

Chapter Four

Mark 4:1-9 Sowing Seeds of Truth

Then once again he began to teach them by the lake-side. A bigger crowd than ever collected around him so that he got into the little boat on the lake and sat down, while the crowd covered the ground right up to the water's edge. He taught them a great deal in parables, and in the course of his teaching he said, "Listen! A man once went out to sow his seed and as he sowed, some seed fell by the roadside and the birds came and gobbled it up. Some of the seed fell among the rocks where there was not much soil, and sprang up very quickly because there was no depth of earth. But when the sun rose it was scorched, and because it had no root, it withered away. And some of the seed fell among thorn-bushes and the thorns grew up and choked the life out of it, and it bore no crop. And there was some seed which fell on good soil, and when it grew, produced a crop which yielded thirty or sixty or even a hundred times as much as the seed."

Then he added, "Every man who has ears should use them!"

In Mark's story, we now return to the seashore where enormous crowds are gathering. Jesus teaches the crowds from a boat sitting on the water while the crowds are on the shore. Mark implies that these crowds are on the shore of a **new red sea** awaiting a **new Exodus**. Jesus is in a **boat out on the water**. This "water" is the water of a new era in Spirit breakthrough. Jesus is out on this **water**, but the crowds are still on the **shore**.

Jesus teaches them in parables--that is, he makes the crowds translate what he is saying from simple stories into *Spirit Stories*. He apparently assumes they have come to hear something about Spirit, but he makes them look beyond what he is saying to the Spirit water or the Spirit desert in their own lives. His teaching methods assume that no one can hear a Spirit teaching unless he or she has Spirit ears.

Mark is teaching in this same way. He is telling *Spirit Stories*. Implicitly, Mark keeps asking us, "Do you have Spirit ears? Listen carefully!"

This particular parable refers to the seeds of teaching that Jesus and Mark are scattering. What happens to seeds depends on the ground upon which they fall. There is hard path, thin rocky soil, thorn-infested soil, and good earth. Some people don't hear at all, the seeds just lie there until some bird eats them. Some people hear a little, but their soil is thin and they forget it soon. Others hear pretty well, but their soil is growing so many competing diversions that the teaching is choked out. Fortunately, almost every group contains some people who are good earth—who hear deeply and grow a big crop that scatters more seeds across the earth.

Which of these three patterns tends to be your style when your "soil" isn't good: the hard path, thin soil, or lots of weeds?

When do you remember being good soil: taking in seeds and giving them extended growth?

Mark 4:10-20 Never Quite Understanding the Teacher

Then when they were by themselves, his close followers and the twelve asked him about the parables, and he told them. “The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those who do not know the secret, everything remains in parables, so that, ‘seeing they may see and not perceive, and hearing they may hear and not understand; lest they should turn, and their sins be forgiven them’ ”.

Then he continued, “Do you really not understand this parable? Then how are you going to understand all the other parables? The man who sows, sows the message. As for those who are by the roadside where the message is sown, as soon as they hear it Satan comes at once and takes away what has been sown in their minds. Similarly, the seed sown among the rocks represents those who hear the message without hesitation and accept it joyfully. But they have no real roots and do not last—when trouble or persecution arises because of the message, they give up their faith at once. Then there are the seeds which were sown among thorn-bushes. These are the people who hear the message, but the worries of this world and the false glamour of riches and all sorts of other ambitions creep in and choke the life out of what they have heard, and it produces no crop in their lives. As for the seed sown on good soil, this means the men who hear the message and accept it and do produce a crop—thirty, sixty, even a hundred times as much as they received.”

Mark continues to elaborate the parable of the seeds and also this central theme: **Spirit hearing is a much deeper matter than just hearing the words.** God’s imperial rule (the reign of Awesome Infinite Silence) is a secret not readily understood by the crowds. This is why parables are used: to make the crowds grapple with the extent to which they do not understand what they are hearing. But Jesus, according to Mark’s story, expects his inner circle of disciples to understand the secret.

Mark used a literary device that became the model for the other New Testament Gospels. In all four gospels, the disciples are frequently portrayed as *Spirit dumb-dumbs* who do not quite get Jesus’ teachings. Jesus, on the other hand, is portrayed as the one who knows the “secret” that Mark is writing his gospel to help us see for ourselves. Mark was smoking out the misunderstandings of his current Christian community in the voices of these disciples and then clarifying those misunderstandings with the voice of Jesus. So what is Mark saying to us? Mark is making it explicitly clear that this parable is not simply about Jesus’ experiences as a teacher but about Mark’s experiences as a teacher and yours and mine and anyone else’s experience who attempts to share the Christian message. (1) Some people are not going to get it at all; the message just bounces. The kingdom of evil eats the message immediately. (2) Some will get it superficially, but lose it soon through a lack of personal depth. If distress or persecution come because of the message, they are shaken loose from the truth of it and abandon it as a mistake. (3) Others lose the message by having too many distractions in their lives: the worries of the times, the seductiveness of wealth, and other yearnings “choke” the message. (4) Fortunately, however, there is a fourth group who do hear the message and they produce fruit and more seeds—thirty, sixty, one hundred-fold—that is, they live their whole lives differently and communicate to others with word, deed, and presence this basic new life of authenticity. Perhaps they teach courses. Perhaps they meet with the awakening ones and nurture them over time. Perhaps they transform their whole *parish* of responsibility. Perhaps they do nothing

remarkable, but the fact that they simply stop being such a problem to others spreads amazement to all who have known them.

Thirty seeds mean thirty what? Maybe thirty other people who hear the message. Thirty wonderfully revolutionary actions. Thirty years of Spirit living. Thirty centuries of religious heritage. Perhaps all the above and more. These seeds are very contagious.

As a Spirit learner, when have you experienced seeds that were planted in you grow?

As a Spirit teacher, when have you been aware of this wide variety of responses to your teachings?

How do you feel about the challenge to surrender the fruits of your teaching to the freedom of others, and to the sun and rainfall of that Awesome Infinite Nurturer?

Mark 4: 21-23 Hiding Your Light

Then he said to them, “Is a lamp brought into the room to be put under a bucket or underneath the bed? Surely its place is on the lamp-stand! There is nothing hidden which is not meant to be made perfectly plain one day, and there are no secrets which are not meant one day to be common knowledge. If a man has ears he should use them!”

So what is this light that we are supposed to let shine? A bunch of religious doctrines? No. A collection of kindly deeds? No. A piece of occult wisdom? No. The light is what we know when we know the majestic mystery of Being. This secret is an attack on all delusion. This secret is our true nature, the authentic fulfillment of our lives and hearts. So why is it a secret? Because few want to know the secret. Indeed, some people are going to persecute anyone who shines this secret from their lamp stand. To put this secret on our lamp stand is risky. We will certainly be rejected by some, and possibly harmed by others.

When or how have you hidden your truth, your true self?

Mark 4:24-25 The Truth Economy

“Be careful how you listen,” he said to them. “Whatever measure you use will be used towards you, and even more than that. For the man who has something will receive more. As for the man who has nothing, even his nothing will be taken away.”

To those who face the truth and be their truth, more truth will be given. To those who don't, even what truth they have will be taken away. This is the way life works in the economy of our relationship with Truth with a capital “T.” But what is Truth anyway?

Many of us in this 21st century know that Truth is a tricky concept. Objective truth in the scientific sense never reaches some absolute truth of the cosmos. In this sense the Truth is always a Mystery that we are forever approaching with our finite minds. This same dynamic is also true

of the inward or contemplative approach to truth. The truth we know about ourselves and the inner dynamics of being human is never complete. There is always more to know.

Mark is going to reveal to us who are willing to know a secret about Truth with a capital “T”—the truth about that Mystery or Infinite Silence that always remains silent. This revelation is about the trustworthiness toward us of this Infinite Silence that is speaking to us in every event of our lives.

When have you noticed that you don't know the full truth?

When have you wondered about the trustworthiness of whatever is the full truth?

When do you recall actively living your true being and being led to still more authentic living?

And when have you noticed that when not following your true lights, you thereby became even more lost in the darkness?

Mark 4:26-29 Our Seeds of Truth can Produce a Harvest

Then he said, “The kingdom of God is like a man scattering seed on the ground and then going to bed each night and getting up every morning, while the seed sprouts and grows up, though he has no idea how it happens. The earth produces a crop without any help from anyone: first a blade, then the ear of corn, then the full-grown grain in the ear. And as soon as the crop is ready, he sends his reapers in without delay, for the harvest-time has come.”

The sower of the seeds of Truth does not have to make them grow. Seeds will grow on their own. However paltry it may seem to plant a few seeds, there will be a big harvest. This is just the way life works in the Commonwealth of Truth (the Reign of Reality). Our seeds may be tiny, but Reality is Big. Seeds that awaken people to Reality will Produce, not because of our cleverness or personal qualities, but because good seeds grow in the good earth, True teachings are supported by Reality, and Reality is very powerful support.

What are some of the tiny seeds you are planting and in whose lives are you planting them?

Tell how you have found it a challenge to trust Reality to produce the harvest.

Mark 4:30-34 The Tiniest Seed can Produce a Huge plant

Then he continued, “What can we say the kingdom of God is like? How shall we put it in a parable? It is like a tiny grain of mustard-seed which, when it is sown, is smaller than any seed that is ever sown. But after it is sown in the earth, it grows up and becomes bigger than any other plant. It shoots out great branches so that birds can come and nest in its shelter.”

So he taught them his message with many parables such as their minds could take in. He did not speak to them at all without using parables, although in private he explained everything to his disciples.

The parables are meant to be understood by the disciples--by those who are awakening to Spirit truth. But parables are meant to puzzle those who are not yet awake. You can't reason people into awakening. Spirit truth is like an absurdity that invades a closed rational universe. When such bits of absurdity are actually true; they are powerful. The Power of Truth is the theme of this last parable. When you are dealing with something as powerful as Truth (that is, the secret of the Reign of Reality), the fact that the beginnings are small should not discourage you. When Truth takes root, something Big will happen. Our job as truth-tellers is just to tell the truth, and let the harvest be what the harvest will be.

When have you been surprised at the large harvest that Reality has wrought from your small seeds of truth?

How does the discussion of these secrets about Truth distress you?

How does the discussion of these secrets about Truth encourage you?

Mark 4:35-41 Commanding the Wind and the Sea

On the evening of that day, he said to them, "Let us cross over to the other side of the lake."

So they sent the crowd home and took him with them in the little boat in which he had been sitting, accompanied by other small craft. Then came a violent squall of wind which drove the waves aboard the boat until it was almost swamped. Jesus was in the stern asleep on the cushion. They awoke him with the words, "Master, don't you care that we're drowning?"

And he woke up, rebuked the wind, and said to the waves, "Hush now! Be still!" The wind dropped and everything was very still.

"Why are you so frightened? What has happened to your faith?! he asked them.

But sheer awe swept over them and they kept saying to each other, "Who ever can he be?—even the wind and the waves do what he tells them!"

This strange story is another parable. Jesus is commanding the wind and the sea of my and your actually lives. So what might this parable mean? Just before telling this story, Mark has reminded us that the unawake crowds will continue to find Truth a secret that is hidden in his parables. And for the inner circle of disciples (those who are awakening), Jesus (the embodiment of Truth) will clarify everything.

So let us place ourselves in Mark's parable about Jesus in which Jesus symbolizes someone who embodies the Truth. And let us see if we recognize this experience of the Truth-bearer appearing to us as a surprisingly powerful presence.

Toward *evening* the disciples enter again upon the *water* crossing to the other side of the lake. Keep in mind that this is a Spirit story. We are being invited to share in some sort of *Spirit evening* out upon some sort of *Spirit water*.

“A great squall came up and the waves begin to rock them.” Mark is describing what life is like for those of us who have volunteered to live the Truth.

The disciples find that Jesus is not concerned about these battering winds and waves; he is asleep on a cushion in the stern of the boat. *They wake him up.* Jesus *rises up* and commands the wind to *calm down*.

Again, we need to view this story as a type of parable that Mark (or someone prior to Mark) constructed. So, let us ask what it is like to view the situation from Jesus’ point of view? His view is that the external situation is not a big problem; it is not tough enough to justify panic. His view is that the disciples are immature. He says, “Why are you so frightened? What has happened to your faith.” In other words “Why is it that still don’t trust Realty?” The shocking implication is that the disciples, according to Jesus, should be able themselves to calm the winds of anxiety and command the seas of opposition.

On the surface Mark makes it seem like he is talking about something externally miraculous—commanding the natural world. But Mark’s style, remember, is a work of secrets, a book of parables. Mark is asking we readers to reach inside ourselves for a deeper Truth than the outward form for his stories. Mark is teaching in parables, just as he remembers Jesus as a teacher of parables. Mark is focusing on a Spirit Truth that we can all know for ourselves. Jesus is not giving us some sort of occult truth that he alone can tell us. The “calm” that Mark is actually talking about is an inward calm of trust, an imperturbability of relying upon the Infinite. Faith means finding the equanimity of never being the victim of any external situation.

Mark intends for us to “get it” for ourselves—to see with our won inward eyes that these qualities of the Jesus exemplar of profound humanness can be our qualities. And we are also informed that we, like these disciples in this story, are going to be amazed that this calm and command of the situation is profoundly human for each of us. Indeed, this quality that Jesus is manifesting is terrifying to the disciples. These dumbfounded disciples ask again the fundamental question of Mark’s entire gospel: “Who ever can this fellow be, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

When have you been amazed at the power and fearlessness of a Spirit teacher?

When have you yourself “commanded this inner wind and the sea” and had them obey you?

If you must honestly answer to these two questions with, “Never,” that is good enough for now. Honesty is the roadway to truthfulness.

Chapter Five

Mark 5: 1-20 The Sixth Healing—A Man with a Legion of Demons

So they arrived on the other side of the lake in the country of the Gerasenes. As Jesus was getting out of the boat, a man in the grip of an evil spirit rushed to meet him from among the tombs where he was living. It was no longer possible for any human being to restrain him even with a chain. Indeed he had frequently been secured with fetters and lengths of chain, but he had simply snapped the chains and broken the fetters in pieces. No one could do anything with him. All through the night as well as in the day-time he screamed among the tombs and on the hill-side, and cut himself with stones. Now, as soon as he saw Jesus in the distance, he ran and knelt before him, yelling at the top of his voice, “What have you got to do with me, Jesus, Son of the most high God? For God’s sake, don’t torture me!”

For Jesus had already said, “Come out of this man, you evil spirit!”

Then he asked him, “What is your name?” “My name is legion,” he replied, “for there are many of us.”

Then he begged and prayed him not to send “them” out of the country.

A large herd of pigs was grazing there on the hill-side, and the evil spirits implored him, “Send us over to the pigs and we’ll get into them!”

So Jesus allowed them to do this, and they came out of the man, and made off and went into the pigs. The whole herd of about two thousand stampeded down the cliff into the lake and was drowned. The swineherds took to their heels and spread their story in the city and all over the countryside. Then the people came to see what had happened. As they approached Jesus, they saw the man who had been devil-possessed sitting there properly clothed and perfectly sane—the same man who had been possessed by “legion”—and they were really frightened. Those who had seen the incident told them what had happened to the devil-possessed man and about the disaster to the pigs. Then they began to implore Jesus to leave their district. As he was embarking on the small boat, the man who had been possessed begged that he might go with him. But Jesus would not allow this. “Go home to your own people,” he told him, “And tell them what the Lord has done for you, and how kind he has been to you!”

So the man went off and began to spread throughout the Ten Towns the story of what Jesus had done for him. And they were all simply amazed.

Let us pay attention to Mark’s allusions. It is by the lake (recall the Red or Reed Sea of the Exodus story) that we encounter someone controlled by a *legion* of demons. “Legion” is a military term, the Roman Legion was 100 men (also recall the chariots of the Pharaoh) The demons enter two thousand pigs and are *drowned* in the sea (recall again those futile chariots). These allusion to the Exodus would not have been missed by Mark’s first readers. Pharaoh’s legions (that is, his army) got drowned in the Exodus story. “Pharaoh and his army” is a symbol for something everywhere present in human experience. Rome and its legions was surely in Mark’s mind. These legions of oppression, including the ever present threat of crucifixion, was a circumstance that had indeed driven most of the people of Israel somewhat insane. This mad Israelite by the sea was infested with a legion of demons. Mark is using the parable of this thoroughly insane person to tell us about a very deep sickness of the soul. Perhaps we have also been driven bonkers by the insanity of our social situation.

Mark intends for us to get it that this person is in really bad shape: he is the split personality of all time, a 100 demons at least, maybe more, since there were 2000 pigs. That is a lot of personalities to get split into. And this very sick man lives in the tombs. No one is able to bind him. He howls day and night. He bruises himself. This man was a horrific presence in the whole town and country-side.

And this man is a symbol for the spirit condition of first century Israel as a whole. And Israel here does not mean “those Jews” but “the people of God”—those called to the service of the Final Reality. Mark is talking about his own religious community that is supposed to be leading the entire world toward the Truth. Mark is focused on bringing forth a new Israel, a new Exodus of the people of God. If today we want to say our religious community or our nation is possessed by a legion of demons, you are in sync with Mark’s symbolic story.

Again, “demons,” in Mark’s use of that term, point to a Spirit malady. In Mark’s story these evil spirits, these inner personality splits, recognize Jesus as a positive Spirit presence. These are spirits that fear rather than follow Jesus. These evil spirits know that this presence of Spirit authenticity in their midst means death to the evil spirits. So these evil spirits have to bargain for their lives with this manifestation of authentic humanness (Jesus). An evil spirit is not part of the essential being of a human being, but a perversion that can be taken away. So when the good comes, the evil is threatened with extinction. These are the dynamics that Mark is picturing. The evil spirits in this story are transferred to pigs who stampede into the sea (recall Egyptian chariots washed away, and think Roman legions robbed of their tyrannical power.)

When have you been struck by the vast extent to which humanity is demon possessed?

When have you yourself been one who was, symbolically speaking, slashing yourself with stones among the tombs?

It is interesting to note that in Mark’s story, the whole town was terrified when they saw the demoniac clothed with his wits about him. They asked Jesus to leave their region. Why is this whole town (another symbol for Israel) afraid of such a deliverance? Because they also are possessed by demons, and they do not want to believe that such deliverances are possible.

The ex-demoniac pleaded to leave this demon-infested place and go with Jesus, but Jesus asks him to go home to his people and tell them what the Infinite Reality has done for him, what mercy has been shown to him.

We may have felt at times like this ex-demoniac, “Please let me go away from my demon-infested town and be with those who have already been healed.” Mark is indicating here that all of us are healed in order to bring healing to others. We are called to celebrate our healing among those who do not want to be healed, and who are scared of those who have been healed. People often do not even want to know that healing is possible. People are quite comfortable with their demon-infested lives, and want to be left alone.

Only the healed or the ones being healing realize how uncomfortable they always were and how preferable healing is to slashing themselves with stones among the tombs.

When have you as a healed person dreaded the task of telling others about your healing?

**Mark 5:21-43 The Seventh and Eighth Healings:
a 12-year-old sickness of an Israelite woman
and a 12-year-old Israelite daughter thought dead**

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side of the lake, a great crowd collected around him as he stood on the shore. Then came a man called Jairus, one of the synagogue presidents. And when he saw Jesus, he knelt before him, pleading desperately for his help. “My little girl is dying,” he said. “Will you come and put your hands on her—then she will get better and live.”

Jesus went off with him, followed by large crowds jostling at his elbow. Among them was a woman who had a hemorrhage for twelve years and who had gone through a great deal at the hands of many doctors (or physicians), spending all her money in the process. She had derived no benefit from them but, on the contrary, was getting worse. This woman had heard about Jesus and came up behind him under cover of the crowd, and touched his cloak, “For I can only touch his clothes,” she said, “I shall be all right.”

The hemorrhage stopped immediately, and she knew in herself that she was cured of her trouble. At once Jesus knew intuitively that power had gone out of him, and he turned round in the middle of the crowd and said, “Who touched my clothes?”

His disciples replied, “You can see this crowd jostling you. How can you ask, ‘Who touched me?’”

But he looked all round at their faces to see who had done so. Then the woman, scared and shaking all over because she knew that she was the one to whom this thing had happened, came and flung herself before him and told him the whole story. But he said to her, “Daughter, it is your faith that has healed you. Go home in peace, and be free from your trouble.”

While he was still speaking, messengers arrived from the synagogue president’s house, saying, “Your daughter is dead—there is no need to bother the master any further.”

But when Jesus heard this, he said, “Now don’t be afraid, just go on believing!”

Then he allowed no one to follow him except Peter and James and John, James’s brother. They arrived at the president’s house and Jesus noticed the hubbub and all the weeping and wailing, and as he went in, he said to the people in the house, “Why are you making such a noise with your crying? The child is not dead; she is fast asleep.”

They greeted this with a scornful laugh. But Jesus turned them all out, and taking only the father and mother and his own companions with him, went into the room where the child was. Then he took the little girl’s hand and said to her in Aramaic, “Little girl, I tell you to get up!”

At once she jumped to her feet and walked around the room, for she was twelve years old. This sight sent the others nearly out their minds with joy. But Jesus gave them strict instructions not to let anyone know what had happened—and ordered food to be given to the little girl.

Mark mingles the next two healing stories together. We start off toward the home of a synagogue official whose 12-year-old daughter is on the verge of death and on the way we meet a woman who is suffering from a 12-year vaginal flow of blood that no doctor can cure. At first glance

nothing seems to unite these two stories except the number 12. Mark's audience would not have missed the significance of that number. They would have known that Mark wanted them to think of "Israel as a whole" (the twelve tribes).

On one side of the lake (think sea), Jesus had just delivered a man from a legion of demons who were drowned in the sea, and now on the other side of the lake (sea), Jesus is going to heal a 12-year-old sickness and raise a 12-year-old child from near death. This is an allusion to the Exodus. Mark is also alluding to a new Exodus. On one side of this lake, Mark tells of a demon possessed Israel that healed of a Legion of demons who drown in the the lake. Then in the other side of the lake, Israel is still sick. First, Mark implies that Israel is sick with a carefully hidden sickness that is robbing her of a full life. With the second story, Mark is implying that Israel is all but dead to the extent that most people say, "There is no use."

Mark's picture of the state of his "people of God" is surprisingly similar to how many of us perceive the state of Christianity in these early years of the twenty-first century. The current manifestations of Christianity is clearly sick with a carefully hidden sicknesses that rob her of full life. Many doctors have tried to help, but have failed.

The woman (Israel) knows that she is grievously ill but does not want to expose her need. Nevertheless she has faith; she trusts that if she only touches Jesus' clothes she will be healed. But this secretive reaching out does not go unnoticed by Jesus. He exposes her and brings her secret out into the open. She tells her whole sad story. Then Jesus explains to her, and to us, that it was her own trust that cured her. She touched Jesus' clothes, but it was not the clothes that cured her. Jesus' clothes were just plain peasant garb, no supernaturally magical attire was needed. Trust is the healing potion.

What would it mean for a sick Christian community to confess its sickness?

What would it mean for a sick Christian community to reach out in trust?

While Jesus was still speaking to the woman about her trust, the synagogue official's people approach with the news that the synagogue official's daughter is dead. There is no need to bother the teacher any further. (Mark's first listeners were aware of Mark's allusions that the daughter Israel is being pronounced dead, even by some member of the Israel community.)

Perhaps such voices still appear in our heads today: "There is no need for an awake Christian teacher to be bothered any further with sick Christianity. This daughter is dead."

But Jesus does not give up on this seemingly hopeless situation. The situation, he claims, is not hopeless, but is still full of possibilities. She is only asleep. So Jesus proceeds to walk to the synagogue official's house, and there he takes "Israel as a whole" by the hand and says, "Get up." And the little girl gets right up and starts walking around.

Jesus gives the girl's family strict orders not to tell anyone about this rise (resurrection) from a seemingly hopeless situation (death). Again, Mark's secrecy motif means that we readers of his "Good News" have not yet understood the "Good News" that Mary is alluding to. Mark is alluding to *resurrection*, but he wants to teach us in parables, because he wants us to "get it" that the *resurrection* is a secret known only to those who are undergoing interior transformation. Mark is tantalizing we hearers of his gospel to look deeply within ourselves. Mark is evoking us to ask him to tell more about this "getting-up-from-death" secret. And later on in his gospel, Mark does say more.

Why do you think Mark keeps picturing resurrection as a secret?

One more item in the dead-daughter story requires comment. Jesus tells the parents to give the risen girl something to *eat*. Mark has introduced a new theme; giving food (nurture) to those who have been rescued from Spirit death. Mark will develop much more the topic of feeding the *New Israel*.

If we going to give leadership to an awakening Christianity, what do we give awakening Christians to eat?

Chapter Six

Mark 6: 1-6 No Respect for a Prophet at Home

Then he left that district and came into his own native town followed by his disciples. When the Sabbath day came, he began to teach in the synagogue. The congregation was astonished and remarked, "Where does he get all this? What is this wisdom that he has been given—and what about these marvelous things that he can do? He's only the carpenter, Mary's son, the brother of James, Joses, Judas and Simon; and his sisters are living here with us!" And they were deeply offended with him. But Jesus said to them, "No prophet goes unhonored—except in his native town or with his own relations or in his own home!"

And he could do nothing miraculous there apart from laying his hands on a few sick people and healing them; their lack of faith astonished him.

Jesus returns to his home town. His teachings and wonders amaze people, but they cannot accept the truth that this local boy has become such a force. They even resent him. They are offended with him. Jesus himself is amazed at their lack of trust. "No prophet goes without respect," Jesus says, "except in his own home town, among his own relatives, or in his own home." Jesus is not able to do at home what he could do in other places.

No other story in the New Testament makes more plain than this story that the personal force of a prophet (preacher, saint, etc.) is not what heals people. People are healed by their own trust in the Reality that the prophet point out to them.

The home town people let their old images of this man blot out his current presence as a prophet, and thereby the Truth that this prophet is seeking to communicate. The old imagery in their minds is getting in the way of being impressed by what he says. We still operate in this way when what we think about someone is clouding our vision of who that person actually is in this present moment. Perhaps we say, "This guy is only my classmate who lived on Duncan street. I knew him when he was in high school. He was a lousy basketball player. This guy used to mow my parents' lawn." Or: "This man is only my daddy." Or: "This woman is only my mommy." Or: "This woman is only my wife: she cooks my meals." Or: "This man is only my husband. He carries out the trash and does the dishes and sometimes forgets to do that". In other words: *How can he or she be a prophetic messenger from Final Reality to my deepest life?*

Also, this story reminds us that Jesus was, in the first instance, just an ordinary person like you or me. In Mark's story there is no virgin birth incident. Jesus is simply a son of an ordinary peasant women with many brothers and sisters. No one remembers any miracles. His Super Birth of Infinite Siring is still a secret. It is clearly a paradox for Mark that this ordinary man and this Infinite Siring is happening in the same person.

In other words, it remains a pressing contemporary question: How could Jesus be, how could you be, how could I be, the bearer of the critical healing *good news* from the Silence of the Infinite Reality meeting us in all the events of our lives?

When have you experienced your role as truth-bringer being rejected by people who know you well in ordinary ways?

Why is it that people can be so blind to the prophetic quality of the prophet?

Mark 6:7-13 Sending out the Twelve

Then he made his way round the villages, continuing his teaching. He summoned the twelve, and began to send them out in twos, giving them power over evil spirits. He instructed them to take nothing for the road except a staff—no satchel, no bread and no money in their pockets. They were to wear sandals and not to take more than one coat. And he told them, "Wherever you are, when you go into a house, stay there until you leave that place. And wherever people will not welcome you or listen to what you have to say, leave them and shake the dust off your feet as a protest against them!"

So they went out and preached that men should change their whole outlook. They expelled many evil spirits and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.

Mark startles us with the story about Jesus trusting his naive and struggling disciples to be bearers of the critical *good news* from the *Infinite Silence*. He gives them authority over unclean Spirits. "Authority" is great poetry here, for we have to speak strongly to unclean Spirits. You have to order them to shut up and get out. Mark is telling us in his typically secretive way that not only could Jesus, an ordinary human being, do amazing things, but also ordinary human beings like you and me may also be given "authority" to do the sort of things that Jesus did.

Indeed, it is implied that we, if we are going to be among Jesus' disciples, have to *take authority* over evil Spirits in ourselves first of all, then also in others, awakening their own authority to expel their evil spirits

In this story, Jesus assists his naive and weak disciples by not sending them out alone. He sends them out two by two. And he gives them instructions for the road to keep them focused on their task. They are to dress and act like itinerant prophets to the poor. They are to be content with whatever accommodations and food are given to them.

And if they are not welcomed or listened to, they are not to become discouraged and quit, they are to shake the dust of that town off their feet as a witness against that town and go on to the next town.

This story makes clear that rejection by others need not mean that what we are saying and doing is the wrong thing, or that we are doing the right thing poorly. Rather, we respect the freedom of others to say "No" as well as "Yes" to our message. And we respect our own freedom to dust off that "No" and move on. We need not collapse into a heap of discouragement over people's rejection. We need not stay, beg, or argue to be heard. We can simply shake the dust off our shoes and move on.

When has the fear of rejection discouraged you from saying the good news you had to say?

When have you stayed too long with seriously rejecting people, and not moved on to more ready listeners.

These ill-prepared disciple did indeed go two by two and supported each other in announcing to people how they might turn around their whole lives. Miracle of miracles, they were often heard. They drove out demons. They healed many. Wonder of wonders, the truth worked.

When have you been surprised that your witnessing to the truth about life had a positive effect?

Mark 6: 14-29 Herod's Guilty Conscience

All this came to the ears of king Herod, for Jesus' reputation was spreading, and people were saying that John the Baptist had risen from the dead, and that was why he was showing such miraculous powers. Others maintained that he was Elijah, and others that he was one of the prophets of the old days come back again. But when Herod heard of all this, he said, "It must be John whom I beheaded, risen from the dead!"

For Herod himself had sent and arrested John and had him bound in prison, all on account of Herodias, wife of his brother Philip. He had married her, though John used to say to Herod, "It is not right for you to possess your own brother's wife." Herodias herself was furious with John for this, and wanted to have him executed, but she could not do it, for Herod had a deep respect for John, knowing that he was a just and holy man. He protected him. He used to listen to him and be profoundly disturbed, and yet he enjoyed hearing him.

Then a good opportunity came, for Herod gave a birthday party for his courtiers and army commanders and for the leading people in Galilee. Herodias' daughter came in and danced, to the great delight of Herod and his guests. The king said to the girl, "Ask me anything you like and I will give it to you!" And he swore to her, "I will give you whatever you ask me, up to half of my kingdom!"

And she went and spoke to her mother, "What shall I ask for?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist!"

The girl rushed back to the king's presence, and made her request. "I want you to give me, this minute, the head of John the Baptist on a dish!" she said.

Herod was aghast, but because of his oath and the presence of his guests, he did not like to refuse her. So he sent one of the palace guardsman straightaway to bring him John's head. He went off and beheaded him in the prison, brought back his head on the dish, and gave it to the girl who handed it to her mother. When his disciples heard what had happened, they came and took away the body and put it in a tomb."

The preaching of Jesus and his disciples was working so well that Herod heard about it. And Herod's guilt-ridden response was, "Oh no, John whom I beheaded must have risen from the dead." There were many other interpretations of these events that Herod might have given, but Herod (in Mark's story) seized upon an explanation that fit with his guilt.

Mark then inserts a rather long telling of the story of the death of John the Baptist. Mark clearly uses this story as a prefiguring of Jesus' death. Mark's story about John the Baptist, ends with putting John's body in the tomb. This is an allusion to the tomb of Jesus. Further, we also have the context that Herod thought that Jesus was John raised from the dead. This is another allusion to Mark's master story about Jesus. In this story, we have another example of Mark's creative and skillful story telling. The hearers of Mark's story are supposed to get these allusions: just as Herod believed that Jesus and his movement was John rising from the dead, so the disciples and their movement were proclaimers of the secret that Jesus had risen from the dead. So what is this "rising from the dead" all about anyhow? Mark wants us to keep asking that question and not assume that we know. At this point in the story "rising from the dead" is a secret.

Have you ever experienced something like Herod's frustration that you rid your life of one prophet and another prophet rises in his or her place?

What do you think this story is telling us about resurrection?

Mark 6:30-32 Reporting and Resting

The apostles returned to Jesus and reported to him every detail of what they had done and taught. "Now come along to some quiet place by yourselves, and rest for a little while," said Jesus, for there were people coming and going incessantly so that they had not even time for meals.

Mark returns to the previous story of the disciples going out to the various towns to preach and cast out demons and heal. Jesus hears their reports and then takes them privately to an isolated

place to rest. They could not even *eat* because people were pressing them so hard. They got in a *boat* to get away.

The proper rhythm for the Spirit life is to go out into the world with your message and then come back to your *boat of community* for nurture that *feeds* your Spirit. What is the *food* that the New Israel needs? Mark wants us to begin asking some questions about *food*. As usual Mark is raising a deeper question than biological nutrition. What is the secret concerning the feeding of the awakened human Spirit?

What do you think? What does feed your awakening human Spirit?

Mark 6:33-44 You Give Them Something to Eat

They went off in the boat to a quiet place by themselves, but a great many saw them go and recognized them, and people from all the towns hurried around the shore on foot to forestall them. When Jesus disembarked he saw the large crowd and his heart was touched with pity for them because they seemed to him like sheep without a shepherd. And he settled down to teach them about many things. As the day wore on, his disciples came to him and said, “We are right in the wilds here and it is getting late. Let them go now, so that they can buy themselves something to eat from the farms and villages around here”

But Jesus replied, “You give them something to eat!” “You mean we’re to go and spend ten pounds on bread (equivalent to six month’s wages)? Is that how you want us to feed them?”

“What bread have you got?” asked Jesus. “Go and have a look.” And when they found out, they told him, “We have five loaves and two fish.”

Then Jesus directed the people to sit down in parties on the fresh grass. And they threw themselves down in groups of fifty and a hundred. Then Jesus took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to Heaven thanked God, broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples to distribute to the people. And he divided the two fish among them all. Everybody ate and was satisfied. Afterwards they collected twelve baskets full of pieces of bread and fish that were left over. There were five thousand men who ate the loaves.

Jesus and the disciples’ retreat from the crowds was short lived. The crowds found their desolate place. Jesus took pity on these shepherd-less sheep; he honored their longings for they knew not what. He continued teaching them.

Late in the day when it was past time for the evening meal, the disciples expressed their concern for the crowds having something to *eat*. And Jesus responds, “You give them something to eat.”

Mark is persistently telling parables, secret-holding stories, double-meaning narratives. We have to think “Spirit food” if we want to understand this story profoundly. The disciples’ first impression is that they do not have anything with which to feed these people. And Jesus responds, “How many loaves do you have? Go look.” They find five loaves and two fish. We

need to think seven people with interior powers. Jesus seats the crowd in large groups and has the disciples break up these five loaves and two fish for everyone. And everyone has enough.

Seven awake people is all we have (five men and two women perhaps), and there are thousands of Spirit hungry people. Is this enough? Can we seven can provide the food needed for this challenging situation.

When have you faced a similar situation--lots of people hungry for Spirit food, but very little food available?

When have you experienced a small number of people feeding thousands?

What was the food involved?

Mark 6:45-46 Away at Last

Directly after this, Jesus made his disciples get aboard the boat and go on ahead to Bethsaida on the other side of the lake, while he himself sent the crowds home. And when he had sent them all on their way, he went off to the hill-side to pray.

Jesus had his disciples get into a *boat* (some sort of nurture vehicle that travels over deep water). They are to go on ahead, while Jesus finished up some work. This could be an allusion to the disciples fleeing back to Galilee while Jesus was getting crucified. Jesus dispersed the crowds and went away to the mountain to *pray*. Mark is clear in his mind that for himself and for Jesus there is a time to be alone and a time to be with people. (Also there is a time to be with the crowds and a time to be with one's inner circle of Spirit companions.)

That Jesus was a person who spent time alone in prayer is a strong theme in Mark's gospel. Modern Christians who have put Jesus on some false-Divinity pedestal may wonder why Jesus felt so much need for prayer. Few of us modern Christians find ourselves spending hours each day in prayer. We are too busy with other demands. Perhaps we feel no deep need for solitary time. And we probably have a rather shallow or sentimental view of what prayer is. Even if we do pray, our prayer may be more like a pious duty than a living necessity in the rhythm of living our profound lives. But Jesus went off by himself, climbed up a mountain, away from crowds and disciples, to be alone in his relationship with (his communication with) Final Realty, the Eternal, the Awesome.

This aloneness might be seen as a time of rest from the press of the crowds, but it was also a time of preparation for being with the crowds and with the disciples. Mark sees both himself and Jesus called to a vigorous life work, and he is calling others to this work. But at the same time, Mark is pointing out our need for aloneness and he is raising these profound questions: "What is prayer? And why do we need it?"

When have you found solitary time an essential factor in the living of your life?

What is effective prayer for you?

Mark 6: 47-52 Walking on Water

When it grew late, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and he was by himself on land. He saw them straining at the oars, for the wind was dead against them. And in the small hours he went towards them, walking on the waters of the lake, intending to come alongside them. But when they saw him walking on the water, they thought he was a ghost, and screamed out. For they all saw him and they were absolutely terrified. But Jesus at once spoke quietly to them, "It's all right, it is I myself; don't be afraid!"

And he climbed aboard the boat with them, and the wind dropped. But they were scared out of their wits. They had not had the sense to learn the lesson of the loaves. Even that miracle had not opened their eyes to see who he was.

Notice the elements of this story. Jesus has gone up the hillside alone. Moses also went up a mountain alone. The disciples without Jesus in their boat are losing faith. The wind is against them. The followers of Moses also lost faith when Moses went up the mountain. They reverted to golden calf worship. Mark's story may also allude to the time after Jesus' death when the disciples were indeed "rowing" alone.

In this dire situation of seriously weakened faith, Jesus returns walking on the water. Again, Mark is telling us a story; he is giving us a parable with Spirit meaning. A literal interpretation of this walking-on-water story misses Mark's challenge. We are being asked to see the Spirit secret in this story. We are asked to ask ourselves what it means to walk on the wild and stormy waters of a real Spirit life in this estranged world.

So when have the wild and stormy waters of your life left you "straining at the oars," "the wind dead set against you"?

The disciples are not walking on the stormy waters of their lives. They are sitting in their relatively safe boat with some like-minded friends. They are also having a rough time making headway in their boat. The wind is against them. Jesus, however, comes alongside them walking on the water of the lake. This terrified them. They think it must be a ghost, for a real human being, they think, could not be walking calmly on top of such rough water.

When have you had such disbelief that a real human being could walk on the wild and stormy waters of the actual lives?

Likely this story has some allusion to the Spirit condition that Mark is experiencing in the Christian communities of his time (about 70 years into the common era). Mark is picturing Christians huddled in their boat (their community) and not making headway in the world.

Perhaps those early communities did indeed experience the wind as being against them. Perhaps they were struggling hard to deal with the wild waters of their real lives. So Mark shows them Jesus coming back from the mountain of prayer, full of confidence, and walking on the the same wild and windy lake on which others are rowing hard.

In writing this story, Mark is also walking on the water. Mark is not a ghost. He is an ordinary person appearing among his contemporary Christians huddled in their “safe” boat. Mark and Mark’s Jesus is crying out “Take heart, it’s just me, a real human being like yourselves. Don’t be afraid.” And when Jesus climbed into the boat with them, the wind died down.

When have you experienced the wind dying down when a person of confidence and trust stepped into your boat?

The disciples, Mark says, “were completely dumbfounded by all this because they had not understood the incident of the loaves: their minds were closed.” Mark is referring to the previous story, to the tale about 5000 people being fed with *five* loaves and *two* fish and there being *twelve* basketfuls of leftovers (plenty for the whole of Israel.)

Apparently, both the feeding story and the walking on water story have something to do with addressing the doubts held by Mark’s first audience (and perhaps by you and me as well) that our resources are ridiculously small in comparison to the task of healing humanity.

Jesus says that we are supposed to give the crowds something to eat. But how? Jesus says that we are “to take heart and not be afraid”—to be as calm and confident as Jesus. But how? What is missing here? Do real human beings actually walk on the wild and windy waters of such overwhelming callings? Do real human beings, with just what they have, actually feed the multitudes with the food the multitudes actually need to be fully satisfied? **How can this be?**

How have you felt the disciples’ doubt and fear about being the Spirit food people need?

What might it mean for you (us) to take heart about the possibility of feeding the spirit-starved masses?

Mark is hinting that Jesus, as well as you and me, feed humanity with our broken bodies and spelled blood, with the expenditure of our deaths, Our food for others is the *resurrection* of our *authenticity*—a condition that has come about through our commitment unto death—washing us of our distractions, addictions, estrangements, demons, shriveled limbs, fevers, blindness, and so on.

Mark 6:53-56 Back to Work

And when they had crossed over to the other side of the lake, they landed at Gennesaret and tied up there. As soon as they came ashore, the people recognized Jesus and rushed from all over the countryside and

began to carry the sick around on their beds to wherever they heard that he was. Wherever he went, in villages or towns or farms, they laid down their sick right in the road-way and begged him that they might “just touch the edge of his cloak”. And all those who touched him were healed.

Mark does not answer directly how Jesus, how Mark, how you and I are enabled to heal and feed the masses. He simply pictures Jesus and the disciples going back to work among the crowds. Things happen. People are healed. Jesus, a real human being, shows us what real human beings can do. If we think that only Jesus can perform wonders--that we are exempt from this possibility, then (according to Mark) we are not a follower of Jesus. Mark does not view Jesus as a super hero that no follower could ever duplicate. Mark pictures Jesus as insisting that the disciples can join him in his amazing work.

What does it mean to join Jesus in his work?

When have you been like Jesus--confident, effective, and food for the multitudes?

Mark loves to challenge us with questions:

Who is this awake, confident, and effective Jesus-figure anyhow?

How is this ordinary human being the presence in history of the speech of Final Reality?

How is Jesus and his following the advent of the long-expected arrival of human fulfillment?

Who is Jesus, anyway?

Indeed, who am I?

What other questions do you have?

How do you propose to answer such questions?