

Jesus Disappoints Our Fantasies **Mark 8:31-38** (English Standard Version)
Saint Marks United Methodist Church, Charleston, WV **2d Sunday of Lent (March 4) 2012**

³¹ And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³² And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³ But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."

³⁴ And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. ³⁶ For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? ³⁷ For what can a man give in return for his soul? ³⁸ For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

"**How long ago was that picture taken?**" she asked the middle age man about his photo ID badge. Arthur had forgotten to take it off, when he stopped in to the hospital, on the way home from work, to visit his friend. "**Oh, it's been a few years, for sure,**" he replied to her.

Arthur took off the ID badge and looked at it. "**What all had come into my life along with the pounds added since the photo was taken?**

"What all had departed along the way with all those darker hairs that once were so evident in the old picture?

"People could see the resemblance between the older photo and how he now looked – even this woman whom he had met for the first time. But *how much had changed over* the years! Now, with *so much more history than future*, it seemed like much of it had been a waste. *What did he have to show for it*, anyway?

"Less stress over money, true? And certainly more stuff. Now, it seemed like much of his energy was spent in figuring out how to "downsize," how to get rid of much of the stuff that once had seemed so important to accumulate."

A preacher came into the room – came in to visit his friend Tim whom he'd come to visit in the hospital. *He asked to read scripture. He asked to pray. He seemed intent on making sure everyone in the room was either saved, or knew how to get there.*

The more the preacher talked, the more uncomfortable Arthur felt.

The preacher only stayed ten minutes, but they were ten very uncomfortable minutes. In between the Bible reading and the prayer, and then again after the prayer, the preacher made

motions of having conversation. But his chatter sounded much like the prayer; only his eyes were open. Lots of “**thank you, Jesus**”s and “**Alleluia**”s were sprinkled into both.

It all sounded so *formulaic*, so *rote* – even when he turned up the excitement factor in his voice. Arthur caught himself *wondering if this preacher said the same thing to everyone*. Same speech, different location. “**Are you saved?**” “**Do you know how to get saved?**” “**Thank you, Lord, for saving us.**” Arthur almost laughed when, in the place of the preacher, the image of a life size pull-the-ring-Chatty-Cathy doll came to his mind.

It all felt **HOLLOW**. It all felt **EMPTY**.

About as hollow and empty as Arthur’s life had been feeling recently. He couldn’t imagine that this *stuff the preacher was trying to sell* was any better than *what everyone else was trying to sell*. Always about **GETTING AHEAD**.

That’s what it all boiled down to – from the **salesmen** who worked for his company, to the **guys who played the political game at work**, to the **people he socialized with**, to **even this preacher**. **EVERYONE HAD A GIMMICK**. It was all about “*You, too, can get ahead.*” “*You, too, can satisfy your cravings.*”

Life insurance or **new car**. **Job promotion** or **salvation**. All about **getting ahead**, getting some **satisfaction**. **Having more than the other guy**. The problem was: **THERE IS JUST NEVER ENOUGH!**

And **NONE OF IT WORKED**. He’d **TRIED JUST ABOUT ALL OF IT** – *even the church thing*, for awhile. It was **ALL** ended up being **JUST NEVER ENOUGH!** which made it all seem so very, very ***EMPTY***.

The preacher left, and the **meddling ID badge examiner** left, too. It was just Arthur and his long time friend, Tim.

Tim winked at Arthur. “**Did you get saved, brother?**”

Arthur laughed. “**Yeah. How ‘bout you?**”

“**I wish. Actually I wish that something could save me,**” Tim said, suddenly, very serious.

“You want me to go get the preacher?” Arthur said, *not knowing if he were serious or joking, himself.*

“Not hardly,” Tim said. **“What I really need is someone who can actually save my back side.”**

“What do you mean, Tim?”

“Oh, nothing. No, it’s these daggone drugs. I’m just talking crazy stuff. Just ... nothing. Nothing at all.”

“Don’t kid a kidder, Tim. Really. Can I do anything to help you? Name it, and I’ll do it.”

It took Arthur a little bit of time to get Tim to tell him what it was that he needed. And Arthur finally began to understand why Tim was reluctant to ask. It was indeed something that would cost Arthur to do. This was not insignificant at all.

But Tim really needed it. And that’s what made the difference. Before Tim got out of the hospital, Arthur had begun to take care of Tim’s need. And he continued to do so, after Tim got out of the hospital. A little bit at a time.

It was not easy for Arthur to do this, because it required him to give up other things – things that he had worked to achieve for himself. But he did it anyway, **because ... well, because** Tim needed it, and **because** he had told him he would do it, **... and because ... because ...** for some reason, it felt RIGHT to do it. And he hadn’t felt this good about doing something for a very long time.

Tim thanked Arthur. And Arthur responded in two ways: **(1) “You’re welcome.” And (2) “Whatever you do, please do not tell anyone that I have done this.”**

Tim said, **“No, I want people to know what a good man you are. You deserve to be known for your deeds.”**

And Arthur, calling upon some knowledge down deep within, said, **“No, Tim. Please don’t tell anyone. That will ruin it for me. You needed me to do this. And I needed to do this. But, if you go telling people about it, it will mess it up for me. Please, it’s OK to thank me. But, don’t tell people what I’ve done.”**

“OK, if you say so,” said Tim.

Arthur somehow knew it **had to be that way**, *even if he couldn't explain why*. All his life, he had sought praise and recognition for any good deed or accomplishment he had done. And now he just wanted to do something good for goodness' sake.

He wasn't sure what that preacher meant by **“saving his soul.”** But one thing of which he was certain: **Whatever** it is that **people say they believe just is not nearly as important as what they do**.

And for the first time in a very long time, **that place** where he thought what people **called a soul** lived, **did not seem empty or hollow**. It seemed **alive**. And it seemed **REAL**.

One of the things that is hard for us today, when we read today's Gospel lesson is the uncomfortable recognition: If the apostles, who were with Jesus daily, didn't get it, then how can we expect to get it?

But, actually, it is helpful to realize that even people very close to Jesus can get it wrong, *when they think according to the ways of the world*. The **ways of the world** always have to do with **“What's in it for me?”** and **“What have you done for me lately?”**

When anyone – *daily admirers of Jesus* or anyone – thinks that way, they miss out on what Jesus said in last week's Gospel and what is the basis of his whole life and ministry: **THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS AT HAND. REPENT AND BELIEVE IN THE GOOD NEWS.**

Early on in the Gospel of Mark, it seemed like Jesus was going to fulfill all of their Messiah fantasies and expectations. Yet, by the end of this Gospel, we could see that Jesus had profoundly disappointed almost all of them; he had redefined both what the Messiah and what the Kingdom were all about.

Whenever our motivation is FOR SELF, then we miss the boat, even if it's for SAVING ONE'S SELF. The only way we understand what Jesus is pointing toward is when we practice SERVING OTHERS. That is opening the door to heaven.

But doing it for the praise and the recognition means that we are not *getting it* – not at all, not at all. Seeking praise and recognition turns any good deed into a self-serving deed. And Self - serving is an oxymoron.

Today, the children came walking through our MEMBERSHIP DOOR – the METAPHOR for both **remembrance of our membership vows**, and the metaphor for **just how close the Kingdom of God is** – and they carried some of our ALL SAINTS BANNERS.

On those banners were symbols of the SERVICE that these who have gone on lived out in their lives. These were simple people, people who had human limitations, people who were not at all perfect. But these are people who lived out SERVING OTHERS as part of their final mark on the world.

Prayers, Presence, Service – **three of our membership vows**, indeed. But also **three of the Keys to the Kingdom of Heaven**. **May those who have ears, hear** ... and **do**.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.