

Bottom of the Ninth (Mk. 16.5-8)
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It wasn't a perfect day for baseball. The forecast had called for rain and thick drops had begun falling from a slate sky as I stepped off the screeching "El." From the high platform, I could see the lights of Wrigley Field creating a glow in the inclement mist as dozens of baseball fans poured out of the cars beside me. We had been packed into the train like sardines, every stop adding more grown-ups dressed eagerly as kids, in ball caps and oversized replica jerseys. Not everyone on the train wore the home colors of the Chicago Cubs. Indeed, it seemed to me that close to half of the fans taking the Red Line north to Addison Street were clad in the bright hues of the visiting St. Louis Cardinals. I had heard stories about this rivalry before, the polite Midwestern version of the fabled bad blood between the East Coast Yankees and Red Sox. But I had never seen it myself. Well, not at Wrigley Field, anyway, the beloved North Side ballpark with the ivy-covered outfield walls that has seen every Cardinal and Cub since 1914 step into the batter's box and dig in. So I was excited when the train came to a stop and spilled all of its baseball fans onto the platform, down the stairs, and into the street right next to the park. But it wasn't a perfect day for baseball.

Waiting in line at the Will Call window, I wondered if a game would actually be played. My cheeks were damp with drops as I collected my ticket and squinted toward the sky. Not a scratch of blue in sight. With a bit of time before the game, I did what I think many baseball fans would have done in the same situation. I rustled up a beer and a bratwurst and considered the afternoon's matchup. Cubs right hander, Rich Harden, would be facing Cardinals ace, Chris Carpenter, also a righty. Combing through the

anticipated lineups, I worried a bit about St. Louis' ability to protect its best hitter, Albert Pujols, while I anxiously eyed a list of talented yet underperforming Cubs sluggers. Soon it was close to game time and I headed back to the stadium gate.

Wrigley Field is 95 years old, and it seems to have retained only its original amenities. The concourses are narrow and loud, the crowd moving through them in two distinct streams that roughly correlate with the rules of driving. The concrete is worn and slick, the support beams rusted and oily. This is to say nothing of the washrooms, which really cannot be discussed in polite company. On the day of the game in question, I passed through the turnstile to learn that there was about a half hour rain delay, which only added to the concourse din. So I decided to find my seat and watch the rain fall on the outfield for a while. After about twenty meditative minutes, I noticed that the drops had turned to mist and the sky had lightened to white. Fans were streaming in now, filling every available seat, and, when the grounds crew ran out to pull back the great tarp covering the infield, the crowd roared its collective approval. Maybe it would be a good day for baseball after all. We were eager to see how many innings we might get.

Now some of you are undoubtedly wondering why I am talking about baseball on a Sunday morning. Perhaps you are wondering what this has to do with religion or spirituality. Perhaps you are puzzled about how this might link to our text from the end of the Book of Mark. Or perhaps you are simply hungry now and wish you knew where to get a good bratwurst in Houston. While you wonder about such things, I'll offer you the real reason that I have chosen to talk about baseball. I have chosen to talk about baseball because baseball has been one of the few things next to religion that has taught me about living with ambiguity. Baseball, its heroes, and the stories we tell about them

have always reminded me in a way of religion, its heroes, and the stories we tell about them. The way we choose to tell these stories, including especially their endings, has everything to do with, in the case of the game, how we play, and in the case of our faith, how we live. There are ways of telling the stories that leave room for not knowing the outcome. Will the game be played or rained out? If it is played, how long will it last? What sort of effort will the players give? And what of the infinite number of possibilities might actually play out before us, from the relatively commonplace excitement of a stolen base or a broken bat RBI single to the rarest of thrills found in the triple play or the no hitter? Of course, more often than not, games turn on something quite common. The utility infielder hits one through the gap, the walked batsman comes back to haunt, or the manager falsely suspects that his reliever will settle down with another couple of pitches. Baseball is a game of countless decisions, each of them incalculably changing the contest and its unknown outcome. It's a game that is a bit like life, insofar as we all step up to the metaphorical plate, squinting out at a crowded infield and a wily pitcher to take our best swings and see what happens. It's a game that is a bit like love, in that it asks anyone who plays it to risk making a fool of herself or himself in front of everyone. And it's a game that is a bit like faith when it asks us to believe in the possibilities that exist even with two outs and two strikes in the bottom of the ninth.

It was actually Rabbi Jesus who first taught me how to hold on to a certain faith in spite of the inherent ambiguity in our living. Growing up, I was struck not so much by the miraculous tales of resurrection at the end of the canonical gospels, but by the brevity of the rabbi's life, the swift moving sense that each chapter represented another closed frame in his story. Every few pages, I got the same feeling I got when the scorekeeper in

the outfield changed the boxed number at the middle or end of an inning and the game moved closer to its conclusion. It always seemed to me that Rabbi Jesus, once he set out, was following a very dangerous path. As I read his critique of institutional religion, his inclusion of all people, including traditional outcasts and enemies, and his commitment to nonviolence, I worried about him. Of course, the gospels tried to assure me that everything would be all right. After all, the rabbi was always resurrected at the end of the story, showing up heroically to greet the women who mourned, the friend who doubted, or the strangers traveling upon a dusty road. Yet, while I had been admittedly worried, these endings always felt a bit too tidy to me. Perhaps I was an early existentialist or just a baseball fan, but it seemed to me that when the game is over, it's over, and its rules don't bend for the great ones any more than the quickly forgotten. So it was a strange comfort to me the first time I read the rabbi's story in a different way.

This morning's text contains one of the endings to the Book of Mark. I say one of the endings because it isn't the only one. Earlier we read from Mark 16, beginning in verse 5 and ending with verse 8. We dropped the story right after Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome go looking for Jesus' body in his tomb after his death. They do not find him but rather encounter a heavenly emissary who tells them that the rabbi is not there; he has been raised. The women are encouraged to go and spread this news, and, verse 8 informs us, they flee, seized in the language of the old story, with "terror and amazement." It's really quite an abrupt ending, like a line drive that gets caught by the pitcher for the third out in the ninth before anyone can react. And it's nearly that unsatisfying. Because this ending of Mark contains no rabbi, no appearance, and no clear resolution. The curtain drops rather ambiguously leaving us, as readers, to

wonder what just happened. Now after verse 8 it is possible to keep reading. What follows, in most study Bibles, is both a shorter ending and a longer ending to the Book of Mark. It is believed that the shorter ending was added not earlier than the 4th Century C.E. and the longer ending, commentaries inform us, was likely known as early as the 2nd Century C.E. yet happens to be missing from our earliest manuscripts. You can find all of this in the Bible yourself, but, in sum, the shorter ending tacks on the idea that Jesus was sent out into the world through his followers, in a sort of spiritual sense, while the longer ending is a bit more Hollywood, offering a Jesus who reappears to Mary Magdalene and the disciples, offers a commission, and then ascends into heaven. These endings wrap up a bit more neatly than verse 8 does, and my suggestion that at least one of them is like Hollywood was intentionally made. For the longer ending of Mark has always reminded me of the ending to the film version of a baseball classic.

In 1952 Bernard Malamud published the first edition of his novel, *The Natural*. The book is beautifully written, its characters are complex, and its ending is deeply ambiguous. On the surface, the book is about baseball, but it doesn't take more than a few pages until readers understand that the narrative is a metaphor for the human condition. The book's protagonist, a ballplayer named Roy Hobbs, struggles throughout with his talents and temptations, his failure and promise, and he finds himself repeatedly making choices that he didn't think he'd have to make in the midst of the dynamically changing game of his life. Here I do not have the heart to spoil the ending for you, but let's just say that the book does not end like the companion film, made in 1984. I suspect that most of us have seen the film version, or at least a clip of its ending, starring a handsome Robert Redford as Roy Hobbs, who steps up to the plate with two outs and two

strikes in the bottom of the ninth to hit a pennant-winning home run. The ballplayer exits a conquering hero, and, just before the credits, we are treated to a soft image of him tossing the ball with his son on an idyllic farm somewhere. It is the happiest of happy endings, washed of any ambiguity as the characters settle down to their seemingly just reward. The only thing missing is the commission and ascension to heaven. Again, what's so striking about this ending is how different it is from that of the book. Trying sincerely not to ruin it, I might just suggest that Malamud's book ends a bit more like the earlier manuscripts of Mark leaving us to wonder, as readers, as fans, what just happened.

This brings us full circle, then, to the way we choose to tell stories. And whether we are telling a story about Jesus, a baseball player, or ourselves, I can't help but ask why we need our stories to have such happy endings? Put a little more precisely, I wonder why we need our endings to fit certain definitions of success? For Jesus, as I read him, was not successful in conventional ways. He defied many of the cultural norms of his day, he spoke in ways that were strange and sometimes ambiguous, he caused more than his fair share of spiritual unease, and, though he played his ninth inning masterfully, the game of his life was as short as a pitchers' duel and they laid him to rest at the young age of 33. Whatever power he had and whatever success it wrought was, in my view, in the realm of his ideas. His influence was felt not in conventional records set or traditional trophies won, but in the spirit with which he lived and the radical wisdom that he left to anyone and everyone who would follow him down a dusty highway or a chalked base path, without any guarantees save the joy of the game itself. In the rabbi we see an example of one who stepped up to the plate with the days he had and was unafraid to take his swings. That's my interpretation as a baseball fan, anyway. I'll leave it to you to sort out how

you understand Jesus in the bottom of the ninth. Shorter ending or longer ending?

Ambiguity or certainty? Divine or human? Or perhaps, following the logic of faith, a bit of everything, the sharp-edged details worn over time like the rafters at Wrigley Field or the stairwells ascending to the Red Line train.

I think I was a bit surprised when the umpire called the final out and I realized that we'd seen a full nine innings after all. The clouds had mostly cleared and there was a soft breeze blowing over the infield into the stands. Surprisingly, the game had surpassed all of my expectations. St. Louis won what had started as a close contest before Chicago pitching issued a number of walks in a boo-ridden sixth inning that the Cardinals managed to break open with four runs scored. The fans on both sides were great, sitting on the edge of their seats, cheering every pitch, passing the peanuts, and teaching their children how to keep score. All of the sights and smells were there, all of the rich history of a game, a place, a team, and its fans. And then, following the rules, after the recording of the 54th out, the game was over. No one came back to play again or suggested that we try a different ending. We simply collected our things and made for the exits. The next day, I should mention, the Cubs pounded the Cardinals to even the series. Because in baseball you never know what is going to happen.

In a sport of a thousand clichés, one of the truest relates to the unknown narrative of every contest. "That's why they play the game," say the old timers. My hope is that this week, this summer, this season, we might remember the stories of the great ones, and, without knowing the outcome, how they chose to play. For all the followers of the rabbi and the box scores.

May it be so.