People from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to John
and were baptized by in the river Jordan confessing their sins.

John the baptist, prophet of the Lord. Once upon a time John must have thought that God was
bringing in a new age through him. People everywhere, listening believing, turning. Success, success,
success. His fame spreading.

But his story ends with a young girl, dancing before her father and his guests. Herod was so pleased
by her dance he promised her anything. She asked for John’s head.

Not wanting to break an oath before his guests, Herod had John beheaded. Such a promising
beginning for John, such a tragic ending.

Mark tells us this story right in the middle of telling us this about Jesus’ disciples. We read: they
went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, anointed with oil many who
were sick and cured them. They were a success – even the king, Herod heard about Jesus and his disciples.

Yet at this very point Mark chooses to tell us about the fate of John. Right after telling about the
disciples’ success, right before telling of the crowds around Jesus and the feeding of the five thousand.

It is as if Mark wants to say to us, faithful ones may have success for a time but in the end the world
cannot tolerate them. Consider John and what happened to him.

And we who know the rest of Jesus’ story know how the crowds did not stand with him either. A
different ruler named Pilate, for different reasons ordered Jesus’ execution.

In the book of Acts we read of more troubles for those who follow Jesus, Stephen stoned to death –
Peter imprisoned, Paul’s life threatened.

Have you ever wanted to have some sign, some clear word, some assurance that you are on the right
track? The money you give, the time you spend, the sacrifices you make, do they count with God? do
they matter? Does it matter that young people go to paint and fix up the homes of strangers? Or that you work on a habitat house? Or give your money for a hunger center in East Cleveland? Is God watching?

Think of how that question must have haunted the disciples of John the Baptist as they carried John’s headless body to a tomb. Isn’t God great they must have shouted in the river days, seeing the proud humbling themselves in repentance and baptism. But now John was dead and Herod the murderer was probably preparing for his next party. Is God watching?

From time to time one of you will tell me of suffering ones. A child stricken with cancer. Parents doing their best to cope but then one of them also struck down. Sometimes the story you tell describes tragedy upon tragedy, heaped upon people who just do not deserve it. You are asking, “Is God watching?” Is God in charge?

Was John a fool giving his life the way he did? Did his living and dying matter? Or did he sacrifice for nothing?

Once Jesus said, “Of those born of a woman there was no one greater than John the Baptist but the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”

The kingdom of heaven. That is the great trump card. Without the resurrection Jesus is simply a fool. His life a waste. A tragedy. Without the resurrection he helped a few people live a little better for a few years – gave them a meal or two – but they died just the same. If there is no resurrection then Herod is the winner, John the loser.

But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead.

And you will be too.

The second lesson declares that you were destined for adoption as God’s children through Jesus Christ. You were chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him.
You have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of your trespasses. Destined, chosen, forgiven.

You. Through Jesus Christ.

God is watching.

The best word will not come from the heroes of this world.