

# Disclaimer

A Sermon Expositing Mark 8:31-38

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Before you embark on this experience it is important for you to know that certain risks apply. The activities you will undertake could result in oxygen deprivation, broken bones, puncture wounds, hypothermia, falls from heights, crushing injuries, burns, cuts, drowning, loss of consciousness, being struck by lightning, being attacked by wildlife, blunt force trauma to the head, contraction of infectious disease, contraction of parasites, dismemberment, other serious injury, or even loss of life.

Why would anyone agree to do anything following that description!?! *How* could anyone do whatever that is describing!?! There is so much in this life that offers far less chance of injury or loss of life it simply seems reckless to knowingly proceed into a situation that could cost you quality of life if not life itself.

I guess that's why I wonder what Mark, the gospel writer, was thinking in telling first his community and now us this little story in today's lesson. Maybe at first blush the story doesn't seem quite so stark as the disclaimer above, but that's only because our understanding of the terms involved has been tamed through the centuries. Jesus calls his disciples to follow him into a life of suffering, and even to taking up a cross! We have a hard time processing what the cross means in our world today. Because it is an image of redemption it has become the central symbol of the Christian faith and as a symbol of a way of life we cherish we often see it represented in jewelry of precious metals, adorned with flowers at easter, set as a beautiful stained glass window. These images are appropriate enough to symbolize what we hope will be an experience of life that finds and radiates beauty, but we can be distracted. In forgetting that the cross was first a brutal device of execution we risk sentimentalizing it. So too we risk sentimentalizing the *life* of the cross. To follow Jesus in our day means for many to nod our heads to a few truth claims, to join with a group of people each Sunday before a time of singing together and listening to some guy rattle on about who knows what. Christianity in our time and place is all so often comfortable, it's safe. That's the way we want it and so we confess the same Messiah Peter did - a safe Messiah who came to set up an authority structure to uphold our ways, our comfort, and our security. That's the journey that we in the American church have embarked upon, but Jesus' words read like a disclaimer, "This life isn't a safe one. It's full of suffering and pain and ridicule, and eventually you'll lose your life. If you're with me, you're going to have to not only be ok with risk and suffering and death, but you'll need to learn to celebrate that fact." Why would anyone agree to something like that!?!

You know, the funny thing is, people do. Everyday people sign on the dotted line accepting the risk of injury or even death to take part in some experience. I bet you have too. One particular hike Anna and I went on a few years ago had to be signed up for in the Ranger's station ahead of time so they would have a chance to tell us in person about the tight spaces we'd be squeezing through and the difficult terrain and 100+ degree temperatures we'd have to endure and the narrow paths at great heights we'd be travelling. They wanted to give us a disclaimer. We met our ranger guide at the right time to minimize the significant chance of being lost forever in the sandy wilderness where no trail can be marked. She took us half a mile down the path and stopped and turned to us to tell us we'd reached the point of no return. To follow her further meant agreeing to

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Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

see the thing through regardless of discomfort or danger – a second disclaimer. What followed was the most stunning view of Arches National Park. Towering formations of sandstone rising hundreds of feet overhead, wildlife great and small, oxygen untouched by industry. A slice of life far richer, far more beautiful than any I've had from relative safety.

That seems to be the thing with disclaimers, they seem to immediately precede experiences that allow us to breathe life in more fully. Wilderness journeys, daring adventures, moments of great courage – do they not wake our senses? Are we not, when forced to consider our frailty and mortality, most fully living?

There was a game we liked to play at the beginning of an outing in the days I was a ropes course facilitator. Groups would come to me ready to spend the day running, leaping, grasping, climbing, grappling mostly 50' feet in the air. It was frightening, difficult, sometimes painful, and while safety was a top priority, it couldn't be guaranteed fully. So we told them to first play tag in a small, defined area. I would chase them around and try to tag them, but if they wanted, they could simply bend and place their hands on their knees rendering them "safe" from my tag. In a time long ago I was somewhat fleet of foot, so some of the participants scrambled like mad to get away. Others quickly discovered the intentionally designed loophole in the game. They simply placed their hands on their knees and remained there for the duration. They were safe. The point of the game early in the day was actually to have a chance to talk about that experience. We invariably heard from those who had won the game, who had stayed safe the whole time that the game didn't seem very fun. They won, but somehow their experience wasn't as full as those who had embraced risk, who'd worked up a sweat.

The game applied as well to the activities we'd undergo on the ropes course that day as it does to a life of following Christ. On this journey, security is not the highest calling. In this life, comfort is no gain.

We could lose this message very quickly by over-spiritualizing. Is the life of Christ a spiritual pursuit? Yes, it is a spiritual pursuit experienced in the body. When we say there is danger in this way we do mean that there is risk to our spiritual selves, but we also mean there is risk to our resources, to our way of life, and yes, potentially to our bodies. The life of faith is characterized by how we respond to this risk wherever it pops up. When bringing our faith to bear in the world do we do so with argument and defensiveness trying to hold at bay those ideas and ways of life we deem incompatible, indeed a threat to Christianity? Or do we bring our faith to bear demonstratively, opening ourselves to others and engaging their ideas and ways of life with vulnerable love? Do we respond to reports in the wider world of violence rendered in places of and against people of faith by becoming suspicious of others and by metaphorically *and literally* closing doors? Or do we accept the risk inherent in a wide open welcome? Do we engage carefully with those who are different worrying that we might get it wrong, look a fool, say the wrong thing, venture to the wrong place? Or do we engage with abandon willing to take the bumps and bruises of getting to know and cherish our fellows? When we hear of those mistreated and cast aside by the systems we share, do we express sympathy from a safe distance? Or do we risk the kind of *empathy* that might carry us to join them in the struggle? If we're attuned to them, these kinds of questions cover the landscape of a life of faith. Jesus had a certain way of answering these kinds of questions.

Following in the way of Christ simply isn't safe. Before you embark on this experience it is important for you to know that certain risks apply. The activities you will engage in could result in fatigue, loss of strength, loss of fortune, loss of friends, a bruised ego, isolation, incarceration, conflict, social discomfort, broken heart, falls from great heights, sleepless nights, busy schedules, financial hardship, feelings of anger, frustration, hopelessness, fear, and skepticism, destruction of your worldview, hyper-sensitivity, ridicule, ruptured status-quo, and yes possibly bodily injury or even death.

This is your disclaimer, but hey the thing with disclaimers is they seem to immediately precede experiences that allow us to truly live.

Amen.