual repentance and social justice. John the Baptist found this out the hard way. He paid for his opposition to moral compromise and social injustice with his life. In the middle of telling us his story about Jesus sending his apostles out 2 by 2 to spread the good news of how God was breaking in to change the world, Mark tells us how John was murdered, his head brought to King Herod on a plate, precisely because John thought he was sent to spread that same good news. That had to have been chilling news to every would be spreader of the good news who read this Jesus story.

There was also trouble in the community of the faithful. There were false prophets rising up in the land, proclaiming that they spoke and acted for God. Jesus of Nazareth was seen as one such of these possible apocalyptic pretenders. He spoke in riddles that commanded so much attention that people were flocking to hear him. Those who were attracted to his parables were mesmerized by his ability to heal illness and exorcise demonic possession. The crowds were so great that the Herodian authorities worried that, like John the Baptist, this Jesus was a threat to the peace the Romans demanded. And the people in Jesus' hometown, where he grew up, worried that he was masquerading as something he was not, that he was perpetrating some plot of self-prophetic promotion that had to be put to a stop.

In the midst of what seemed like a people and place possessed, Jesus decides against sane and sound advice that it was probably time to hide out, lay low, and gather himself and his movement—to take a sabbatical to come up with a strategic plan for next steps. No, instead, he decides the time is right to expand his movement by sending his chosen ones out to spread the dubious news his home folk had already rejected—that *HE* represented the intent of God's Future Kingdom in the problematic, present moment.

We, too, live in a troubling day and age. In the community of the faithful, the mainline church is struggling. For decades the Presbyterian church has been losing members. When it decided to make firm decisions related to social justice, it lost more members, even churches. Other churches, like our United Methodist friends, continue to struggle about identity and purpose. And while the churches in Asia and Africa explode in terms of numbers, many of those churches are unsure about the soundness of the theology of many of our American churches. I have met many an international Christian whose church wants to send missionaries to the United States, not just to spread *their* faith, but to correct *our* faith.

If there is theological turmoil in the church, there is outright, almost demonic chaos in social and political society. That was Mark's world, to be sure. There was demonic possession everywhere, bleeding into the very fabric of the world into which God had sent Jesus and Jesus had sent his disciples. Even in this very text, Jesus speaks of the need for his disciples to exorcise demons and purge unclean spirits. Like Thomas Jefferson, I'm not sure we take this supernatural part of the Jesus story all that seriously today. The whole business of the demonic, possession. Of evil that is so pervasive that it seems omnipresent, of forces that are so powerful they seem omnipotent, of uncleanness that is so personal it seems like it lives next door, walks alongside you on the street, shows up in worship beside you on the pew, ends up representing you in elected office. We are too sophisticated any more to believe in demonic, unclean spirits.

And yet, a CBS News internet article argued on September 18, when I was drafting this sermon, that there have been more mass shootings than days in the United States this year.¹ September 1 was the 244th day of the year. On that day there had been 283 mass shootings. This puts 2019 on a pace to average more than one mass shooting a day. And clearly, as a people, we have neither the will nor the capacity to stop it. Demonic? The polar ice caps have melted faster in the last 20 years than in the last 10,000.² An intergovernmental panel on climate change argues that if we are going to protect the planet we must limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celcius above pre-industrial levels. But the panel estimates that at the rate of carbon dioxide emissions, we will drive global temperatures past that level in less than 16 years.³ Unclean? The gap between the wealthy and the poor continues to expand ominously. According to one study, "As of 2007, the richest 1% held about 38% of all privately held wealth in the United States while the bottom 90% held 73.2% of all debt. According to The New York Times, the richest 1 percent in the United States now own more wealth than the bottom 90 percent." According to the website, Inequality.Org: "Over the past three decades, America's most affluent families have added to their net worth, while those on the bottom have dipped into "negative wealth," meaning the value of their debts exceeds the value of their assets." How long can a society peaceably maintain a circumstance where so many people have negative wealth? Unclean? The Opiod crisis blooms unabated, even as a vaping emergency looms on the societal horizon. What we have before us is rightfully considered a health crisis. But when it was a different drug and a different race of people in society victimized by its murderous addiction, officials declared not a health emergency but a war on drugs that has helped create one of the most horrendous incarceration rates of people of color in the contemporary history of the planet. Demonic? There are wars and rumors of wars. There are children separated from families who are jailed for their desperate attempt to cross the border of one of the greatest immigrant societies ever established. Incidents of racial and gender violence are spiraling up at outrageous rates. In the midst of it all there is a level of political discord and verbal vitriol that makes solving even simple problems seem all but impossible, and we have much more than simple problems. I am reminded of what a student long ago wrote in his paper as he reflected on the words a member of his Camden, New Jersey church had shared as the two of them looked out from the church steps at a house across the street where illegal narcotics were easily obtained: "it's like we're possessed." All of which makes me meditate on the cautionary words uttered by the cartoonish

1. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/mass-shootings-2019-more-mass-shootings-than-days-so-far-this-year/>

2. <https://www.dw.com/en/polar-ice-sheets-melting-faster-than-ever/a-16432199>.

3. <https://theconversation.com/the-climate-clock-counting-down-to-1-5-107498>.

villain of the silly movie *Pirates of the Caribbean*. As the moonlight hits him and betrays his true, ghoulish identity, Captain Hector Barbossa warns Miss Elizabeth Swann, the woman he has kidnapped and locked up in the brig of the pirate ship, the *Black Pearl*: “You best be believin’ in ghost stories, Missy. Cause you’re in one.” Mark is all but certainly telling those of us who read this story of Jesus sending out his disciples 2 by 2 to have authority over unclean spirits: “You best be believing in demon stories, Christian. Cause you’re in one.”

Jesus sends his people out into this mess telling them to take nothing. I’d want to take everything, including a promise that if things didn’t work out right, I would get my old position back right by his supernatural side. I think that is also why he sends them out in twos, so they won’t feel alone in this great challenge they face. Everyone feels a little bit stronger when they are not alone. The early church knew it; that is why they no doubt adopted the practice of sending folks out in twos. Peter and John. Paul and Barnabas. Barnabas and Mark. Paul and Timothy. Paul and Silas. Meg and Jarrett.

Being sent out in pairs implies something. They are not solitary individuals. They are a representation of a larger community, of which they are a vital, connected part. Their *two*-ness symbolizes *fullness* of community. Or as commentator Lamar Williamson puts it, “They incarnate . . . community . . .”⁴

Jesus, you remember, called a community of 12. They are 2 of that group. A small representation of the larger community. They are not alone. Like we are not alone. They, like we, are part of a team. God’s team. You know, when I was in high school, I never liked doing team stuff. Well, I wanted to do team sports. I loved being part of a sports team of football players. I was a wiley veteran of three years on the junior varsity football team. Not many people played junior varsity football for 3 years. I was special. So special that they named a bench after me—because I sat on it so often during the games. I wanted to be on that football team. But not any academic team. When a teacher said “joint class project,” I said, “what?!” You get 5 people on an academic team, you know what’s happening. One to whine about having to do any work. One to proclaim himself supervisor. Two to always have to do something for their parents or grandparents. And you, to have to do the actual work. Everybody got a grade, your grade, and you got to make a voodoo doll of the teacher and stick pins in it for sticking you with a team. I suppose Jesus’ 2 people teams were nothing like that though. He gave them equal teaching power. Equal healing power. Equal exorcism power. Power derived from their communal connection to the 12 that ran straight back to him.

Meg and Jarrett, what they do, how they speak, how they follow on the way is an indication that they, too, engage this possessed, demon story of a world—not alone. They, too, just like the original 12, sent out two by two, are part of the work of Jesus, part of the community of Jesus, as you are part of the community of Jesus. Therefore, they are part of you. In representing Jesus, they represent you. In representing you, they represent Jesus! They are part of an equation representation that we are, all of us, in this together. They are not sent alone, they are sent WITH YOU! In this dangerous world in which we find ourselves, you must hold them up as they will certainly hold you up.

And they have the power to hold you up because, like the original twelve sent out two by two, they have been sent to you with Jesus’ own authority. Mark says Jesus authorized them to represent him, to incarnate him as he incarnates God. Kind of. To teach this world as Jesus

4. Lamar Williamson Jr., *Mark* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), 119.

teaches it. To heal the brokenness of this world as Jesus heals it. To exorcise the demonic in this world as Jesus exorcises it. As Jewish followers of a Jewish teacher, the disciples surely would have understood this.

And how exactly are they to convey this authority? Mark explains in his narration. You remember how the scripture explained that he ordered them, he authorized them about what to take on the journey. The English says, “journey.” The Greek that Mark used said, “way.” He authorized them for the way. Way is an important, theological term for Mark. This way is the way of the Lord that is being paved, prepared, and traveled from the very second verse of Mark’s Gospel. Mark uses the term over and over again to signify this way of Jesus that becomes the way of discipleship that is destined to be the way of the church. It is the way Jesus traveled and exemplified and authorized throughout his own ministry. We are not talking some ethical ideal, something we philosophize about. You want to know God’s way, look at God leading Israel out of Exodus. You want to know Jesus’ way? Look at Jesus’ ministry. What he says. What he does. Don’t try to make up stuff. That will be Brian’s way, or Judy’s way, or Jeff’s way, or Annie’s way, or University Church’s way. We want our own way because our own way is going to be less difficult and more to our liking than Jesus’ way. I always want my way. From work to play. In the gym. I got this trainer and he’s great. He wants me to exercise his way. His way is hard. His way makes me want to sit down and drink a cool Coca Cola or something. But he says, jump higher, move faster, lift heavier, don’t you stop, what you stopping for. Because I’m tired. Cause I want to rest. My way, when I exercise by myself, when he’s not around, when I get tired, I rest. I don’t push as hard. I don’t do as many reps. He likes to push to the point that he calls muscle failure. I lift until I can’t lift any more. I’m trying to push those weights up over my head, but those weights are winning, and he’s chuckling, “ha, ha, muscle failure, that’s good,” and I’d throw the weight at him except I can’t even lift my arm, much less the weight at that point. I’m doing it his way. More difficult than my way. In the end, more beneficial than my way.

So, what is Jesus’ way. It’s an “on the move” way. He declares that in his ministry the Reign of God is at hand. The future intent of God is breaking forth in the human present in his life and ministry. To be on the authorized way of the Lord is therefore to be doing the things Jesus himself is doing, to the muscle draining extent that Jesus is doing them. And what has he been doing to this point in the Gospel of Mark? Well, let’s see. Where he sees human illness, he steps in to heal it. When he sees a leper, societal outcast who should not be in the company of holy people, Jesus reaches across the borders of propriety, breaks every code of purity and holiness, and touches him, and emigrates him back into community. When he encounters the politics of his people that declares only someone authorized by the Temple in Jerusalem can speak for God and forgive sins, he offers up a new political reality where grace and forgiveness can be had on the open market, just for the asking. Where people who hurt their own people like tax collectors were reviled and exiled from polite company, he saw potential in them and called some of them to follow him as disciples. Where sinners, sex workers, brought shame to themselves and those who spent time with them, he dined with them, socialized with them, created relationship with them. Where laws became legalized to the point that the laws were more important than the people whom the law was supposed to serve, so that hunger and healing were outlawed on the sabbath, he became an outlaw by breaking them. Where racial and ethnic hatred was deep and divisive between Jew and Gentile, he crossed racial divides, taught Gentiles and Jews, healed Jews and Gentiles, fed Jews and Gentiles. That was his way. That is therefore our way. This story authorizes us to incarnate the Jesus way. This story challenges us to

incarnate the Jesus way. This story demands that we incarnate the Jesus way. Lamar Williamson calls this story a missionary manifesto!⁵ That is radical talk. That is scary talk. That is challenging talk. That is the kind of talk that rouses a person to get up and do something. Jesus didn't call a group of recluses to stay and shadow him; he authorized a group of special agents to go out and mirror him. There is no such thing as a Jesus homebody. People of the way are called to be on the way . . . to where God's people need them. God didn't call Meg and Jarrett here so you could rest on your laurels or their laurels or build a nice sanctuary of safety. They are sent to represent. And that means their calling is to charge others to go forth the way they have themselves been charged. They were sent to make sure you stay on the way.

Given the urgency and importance of the situation, Jesus tells them not to take time to pack, but to get on the way with what they have, however little that is. I'm assuming in this day and age that we're letting Meg and Jarrett take their kids and their clothes and a car or two to get around and maybe a place to stay. What Jesus means for us in our context, I think, is that we should be vulnerable when we get on the way. Take no assurance that everything is going to work out right the way we want it to work out. And try not to make your objective everything working out. The objective is not to make everything work out. The objective is to share and represent the good news that God is on the move, like Jesus was on the move, and then to enact that boundary breaking good news by being the very representative of Jesus' own boundary breaking way. To remember that the messenger represents the one who sent her.

Jesus believed his disciples, sent two by two, could be vulnerable, because there was a community of disciples out there, on the way, committed to being hospitable to them as University church has committed to being hospitable to Meg and Jarrett as they travel the Jesus way. Discipleship in Jesus' time, discipleship in the early church, discipleship in our church cannot survive without such hospitality. In his commentary, Ched Myers puts it this way: "It could certainly be conjectured that those institutions reflect an actual social strategy by which the early movement procured a network of 'safehouses' around the countryside for purposes of mission and travel."⁶ Could it be that University church is a hospitality safe house? For Meg and Jarrett on their travel of the Jesus way? For the people you and Meg and Jarrett together draw onto the Jesus way? Imagine . . . University Presbyterian Church, the Chapel Hill safe house of hospitality for harboring people who are traveling the hazardous, boundary breaking healing, teaching exorcising Jesus way!

But a different kind of safe house. Safe houses are usually thought of as places where people hide out. Don't want to be found. I know a lot of Christians and a lot of churches in the worship witness protection program. The church becomes a safe house of worship where all we do is what we spiritually do for ourselves, spiritually invest in ourselves, where we don't let the problems and troubles of people walking the ways of destruction and chaos in the world touch us. No lepers. No women with issues. No racial issues. No political issues. No legal issues. The Jesus way safe house doesn't exclude all of that; the Jesus way safe house exists precisely because of all of that. To welcome those who have been authorized by Jesus as speaking, healing, and exorcising agents in the face of all of that.

Jesus knows, of course, that many people to whom he sends his pairs of disciples will not like what they hear about this Jesus way and they will reject his disciples just as they will

5. Lamar Williamson Jr., *Mark* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), 120.

6. Ched Myers, *Binding The Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 214.

ultimately reject Jesus. For some reason, while everybody loves good news, THE good news makes a whole lot of people mad. Jesus tells his disciples that when that happens, they should just shake the dust of that town off their feet and go on to the next town and share and enact THE good news there.

See, I don't like that. I want to be liked. I want to be well-received. I don't want to come to a moment like this and upset people, or to have word get back to my Board of Trustees that Brian came to Chapel Hill and upset people. I don't want to shake the dust of Chapel Hill or Richmond or Charlotte or any other place off my feet. I want things to go so well that I actually keep the dust from their community in my memory the way I keep beach sand in a jar and carry it home with me to remind me of how good a time I had. I want to have the sand of Chapel Hill in a jar on my self with the other things I love. But Jesus told his disciples not to worry over that. They couldn't afford to think like that if they were going to teach, heal, and exorcise as they were authorized. Being faithful to walking the way Jesus walked was more important than being liked. That's a hard thing. That's why it is especially important that there be safe houses of hospitality for those who are doing that hard work.

It happens. It works. For the pairs Jesus sent out. How will it work for Meg and Jarrett, the pair Jesus has sent here to Chapel Hill. Much depends, of course, on the hospitality of the University Church safe house. What I can tell you is that, oddly enough, in the Gospel of Mark, at least for this part of the journey, there was a happy ending. The disciples, who stumble and bumble their way most of the time in Mark, who fail, who are hard of hearing and hard of heart, actually succeed in their work of teaching, healing, and exorcising on the Jesus way. At 6:30, they come back to Jesus and report mission success. They are successful because, despite the obstacles, they took their authorization from Jesus to heart. Despite the challenges, they stayed on the way. There are always people going the other way when we are going God's way. There will be challenges. People don't like God's way because it is a change way, not a through way. There's people breaking up, broke down, desperate, wandering, lost, and to help them you've got to stop and wander around in the traffic. Sensible people don't like that. Logical people find that a dangerous way to behave. Better to get in the car, lock the doors, set the GPS, engage the cruise control, and get to church with as few distractions as possible along the way. That's the problem with the Jesus way though. It is a way pot-holed with distraction. To get to God you've got to drive through, not around. That kind of way you don't want to travel alone. And that is why, University Church, Jesus has paired Meg and Jarrett . . . with you.