

# The Creator of Christianity

a commentary on the Gospel of Mark

by Gene W. Marshall

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# Introduction

## to this commentary on the Gospel of Mark

Living in Aramaic-speaking Galilee twenty-one centuries ago, Jesus and his first companions constituted the event of revelation that birthed the Christian faith. But without Paul's interpretation of the meaning of cross and resurrection for the Greek-speaking Hellenistic Jewish culture, we might never have heard of Christian faith.

Mark, whoever he was, lived during the lifetime of Paul and was deeply influenced by Paul. In about 70 CE, Mark, like Paul, was a major turning point in the development of the Christian religion. Mark invented the literary form we know as "the Gospel." This remarkable literary form was then copied and elaborated by the authors Matthew and Luke, and then revolutionized by John. These four writings, not Paul's letters, are the opening books of the New Testament that Christians count as their Bible (along with the Old Testament). "Gospel" (Good News) has become a name for the whole Christian revelation.

We might say that Mark was the theologian who gave us the Christianity that has survived in history. The Markian shift in Christian imagination was important enough that we might even claim that Mark, rather than Paul or Jesus, was the founder of Christianity. However that may be, Mark's gospel is a very important piece of writing. And this writing is more profound and wondrous than is commonly appreciated.

Of first importance for understanding my viewpoint in the following commentary is this: I see the figure of "Jesus" in Mark's narrative as a fictitious character—based, I firmly believe, on a real historical figure. I do not want to confuse Mark's "Jesus" with what we can know through our best recent scientific research about the historical Jesus of Nazareth. For our best understanding of Mark, we need to view Mark's "Jesus" with the same fun and sensibility we have toward Harry Potter when we read J. K. Rowling's novels about this unusual character.

In other words, Mark is the theologian that we are reading in the Gospel of Mark, not Jesus or Paul, and not Luke or Matthew or John. Mark is himself an unusually clever writer and a profound theologian. This truth is fundamental for understanding this commentary.

*What do you think about Mark being the creator of Christianity?*

*How is it important to you that the historical Jesus of modern scholarship differs significantly from the Jesus of Mark's narrative?*

## What is Theology?

Not all religions have a theology, but Judaism, Christianity, and Islam do. Buddhism has Dharma sutras and many Dharma talks that are still being given today. These thoughtful efforts of the Buddhist religion are something like a theology. It is fair to say that all religions have a "theoretics"—something that its members do to reflect upon the

core topics that characterize that religion's ongoing community of thoughtfulness about their life together, their message, their mission, as well as their religious practices and ethical guidelines.

Christian theology begins its thoughtfulness with reflections upon a specific event (a specific complex of happenings in history). The happenings that constitute this "event" are understood to reveal the profound essence of every event in human history. That event has been given the name "Jesus Christ." An ordinary first century man named "Jesus," understood to be the "Messiah," was viewed as a revelation about living in an ultimate devotion to the Ultimate Reality that we encounter in every event of our personal lives, and in every event of our social history.

Judaism does something similar in its theologizing, but in this case the core revelatory event is "The Exodus from Egypt of a collection of slaves plus their revolution in law-writing." Islam also treasures a revelatory event—in this case, "the Advent of Mohammad as a Messenger of the One Ultimate Creator of all things and events." Obviously, in each of these religious groupings, there is good theology and bad theology, depending on whether those theological reflections appropriately reflect what their revelatory event revealed about the essence of living a human life. Good theology also depends upon whether a particular bit of theological thoughtfulness has resonance with living people in their contemporary settings.

This commentary on the Gospel of Mark intends to be "theology" in the sense just defined. I prefer the word "theologizing," for I see Christian theology as an ongoing process of a community of people. My contribution to the ongoing process of Christian theologizing may be minor or large, but that is not entirely up to me. The community of those who are grounded in the Christ Jesus revelation will value or not value, preserve or not preserve, my contributions to the ongoing theologizing process of those who are captivated by the Christ Jesus revelation.

I see myself doing a *radical* form Christian theologizing. It is "radical" because this thoughtfulness is my attempt to return to the "*roots*" of the Christian revelation from the perspective of a radically contemporary understanding of the nature and role of religion in human society.

"Religion," as I now understand that word, is not a set of stable doctrines and moralities allied with a once-and-for-all finished set of solitary and communal practices. The only stability that a religion has is its radical root. Religious doctrines and moralities, as well as religious practices are all in flux. Today, that flux is huge for every religion on Earth. The sort of Buddhism that is sweeping the North American continent is not stuck in the ruts of previous centuries. It is a fresh, creative accessing of ancient roots. In Christianity we are seeing something similar. I count this commentary part of that fresh effort to see the Christian revelation with new eyes and to hear this "good news" with new ears.

*How in your life have you participated in Christian theologizing?*

*Whose theologizing has helped you most with your own?*

## The Death of a Metaphor

Some members of the Christian community speak of “the death of God” or even “the end of theology.” In this commentary (and in all my theologizing), I take the view that “the death of God” does not refer to an end of all use of the word “God,” I choose to understand “the death-of-God discussion” as pointing to the end of something temporal—namely, the obsolescence of an ancient metaphor of religious thinking held in the word “transcendence.” For 2000 years Christian theologizing has used this familiar metaphorical narrative: a vivid story-time imagination about a transcendent realm in which God, angels, devils, gods, goddesses, and other story-time characters are living in an other-than-ordinary “realm” and “coming” from that “realm” to “act” within our ordinary human space and time. That is metaphorical talk. Being metaphorical, however, is not the problem. The problem for us today is the obsolete quality of that double-deck metaphor.

I am using an alternative metaphorical system of religious reflection in my mode of Biblical interpretation. I view our ordinary lives as well as our profound lives as participants in “One” realm of being. This “One Reality” has a depth that is invisible to both human eye and mind. I am using the capitalization of “Reality” to mean something different than our mind’s sense of reality. Reality is a “Land of Mystery” that the human mind cannot fathom. This profound depth of Reality shines through the passing realities of time that are visible to eye and mind. This Invisible Eternity can be said to “shine-through” temporal events. An ordinary bush can indeed burn with Eternity. An ordinary human being can indeed glow with the Presence of Eternity. But this Eternity is not another space that is separate from our ordinary space/time of living. Furthermore, this fresh view of Eternity does not imply a contempt for the temporal realm. Rather, it implies a fulfillment for each and every ordinary temporal event of our lives. Each temporal event has an Eternal depth or glow or burn. Eyes and ears alone cannot grasp our profound humanness and its Eternal connection. Only our enigmatic consciousness can “see” the Eternal, and this “seeing” is an internal experience that is “seen” in absolute solitude.

In this fresh context the words “ordinary” and “extraordinary” are viewed as mere categories of human perception. We live in One, and only One, realm of Reality with many temporally viewed aspects. Among these many aspects, we can speak of this basic polarity: the impermanent and the permanent—the temporal and the Eternal. This polarity is not in Reality itself, but in our human consciousness of Reality. Temporal and Eternal are both aspects of our one experience of one invisible One-ness that our minds cannot comprehend.

And this One-ness is not seen by eye or mind. We do not “see” One-ness directly. One-ness is a devotional category that means that we are devoted to serve all aspects of our Real experience, rather than viewing the Real as part friendly and part enemy. From this One-ness point of view, the only enemy is our own and other humans’ estrangement from the One Reality within which our own persons and all other persons dwell.

This One-ness viewpoint within Christian faith is not a denial of the diversity of our experiences of the Eternal or of the temporal. Differentiation and multiplicity obviously characterize our temporal lives. Multiplicity also characterizes much of our God-talk. In the God-talk of the Bible, there are many angels or servants of the One that express and carry out the actions of the One. But this One-ness is maintained in spite of the many-ness that is understood to be aspects of the Eternal, sourced from this One-ness. In the opening verses of the Bible, the One God says to some angels, "Let there be light!" and this was done by the One's many servant forces. Such poetry was intended to preserve the One-ness of Reality, not to fragment the One-ness of Reality that is fundamentally worshiped in the life of Christian faith.

*How has it been hard or liberating for you to give up the old double-deck metaphor?*

*What has been your struggle with devotion to One Ultimate Reality?*

## **Interpreting Scripture Today**

Today, Christian theologians, who want to go to the roots of the first century Christian "*revelation*," face the reality that people in the first century used the now obsolete two-tier, story-telling metaphor. That old manner of talking about ultimate matters had been the way of talking about ultimate matters for as long as anyone could remember.

In spite of the fact that their way of talking is no longer adequate for us today, we cannot claim to be Christians if we fail to interpret our scriptures. Therefore, to do scriptural interpretation adequately, we must translate for our era of culture what those early writers meant in their own lives when they used that old form of metaphorical talk that is now basically meaningless to us. Throughout this commentary, I will be illustrating what such metaphorical translation looks like.

Christian theologians today also face a second challenge. Within our current culture we tend to overlook metaphorical meanings altogether. We tend to view all statements literally. We learned to be literal from the current prominence of the scientific mode of truth. In the scientific style of thinking, words mean something only if words point to something in the realm of facts, observable by the human senses. Influenced by this overemphasis on facts, both religious agnostics and religious literalists fail to see the poetic or contemplative type of truth that is contained in the wild stories of the Bible. The agnostics are right to see that many stories of the Bible are preposterous when viewed literally. And religious literalists, who think they are defending Biblical truth with their literalism, are actually ignoring the profound truth that is hidden in these wildly creative stories.

For example, Mark could tell a story about a 12-year-old Israelite girl being lifted from the dead, and his hearers could understand without qualms that this was a story about the 12 tribes of Israel being called back to life from a sleep-like-death. Listeners to such writing caught on to these metaphorical meanings without any need for help from

a word like “metaphorical.” Why? Their minds were not yet characterized by an overemphasis on literal truth.

Fictitious stories still mean a great deal to most of us today. Thousands of youth and adults have enjoyed deeply the stories of Harry Potter. We know that these are fiction, that Harry’s magical ways are not to be taken literally. Yet we identify with him and his close friends in being magical persons who do not fit into the general society and who need to keep their true nature secret from most people. In other words, we can still see truth in fictitious stories, if we let ourselves do so.

So as we read the Gospel of Mark, we need to keep in the forefront of our thinking that Mark is composing his “good news” in a hot-fiction mode of truth. We need to interpret Mark’s preposterous story telling in a contemplative manner. In our dialogue with Mark, we are challenged to notice how we have had or can have these same life experiences in our own lives today.

*How has literal biblical interpretation been a factor in your life?*

*What biblical poetry still puzzles you today?*

## **Cross and Resurrection**

It is fair to say that the symbols of *cross* and *resurrection* are as central to an understanding of the Christian revelation as *meditation* and *enlightenment* are to an understanding of Buddhism. Yet both cross and resurrection seem cryptic, even weird, to many people today.

Members of our current scientific culture may be excused somewhat for having a weak understanding of resurrection. Most of us know, if we are honest, that belief in a literal return to life of a three-day-old corpse is superstition. Yet this meaning of resurrection has been paraded as Christian by many interpreters of the resurrection symbol. Mark did not see resurrection in this light. Or perhaps we might better say, “Mark did not see resurrection in this darkness,” for a literal return from the dead means nothing deeply religious to Mark or to you or me. If such an event were to happen today, it would be open to hundreds of speculative explanations, none of which would be profoundly or convincingly religious.

Mark’s understanding of the cross is equally opaque in our culture. Some modern authors even accuse Christianity of having a morbid preoccupation with death, suffering, and tragedy. The crucifix, or even a bare cross, is viewed by some as silly and grim—like hanging a guillotine on your wall or around your neck. But for Mark the horror of the cross is seen as priceless food for the soul. How can that be? Surely, we have some thoughtful exploration to do, if we are to grasp the Gospel (the good news) that Mark claims to be announcing.

I know of no better way to introduce the symbols of cross and resurrection to a contemporary explorer of Christianity than with a commentary of Mark’s Gospel. I will show in this commentary that Mark understands the resurrection as intimately



connected with the cross and that both are about possible experiences that every human being can have. As characters in Mark's Gospel, the disciples do not experience the fullness of resurrection until the very last chapter of Mark's narrative. Until then resurrection for them is a secret. At the same time Jesus experiences resurrection in the first 13 verses of Mark's commentary. For the rest of this narrative, Jesus is what a resurrected person looks like walking, talking, eating, sleeping, praying, healing others, and challenging the status quo. The character Jesus in Mark's Gospel is an exemplar of living the resurrected life unto death.

Meanwhile the disciples are what it looks like to be on a journey toward resurrection. They are dramatized as dumb dumbs on both cross and resurrection. So we can view Mark's narrative as about two journeys that are both aspects of our own life journey: (1) the journey of spirit awakening that is taking place in the lives of the disciples and (2) the journey of the spirit-awake human—what that looks like in action—that is, how Jesus' presence, words, and actions are dramatizing the qualities of the resurrected human and how such a presence among us is healing to others. The full meaning of the resurrection will remain Mark's secret until chapter 16, but *cross* and *resurrection* are primary symbols in Mark's narrative beginning in chapter one.

Again, both these journeys can go on in the lives of all of us: (1) we, like the disciples, can journey toward full enlightenment (death-and-resurrection living), and (2) we, like Jesus, can resolve to live our resurrection life (spirit enlightenment or profound humanness) in the real world, in the historical challenges of our time and place. As resurrected women and men, we, like Jesus can expend our new life of profound humanness for the healing and well-being of others. We are invited to identify with both Jesus and the disciples in Mark's narrative.

In the first 13 verses of chapter one, Mark's character "Jesus" has his own death and resurrection experience—in the same sense that you or I might have our own death and resurrection experience—in the living now of our own conscious lives. It is important to notice that Mark retains the complete humanness of Jesus by having him in these early verses undergo John's baptism of spirit washing and Jesus' own calling to spirit mission, a calling that any of us might also experience.

After those first 13 verses, Mark's Jesus is on a different journey than the disciples. The disciples are on a spirit journey toward resurrection. Jesus depicts the journey of the resurrected human in action. He is what a human being looks like who has been resurrected to his or her profound humanness, after having died to his or her temporal relations as his or her primal devotion. I repeat, Mark's Jesus-story is about the journey unto death of a human being after entry into the resurrected life.

In Luke's second book, *The Acts of the Apostles*, we see more about what this second journey of living the life of resurrected humans looks like as the story of real-world historical persons other than Jesus. Peter, Paul and other men and women are presented by Luke as further "resurrection" exemplars. Luke wants us to get it that we who live "in Christ" are living the resurrection life. Indeed, we are to be the resurrection of Jesus. We are called to be the body that rose on Easter morning.



It is probably easier for most of us to identify with the disciples who are moving toward resurrection step-by-step through the course of Mark's story. We can also identify with the crowds who are intrigued, but puzzled, by Jesus' parables. We can even identify with those persons who reject Jesus.

Mark's Jesus uses parables to trick the sleeping into noticing their sleepiness and into seeking more truth. Then to his more committed disciples, Mark's Jesus explains his parables further, expecting them to catch on to their own profound humanness sooner than the crowds.

Mark is assuming that the readers of his Gospel will be carried along, like the disciples, toward the total unraveling of their egoism to an embodiment of the resurrected life that was walking and talking among them in the body of Jesus and later in the body of the church, that came to be referred to as "the body of Christ"—that is, the body of the resurrected one. So in Mark's narrative, we are entitled to identify with Jesus ministering to his blind followers as well as with identifying with the blind followers to whom Jesus is ministering.

As we read Mark's gospel, let us keep in mind the originality and imagination of this remarkable person we are calling "Mark." We are dialoguing with Mark, not with Jesus. Jesus is a character in Mark's story. We are in a conversation with Mark in the same way that reading a Harry Potter novel is a conversation with J. K. Rowling, rather than Harry Potter. Of course we can have a conversation with Harry Potter as one of Rowling's characters. Similarly, we can have a conversation with Jesus as one of Mark's characters.

In the following commentary, here is what I am going to do. I am going to quote in order the entire Markian text.<sup>1</sup> After each section of Mark's narrative, I will do a commentary on the quoted verses and follow that with a few discussion questions. I am assuming the best of New Testament historical scholarship, but I will be doing what I call "21st century theologizing for the ordinary reader."

*So what are you looking forward to in this study?*

*And what puzzles you most about this enigmatic document called "The Gospel of Mark"?*

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<sup>1</sup> The Scripture quotations from Mark's Gospel are taken from J. B. Phillips translation. I have chosen this version because of its ordinary and personally effective language. While there may be better translations of the literal Greek, it is also true that Mark used a street Greek. Mark spoke in ordinary speech to ordinary people. Most of the first hearers of Mark's text heard it read aloud. J. B. Phillips captures, I believe, this sense of ordinary story telling.

# Chapter One

## Mark: 1: 1-3 Good News

The Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begins with the fulfillment of this prophecy of Isaiah:

Behold, I send my messenger before your face,  
who will prepare your way before you.  
The voice of one crying in the wilderness:  
Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.

In his very first sentence, Mark is telling us what his piece of writing is going to be about. It is good news (gospel). And this good news is about the advent of the Messiah, the “Son of God.” Mark does not tell us yet what this language means. In fact it is a secret that Mark keeps until chapter 16. Mark’s first hint about what “Christ” and “Son of God” mean is that we are about to see an important historical happening, an advent that is a really big deal for the whole of humanity. Mark has found a passage from Isaiah that gives us an initial hint about what Mark’s “good news” is about.

Mark is using this history-bending passage from Isaiah to allude to Mark’s own history-bending “good news”. “Prepare the way of the Lord!” Christians today may jump to the conclusion that by “the Lord,” Mark means Jesus, but actually “the Lord” in this passage is talking about the Creator of heaven and earth—the Invisible All Powerful Mystery that is operative in every event that happens to us. This Final Ever-present “Lord’s way” is being freshly prepared for our direct experience. We don’t yet have Mark’s clarity on what this means, but we do have Mark’s announcement that he will be discussing a happening of major import, certainly not a trivial topic. The Lord of all history is going to make some sort of special impression on all of us who are willing to have our eyes see and our ears hear.

## Mark: 1: 4-8 John, the Baptist

For John came and began to baptize men in the desert, proclaiming baptism as the mark of a complete change of heart and of the forgiveness of sins. All the people of the Judaea countryside and everyone in Jerusalem went out to him in the desert and received his baptism in the river Jordan, publicly confessing their sins.

John himself was dressed in camel-hair, with a leather belt round his waist, and he lived on locusts and wild honey. The burden of his preaching was, “There is someone coming after me who is stronger than I —indeed I am not good enough to kneel down and undo his shoes. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

In these verses, Mark is indicating that the religious movement initiated by John, the Baptist is an important precursor to the topic of Mark’s good news. Mark implies that Jesus identified deeply with the movement initiated by John, the Baptist. Many New Testament scholars believe that this was true of the historical Jesus—that the man Jesus was not a Zealot or a Sadducee or a Pharisee or an Essene—that Jesus chose the radical

movement of John, the Baptist instead of these other options for communal association. Decades later, Mark still felt that John's movement was an important movement, as well as an important part of the story of Jesus. Mark does not give us any details of that movement or of Jesus' biography in relation to it. But Mark did feel the need to clarify something about John's movement.

Mark clearly felt that the movement Jesus initiated needed to be distinguished from John's movement—that the addition that Jesus made to John's movement was huge. John was a wild-hermit, eating and dressing like the ascetic Elijah, and calling people out to the edge of society to be washed of the evil that inflicted that entire wicked era of history. Individual people were volunteering for that washing, and John's movement was also an address to the whole society—a critique of that society's departure from the Mosaic norm, indeed a departure from the authenticity of being human. The historical Jesus likely concurred with that radical critique. According to Mark, Jesus accepted John's warning that a radical historical judgement from Eternity of the entire human world was on the way, and would arrive soon.

Perhaps, we can also identify with John's message, as we look realistically at our 21st century world order—refusing to deal fully with our ecological challenges, drifting backward toward authoritarian governments, racism, sexism, bigotries of every type. We too may be open to being “washed of our era”—joining a deep repentance, renouncing the estranged state of things, and rising up from such a washing into a new attitude toward the whole of human history. Jesus joined John at the river Jordan.

*When have you wished to be washed of your era?*

*When have you felt that the world's estrangements from realism were so great that a general catastrophe was surely on the way, and soon?*

Mark goes on to proclaim that Jesus will make a huge addition to the revolution launched by the remarkable John, the Baptist. This addition was so significant that John himself, according to Mark, knew that he, John, was not worthy to kneel down and undo the shoes of Jesus. John, Mark indicates, washed us of our evil era, but Jesus will wash us further with the hot fire of God's own Spirit. What does all that mean? We will have to wait and see as Mark's story moves along, but at this point we have Mark's hint that the event of Jesus is a remarkable *coming* of a very radical revolution in human understanding of what it means to be a human being

### **Mark: 1: 9-11 The Heavenly Birth of Jesus**

It was in those days that Jesus arrived from the Galilean village of Nazareth and was baptized by John in the Jordan. All at once, as he came up out of the water, he saw the heavens split open, and the Spirit coming down upon him like a dove. A voice came out of Heaven, saying, “You are my dearly-beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased!”

Almost every phrase that Mark includes in his story has some sort of secret meanings. “*Up out the water*” can pass unnoticed if we do not associate this immersion with dying to the evil era. If we do see the allusion to dying, then “up out of the water” is an allusion to resurrection. In this story Jesus is becoming the resurrected one.

“*The heavens split open*” is an even more cryptic piece of poetry to a modern person who does not know what to make of the word “heaven” and certainly finds it very odd to speak of seeing “the heavens split open.” Translating that phrase from its transcendence metaphorical imagination to an existential transparency type of poetry takes a bit of thoughtfulness. “Heaven” means the realm of Absolute Mystery, and Mark is picturing that dynamic as right above our heads. There is a sort of big punch bowl with stars on it and if that bowl were to split open we would see right into the Eternal heaven. I believe that Mark is thinking more metaphorically and less literally than that picture may sound. Seeing into the Eternal is the heart meaning of the text. As Jesus comes up out of the watery tomb in which John has dunked him, the punch bowl of Awesome Absolute Mystery splits open. What a story!

Next, this profound-eyed person Mark sees another signal of profoundness: “*the Spirit coming down upon him like a dove*.” Spirit, for Mark, is the Absolute Mystery itself manifesting as a state of our whole life sometimes called “Wonder” or “Awe.” But for someone who has the courage for such a dreadful, fascinating state of Awe, this happening is a gentle thing, like a dove settling on head and shoulder.

Finally, Mark gives us one more symbol for how this baptism was an outstanding event: “*A voice came out of Heaven, saying, ‘You are my dearly-beloved Son.’*” We need not believe that a tape recorder would have heard this voice. Mark included this bit of poetic flair to complete his view of the significance of this baptism for this simple roof-repair man’s son from the nowhere of Nazareth. And what does “Son” mean here? It means that Jesus is having a new birth, not of a father from Nazareth, but of a Spirit from Eternity. This is Mark’s “virgin birth” narrative. Mark is implying a virgin birth for Jesus, a birth sired from heaven that was now taking over Jesus’ whole life from his biological birth in Nazareth.

The *Awed One* (Jesus) is filled with *Awe* (Spirit) sourced from the *Awesome* (Eternal Mystery.) This whole secret Trinity of Divinity (Awesome, Awed One, Awe) is happening among us, to us, to humanity in these opening pages of Mark’s story. For the rest of Mark’s strange narrative, Jesus is the washed one, the resurrected one, the beloved of Reality one. Jesus is virgin born among us to lead us into our own profound humanness. For the rest of Mark’s gospel we see in Jesus what this exemplar of resurrected humanity looks like—walking, talking, calling, teaching, healing, feeding, eating, celebrating, living, suffering, dying. Women coming to honor him in his tomb find nothing there, except their own resurrection into Jesus-hood profoundness.

So, what might this passage be saying to us today about the living of our own authentic lives and about the power of these Christian symbols for our own depth living? Perhaps we might give Christian symbols a second look. Perhaps we might view these long-preserved stories as being clues to our own most profound matters of living. Perhaps we might ask of Mark and other resurrected witnesses, what must we do to inherit this life abundant. Perhaps we are drawn to read further in Mark's story to see where our own particular healing is required in order to be washed of our own grim era—washed in order for us to enter here and now into this communion of the saints, this Kingdom of God, this Reign of Reality, this commonwealth of profound realism of which Jesus speaks. Perhaps such an enigmatic interior baptism is our first step, our next step toward beginning a fresh walk with Jesus for the rest of our own life story.

Mark clearly sees Jesus' baptism by John as a new birth in the consciousness of Jesus. If we were using Eastern language we might call it "enlightenment." Using the language that Mark develops toward the end of his story, Jesus was experiencing in John's baptism a death and a resurrection to profound humanness—to his spirit depth, to his authenticity in this ordinary human body..

The ordinary human ego of Jesus was not destroyed, but that ego ceased to be the identity of this person. Jesus was dead to the evils of his era to the extent that there was nothing left to his identity except his essential authenticity, his profound humanness that was created by Final Reality from the dawn of time. Jesus in this story is a symbol for that profound humanness that the Creator of everything gives to humans before their fall into their estrangements from Reality. Jesus is the "Offspring of God," the new humanity—a humanity that Jesus' healings are going to call forth in others. Perhaps in you. Perhaps in me.

To say all these extreme things about Jesus, at the very beginning of his narrative, means that Mark views Jesus as a human being who has already died to estrangement and been raised up to authentic life. As we will see, Jesus is not intimidated by the entire Roman world or by Israel's hypocritical religious establishments of compromise, flight, or furious hatred toward it all. Jesus is not intimidated by the prospect of living such a profound life or dying such a profound life at the hands of those he serves.

Matthew and Luke expand on this topic of Jesus being an "Offspring of Final Reality" with stories about Jesus' virgin birth. John's gospel also talks about a second birth that is available to all of us who embrace Jesus's message. But at this point in Mark's gospel the meaning of this divine birthing is only hinted—it is still a secret that something very special has appeared in Jesus. In coming chapters we are going to watch what happens as this person lives out such profound humanity in real-world social engagement. We are going to see someone who lives the authentic life unto death.

According to the scholarship of Rudolf Bultmann, what baptism came to mean in the early church was threefold: (1) washed of the era of “sin,” (2) sealed within the body of Christ, and (3) filled with the Holy Spirit. All three of these meanings are descriptions of an event of rebirth—drowning our estrangements to death, opening us to our profound authenticity, and facing our future in this “Spirit of Wholeness.”

*What experiences in your life seem to correspond with such a profound rebirth?*

### **Mark: 1: 12-13 The Agony of Vocation**

Then the Spirit sent him out at once into the desert, and there he remained for forty days while Satan tempted him. During this time no one was with him but wild animals, and only the angels were there to care for him.

The Spirit awareness that manifested in Jesus at this point in Mark’s narrative has an immediate and serious effect on the life of Jesus. The horrifically positive designation “Son of God,” enlightened being, profound humanness drives Jesus into an agonizing solitary period of prayer. We see in this story that the birth of profound humanness in Jesus does not take away the raw humanity of Jesus (or of us), and that Jesus (or any of us) can be tempted to be less than the profound humanness that we are.

This temptation story prefigures the later story Mark tells about Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane—when Jesus is facing being tortured to death the next day. The prospect of death is also present in the 40-day fast story. John the Baptist is due to be jailed and killed. Jesus knows that the mission before him is risky to that extent. He knows that he has the option of backing away from the task of realism and playing it safe. He takes 40 days to prepare himself to stay the course.

In other words, this new birth into Holy Spirit is a big deal. It sends Jesus into the wilderness—that is, Jesus (and we in our new birth) are taken out of all our taken-for-granted cultural norms and sent beyond our under-estimations of our true being. Out there beyond all the city lights and good food and safe housing, there in the wilderness Jesus (and we) are put to the test. For forty days Jesus (and we) struggle with the evil option of playing it safe in this world—renouncing the role of being the approved son or daughter of the Eternal. In this wilderness, tempted by the evil options, only the wild animals and the “messengers” from the Awesome Reality look after Jesus (and us). He and we are alone with this decision. Are we going to cast our entire life and our death into the task of truthful living or not. And what is truth after all? Why not just live the life of being safe for a while longer? Perhaps fitting in with the powers of this world is a better option than this radical realism? Perhaps backing quietly into our tomb is a better option than intending our death and putting our one life into the breach of history?

With such profound choices, Jesus (and anyone) is alone. No other human beings are out there in this place of decision. Just birds and squirrels and foxes and snakes and a



few invisible angels. How shall we understand Mark's term "angels"? I see these angels as symbols for the numinous—that invisible glow of Awe shining through the trees and sand dunes and birds and snakes. Except for these wild companions, and these states of Awe, we are all alone. Yet we are looked after; the "Eternal Awesomeness" is sending us wild nature and the even wilder messengers of Awe to look after us. What does it mean for Awe to look after us? Our Awe experiences help us separate reality from unreality. These messengers from the Awesome are keeping us in touch with Reality. They guide us through the ditches of delusion, if we have ears to hear these voices of our Awe-filled-being.

"Our better angels" (the Awe sent from the Awesome) tell us what is real and what is not real. With help from these "angels" we are able to answer each temptation that comes up from the mighty kingdom of estrangement—that mythic non-world of our own imagination. This is the story about Jesus. His raw humanity is still present. He is tempted in every way that we might be tempted, and he prevails. We can also prevail. This is the secret that Mark is not telling us yet. At this point in his story, Mark is just giving us hints.

As we will see the disciples he calls do not yet see these hints. Like us, they have not yet arrived at the place where they can see and hear the truth that Jesus is. The resurrection experience is still ahead of them. But this is part of the good news for those of us reading this gospel. The resurrection experience is indeed ahead of us, if we persist in being open to what is real. Our profound humanness, our Jesus essence, is there for the finding. And when and if we arrive, we will be astonished like the women fleeing from the tomb back to Galilee to look once again at how a spirit healing ministry takes place.

*When have you experienced being looked after--not in any magical way, not in an external way--just looked after by these deeply interior experiences of nature and by our "better angels"?*

*How are you tempted to under-estimate yourself?*

*How do you play it safe rather than play it real?*

*How do you try to be somebody you are not, rather than being who you are?*

*What would it mean for you to wrestle to the ground your temptations to be less than a fully approved son/daughter of the Infinite Silence of Absolute Mystery?*

### **Mark 1:14-15 Jesus Starts His Vocation**

It was after John's arrest that Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the Gospel of God, saying, "The time has come at last—the kingdom of God has arrived. You must change your hearts and minds and believe the good news.

After John was imprisoned (his ministry was over and his death eminent), Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming “good news from the Infinite Finality. If we want to speculate about the state of consciousness in Mark’s Jesus, we might guess that John’s imprisonment and possible death was a crisis for Jesus that opened in him the need for him to be a replacement for John, yes more than a replacement, to be a new phase of the movement of spirit that John had begun.

John had called people out to the edge of existence to repent and to be open to a fresh start. Jesus took this edge experience into the villages of Galilee and eventually into the cultural capital of Jerusalem. Further, he announced that the fresh start that John was awaiting was already underway. Manifest within the responses that people were making to Jesus’ teaching, “the Kingdom of God,” (as Jesus called it) was breaking through “right now.”

Mark’s Jesus in announcing that humanity’s waiting period is now over; the Reign of the Infinite is closing in on the reign of estrangement; detach yourself from the existing orders of unreality and trust your whole being to this fresh start.”

Mark’s often used phrase “the Kingdom of God” can be translated “Final Reality’s imperial rule” for the word “God” meant to Mark something Eternal in the living experience of our everyday lives. I also like the phrase, “The reign of the Infinite Silence,” for that phrase at least provokes us to look in the direction of a numinous Presence in our daily lives. Clearly, Mark and Mark’s Jesus are not talking about a literal invasion of magical forces from some other world. Nor is Mark talking about the literal end of this world. Mark is talking about the end of the reign of Satan, which means the end of the reign of wretched inauthentic living within our personal and social lives.

In summary, the coming “reign of God” means at least these three things: (1) the actuality that the Infinite Reality always has and always will reign over finite processes, (2) the inward submission by humans to the inescapable Presence of the Infinite, and (3) the manifestation of this Presence in all our daily living. Most important of all, this is a breakthrough in our own freedom to act with real-world care for our neighbors and ourselves.

In other words, Mark is saying that the essence of Jesus’ preaching was “The Infinite is making an approach to our lives and opening new doors for us; therefore, “Let us repent from our old dysfunctional ways and open ourselves to having the Infinite reign in our lives.” Repentance here does not mean merely saying we are sorry; it means an “about face” in our attitudes and behaviors. The fresh start implied here is letting what is really real emerge within you and issue in the realistic living of your actual life.

*What would it mean for you to repent on behalf of the evil times in which you live?*

*What would it mean for you to let the Infinite Reality reign in your life?*

*How does this interpretation of the phrase “Kingdom of God” help you understand better the core topic of Mark’s poetic book?*

Mark writes another fifteen and a half chapters, but in a somewhat cryptic way, he has already said it all. Mark will continue assembling resources from the recent Jesus heritage and from the ancient Hebrew heritage to support his grasp of this “good news.” As we will see, Mark does this in a very clever, highly organized, and thoughtful manner.

### **Mark 1:16-20 Becoming Fishers of Human Beings**

As he walked along the shore of the Lake of Galilee, he saw two fishermen, Simon and his brother Andrew, casting their nets into the water. “Come and follow me, and I will teach you to catch men!” he cried.

At once they dropped their nets, and followed him.

Then he went a little further along the shore and saw James the son of Zebedee, aboard a boat with his brother John, overhauling their nets. At once he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and went off after him.

This is a remarkable bit of drama. These men, when asked by Jesus, simply dropped their entire life vocations and picked up another vocation: “following Jesus.” Mark seems to believe that the very presence of the fully resurrected human (Jesus or Mark or, yes, one of us living today) is so powerful that sensitive members of the society will leave whatever they are doing and follow that body of profoundness wherever that body is going.

If a scientific biography of Jesus were possible, we might find that the historical Jesus of Nazareth actually said a bit more to these disciples than, “Come and follow me and I will make you fishers of men.” This is Mark’s interpretive summary. Mark is not recording historical information; he is dramatizing the nature of running into a fully authentic human as an “either/or” confrontation—either continue in the common slime or start a new life. Either you keep on living your familiar unawakened life, or you make a complete departure toward becoming awake and alive.

This new departure in living includes engaging in the vocation of “putting your hooks” into other people with the purpose of enabling them also be awake and alive. This sort of “evangelism” has nothing to do with merely expanding a religious institution. This “preaching of good news” has to do with robbing delusion of its slaves and setting people free to be who they essentially are. Movements and fresh institutions may flow out of such evangelism, but these results are not the essence of preaching this “good news.” Healing lives is the focus of such preaching, then and now.

*When have you dropped everything and followed someone?*

*What “either/or” moments have happened to you in your life?*

*How do you sense yourself “called” to be awake and to be an awakener of others?*

*What feelings attend such a calling for you?*

### **Mark 1:21-22 The Authority of Authenticity**

They arrived at Capernaum, and on the Sabbath day Jesus walked straight into the synagogue and began teaching. They were amazed at his way of teaching, for he taught with the ring of authority—quite unlike the scribes.

Jesus is a head-on attack against what we might call “scribal authority”—the authority of the written tradition, the authority of the Bible, the authority of the Church, the authority of the Pope. Jesus speaks and asks his followers to speak with the authority of authenticity. Such authenticity / authority resides in the speaker’s obedience to the Mysterious Wholeness of Reality. Such authenticity / authority speaks to others because this same “Reality” can be accessed by these hearers. What is being said is *authoritatively* true, not because the Scripture says so, or the Pope says so, or because some sort of reason says so. It is true because we can see it, hear it, feel it, experience it here and now, with the eyes and ears and guts of our own Spirit being. This strange authority of Jesus is not a sociological authority of any sort; it is the authority of authenticity. It is authenticity speaking to the authenticity within the hearers.

*How have you at some time leaned for your certainty on the Christian Scriptures?*

*How have you at some time leaned for your certainty on some other “religious authority”?*

*How have you broken with or subverted some of the authoritative norms expected of you?*

*How have you rejected all authority, including the authority of authenticity?*

*What does it mean for you to hear and honor the authority of authenticity?*

### **Mark 1: 23-28 The First Healing: an Unclean Spirit Obeys**

All at once, a man in the grip of an evil spirit appeared in the synagogue shouting out, “What have you got to do with us, Jesus from Nazareth? Have you come to kill us? I know who you are—you’re God’s holy one!”

But Jesus cut him short and spoke sharply, “Hold your tongue and get out of him!”

At this the evil spirit convulsed the man, let out a loud scream and left him. Everyone present was so astounded that people kept saying to each other, “What on earth has happened? This new teaching has authority behind it. Why he even gives his orders to evil spirits and they obey him!”

And his reputation spread like wild-fire through the whole Galilean district.

The unclean spirit that resides in each of us recognizes the authority of authenticity and cries out in fear. It may seem strange that an unclean spirit would know something about Jesus that remains a secret to the disciples as well as to the sleeping masses of humanity. But according to Mark, an unclean spirit knows authenticity when authenticity is encountered. Why? Let us guess that it is because the unclean spirit (inauthenticity) is being threatened with death by authenticity. The presence of authenticity is so threatening to inauthenticity that attention has to be paid.

What is an unclean spirit? We have a different psychology in the 21st Century. We know that there are no gremlin-type beings who crawl around inside our consciousness. We know that these inner pieces of estranged consciousness have been created by our own humanity's essential freedom. An evil spirit is a human choice that has made our lives no longer free. Such a choice sticks, so to speak. It has become a bondage instead of our freedom. We are then driven by these evil spirits, even though these "spirits" are nothing but our own human freedom gone astray. Mark and the other lucid people in Mark's era were using the best psychology they had for talking about these estrangements from living the full reality being faced. Poetically speaking, it is understandable that these estranged fragments of human consciousness were pictured as alien persons— evil spirits inside of us that have taken over our bodies from our essential freedom and created goodness.

From the perspective of biblical theologizing these inner beings were states of uncleanness—not an uncleanness of body, but an inner rebellion from the clean truth of the inescapable ground of our being.

Søren Kierkegaard called this uncleanness "despair." We are in despair because we do not choose to be what we actually are, a finite and dying being in a self-aware relationship with the Final Source of our life and our death. Despair is dirty because it messes up everything in our lives, our relationships, our thinking, our vocation, our presence.

Kierkegaard has also helped us understand how we can interpret for our times these "indwelling evil beings from another realm" as "evil-relatednesses"—as dis-relationships within our inescapable relationship with what confronts us in the living now. Our inescapable Spirit-relatedness has two forms: (1) authenticity (willing to be what we are) and (2) inauthenticity (unwilling to be what we are). "Evil spirits" was Mark's way of picturing this tragic condition of not being authentically human."

*When have you witnessed your inauthenticity crying out in the presence of someone's authenticity?*

*When have you noticed that inauthenticity is humanly created?*

In Mark's story, after this particular unclean spirit recognizes Jesus' authenticity and cries out in fear, Jesus responds, "Hold your tongue and get of him." At this point in Mark's story the identity of Jesus is still a secret. Only the evil spirits recognize who Jesus is. The disciples and the crowd only see that there is a power to command evil spirits.

Can we image ourselves in Jesus role saying to a fragment of some person's unclean consciousness, "Quite down; leave this person alone; depart the premises; give up your rule over this human life; release this person from your slavery"?

In Mark's story the unclean spirit with a loud shriek leaves. Something actually dies here, but it is not the natural person of that man that dies. Death happens to some aspect of that person's despairing dis-relatedness with Reality. Jesus' command is not the immediate cause of this exodus of the evil spirit. The man's own authentic consciousness is the immediate cause of the exodus. Jesus's command to the demon awakens in this man his own power to do the exorcism. We need to know this as we, like Jesus, take on Jesus' role of being a healer of the spirit sick. You or I or Jesus is merely an assisting doctor: Reality and the patient's own freedom is the actual healer. We healers simply call forth in others their own authenticity.

We do indeed see in Jesus "a new kind of teaching"—a teaching backed by the authority of authenticity. And this authority of authenticity resides both within Jesus and within the man who is harboring the unclean spirit. Jesus orders the unclean spirit to leave, and in this case the essential being of the sick man models Jesus. It is important to insist that both Jesus and the sick man are ordering this unclean spirit to leave. If the man does not participate, the healing does not happen, as many other New Testament stories testify. The healed person is the healing agent; Jesus is but the audit of our sickness and the call to accept healing rather than sickness. The healed person actively, intentionally accesses the healing power. In several other such stories, we find Jesus saying that it is the "faith" of the person being healed that does the healing. But the role of the Jesus-healer is important. We are asleep to our true humanity until it is called for.

What a story! Inauthenticity must obey the command of authenticity! "Sin" is actually *nothing* but a bad twist in something good. That "something good," is our authentic life, and our authentic life is stronger than all the bad twists in our relatedness to "What Is."

*How have you experienced aspects of your own inauthenticity leaving when you commanded it to do so?*

*When have you witnessed such healing going on in other people?*

*How do you feel about playing the Jesus role in such healings?*



## Mark 1:29-31 The Second Healing: a Down and Fevered Woman is Raised Up

Then he got up and went straight from the synagogue to the house of Simon and Andrew, accompanied by James and John. Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a high fever, and they lost no time in telling Jesus about her. He went up to her, took her hand and helped her to her feet. The fever left her, and she began to see to their needs.

This is the second healing story. The healing of many people is alluded to in this gospel, but Mark only tells *twelve* stories about Israelites being healed, plus one story about healing a Gentile woman's daughter. This Gentile woman is the one who impresses Jesus with her retort about picking up crumbs from the children's table. (*Twelve* is a symbol for the twelve tribes of Israel.) By telling twelve healings of Hebrews and only one Gentile, Mark is indicating that though Jesus focused his ministry on the Jewish people, there has been and there are going to be plenty of crumbs left over for the entire human family. This food multiplies abundantly.

The extent to which Mark is telling parables with these healing stories has often been overlooked by the literalistic mentality so rampant in contemporary Christian communities. We who long for miracles and magic have tended to view these healing stories literally and thus miss the Spirit purpose behind Mark's amazing fiction. Here is a list of Mark's twelve healing stories told about Hebrew people; think of them as parables pointing to the restoration of various Spirit aspects of human authenticity:

1. A man controlled by an unclean spirit
2. A woman down in bed with a fever
3. A leper—an unclean outcast from society
4. A man paralyzed, prone on a mat like dead
5. A Sabbath synagogue worshiper with a crippled hand
6. An uncontrollable man in the tombs by the sea with a "Legion" of filthy spirits who enter 2000 pigs who are drowned in the sea
7. A woman unclean with a 12-year old flow of vaginal blood
8. A 12-year old daughter of a synagogue leader who is in a deathlike sleep
9. A deaf-mute who can't hear and can't speak
10. A blind man who needs two tries to open his eyes widely enough to see clearly
11. A violent mute-spirit the disciples can't heal because it takes more prayer
12. The brash, blind beggar met at Jericho on the way to Jerusalem. The name of this man was Bartimaeus, (the son of Timaeus). Timaeus means "highly prized."

Let us examine further the second of these healings. Simon's mother is *down* in bed and Jesus takes her hand and raises her up to cool servanthood. This is an allusion to the resurrection. She is *down* with a fever. This is an allusion to the overheating of our lives by some Spirit estrangement. Being down with an overheated malady is preventing this woman from serving others. She is not crying out with an unclean spirit. She is not blind, deaf, lame, or leprous. She is just *down*. She is just feverish. For all practical purposes she might be considered *dead*. Jesus raises her *up*. The fever leaves her, and she begins serving other people.

*Spiritually speaking, when do you recall being **down**? What was that like?*

*If you have recognized someone else being down with a **spirit fever**, what is that like?*

*In what way might a Christian community be down in spirit, suffering from a fever, and thus useless for serving their region of people?*

### **Mark 1:32-34 A Secret Identity**

Late that evening, after sunset, they kept bringing to him all who were sick or troubled by evil spirits. The whole population of the town gathered round the doorway. And he healed great numbers of people who were suffering from various forms of disease. In many cases he expelled evil spirits; but he would not allow them to say a word, for they knew perfectly well who he was.

At **sundown** they came to be healed. Mark never uses a single word accidentally. "Sundown" symbolizes something. Perhaps people come to Jesus as the sun is setting because in the full light of day, they are too ashamed of their sicknesses. Perhaps people come as it is getting dark because Mark is actually talking here about dark experiences in our deep inner beings.

Why does Mark have Jesus ask the demons not to speak about who Jesus is? Mark signals again and again about how Jesus' radical authenticity is a secret. The masses, not even the disciples, know the secret. It takes very special eyes to see who Jesus is. Yet the demons recognize who Jesus is. Apparently, demons are profoundly threatened by Jesus' very presence. His authenticity gets their attention. Authenticity threatens inauthenticity.

"Well, who is Jesus?" the reader might ask. Mark will focus on the question, "Who is Jesus?" throughout his gospel. But for now, Mark has Jesus command the demons, who recognize his power, to keep Jesus' identity secret.

Today, many people who do not know the secret, believe that "who Jesus is" can be put on billboards and understood by a passing highway traveler. But for Mark, "who Jesus is" is a secret. And as we shall see, those who learn this secret are few. And when they do learn it, they are so shocked that they are filled with dread. But that is getting ahead of Mark's story. For now, only evil spirits know the secret of who Jesus is. The

disciples, the crowds, the religious authorities do not know. Evil spirits know; but unawake humans, and not-yet-fully awake humans, do not know.

*With whom in this story do you identify? Those bringing sick people? The sick people? The disciples watching? The general population? Jesus?*

*How do you respond to Mark's emphasis on the secrecy of Jesus' identity?*

### **Mark 1:35-39 Very Early, Very Dark, and Very Alone**

Then, in the early morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a deserted place, and there he prayed. Simon and his companions went in search of him, and when they found him, they said, "Everyone is looking for you."

"Then we will go somewhere else, to the neighboring towns," he replied, "so that I may give my message there too—that is why I have come."

So he continued preaching in their synagogues and expelling evil spirits throughout the whole of Galilee.

Early, dark, and completely alone--this is the time and the place when and where Jesus prays. Jesus does not consult with the crowds about what to do with his life. He does not consult with his intimate circle about what to do with his life. Jesus, completely alone, consults with the Infinite Reality. Mark does not say what went on in this prayer time, or what sort of prayers were prayed or what prayer is. Jesus might have practiced silent meditation. All Mark tells us is that Jesus rose early and in the dark and all alone spent *time* in undivided attention to his relationship with the Infinite.

*What does it say to you about Jesus that he needed to spend so much time in prayer?*

*And what is prayer anyhow?*

The disciples had to go find him to tell him something they thought he needed to know, "The masses are looking for you." But Jesus does not say, "Good, I'll be right down to attend to their needs." He says, "Let's go somewhere else." He tells them what his task is: to speak to the other villages of Galilee. What is this message—a message that is even more important to Jesus than healing more sick people?

Apparently, Jesus' mission is to speak to ordinary people in the outback villages of Galilee, a tiny district of Jewish humanity. How, we might wonder, did Jesus come to this conclusion? To such questions, many modern Christians have become accustomed to giving easy answers like "God told him" or "Jesus was God." Mark, however, avoids such easy answers. He does not tell us how Jesus knew what to do, but he implies that the certainty of decision that Jesus displayed was related to the hours he spent in prayer—early, alone, and in the dark with the Infinite Reality.

*How might spending time in prayer affect your own confidence in choosing what you need to do with your life?*

## Mark 1:40-45 The Third Healing: An Unclean Outcast

Then a leper came to Jesus, knelt in front of him and appealed to him, “If you want to, you can make me clean.”

Jesus was filled with pity for him, and stretched out his hand and placed it on the leper, saying, “Of course I want to—be clean!”

At once the leprosy left him and he was quite clean. Jesus sent him away there and then with the strict injunction, “Mind you say nothing at all to anybody. Go straight off and show yourself to the priest, and make the offerings for your cleansing which Moses prescribed, as public proof of your recovery.”

But he went off and began to talk a great deal about it in public, spreading his story far and wide. Consequently, it became impossible for Jesus to show his face in the towns and he had to stay outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from all quarters.

Lepers were outsiders, health risks, considered unclean, unfit for normal social life. To restore the unclean to social life somehow hit a nerve in the life of the masses. To see and experience such healings, they crowd around Jesus. Mark implies that Jesus has a deeper healing in mind than social acceptability, one for which people will not so readily come for healing. What does a true compassion for all sorts and qualities of human beings look like? What is this deeper more invisible uncleanness that Jesus has come to heal?

Jesus goes to people who are considered untouchable, socially repulsive, persons way beyond the norm, riffraff, dirty, smelly, bag ladies, dope-heads, crazies, all symbolized by this worst-of-all dirtiness—the disgusting disease of leprosy.

*Who are the most disgusting outsiders today?*

*What would it take to restore these conscious beings to normal social life?*

*When have you found yourself viewed by the society that surrounds you as disgusting?*

## Chapter Two

### Mark 2: 1-12 The Fourth Healing: A Man Paralyzed Like Dead

When he re-entered Capernaum some days later, a rumor spread that he was in somebody's house. Such a large crowd collected that while he was giving them his message it was impossible even to get near the doorway. Meanwhile, a group of people arrived to see him, bringing with them a paralytic whom four of them were carrying. And when they found it was impossible to get near him because of the crowd, they removed the tiles from the roof over Jesus' head and let down the paralytic's bed through the opening. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the man on the bed, "My son, your sins are forgiven."

But some of the scribes were sitting there silently asking themselves, "Why does this man talk such blasphemy? Who can possibly forgive sins but God?"

Jesus realized instantly what they were thinking, and said to them, "why must you argue like this in your minds? Which do you suppose is easier—to say to a paralyzed man, 'Your sins are forgiven', or 'Get up, pick up your bed and walk'? But to prove to you that the Son of Man has full authority to forgive sins on earth, I say to you,"—and here he spoke to the paralytic—"Get up, pick up your bed and go home."

At once the man sprang to his feet, picked up his bed and walked off in full view of them all. Everyone was amazed, praised God, and said, "We have never seen anything like this before."

This man is paralyzed. He is *down* like *dead*. He is carried by four bearers. A hole is made and he is lowered down. Down in the bottom of the hole that they "dug" in the roof of this house is Jesus, and Jesus says to this prone man, "Child, your sins are forgiven." These allusions to death and resurrection are clearly intentional. Mark intends for us to "get it,"—to hear this Spirit lesson: "the spiritually dead are raised up through forgiveness."

Mark has introduced a new theme: "forgiveness." The religious scholars in Mark's story take offense that a mere human being can declare forgiveness. "Only God," they say, "can forgive." But Jesus, sensing their rejection, clarifies that the son of Adam (that is, any authentic human being) has authority to forgive sins. But Jesus does not say to the man, "I forgive you." He says "Your sins are forgiven" The meaning here is that Jesus is the Mouth of God speaking for God about a forgiveness that is extended to all of us. Mark further clarifies that accepting forgiveness and rising up from your paralysis are one and the same thing. The down-like-dead man, hearing that he is forgiven, gets up, picks up his mat, and goes home. Forgiveness is not an excuse for remaining dead. Forgiveness is a fresh start in being alive.

Some of the people standing around feel the Awe of this. They become ecstatic. They extol the Awesome Infinite Silence for confronting them with this possibility. They exclaim, "We've never seen the likes of this!"

Now what is Mark talking about with this story? What is going on here that could be so Awesome, so new, so important? Clearly, Mark is talking about more than the literal elements of the story. Honestly, who cares whether or not some paralyzed man who

lived 2000 years ago got back on his feet? Mark is telling us that Jesus is the one who meets us, each of us, at the lowest point of our spirit condition--when we are indeed dead in our despair, unable even to walk our lives; when we are out flat, having to be carried by others. When despair has blocked all possibility of going on with our lives, at this point Jesus says to us: "Your despair is forgiven. Everything in your past or in your present life over which you are despairing is forgiven. You have, right now, a fresh start before you; arise and walk it." When some despairing person actually accepts such forgiveness, all of us feel the Awe.

*When have you seen forgiveness put someone on their feet?*

*When has forgiveness put you on your feet?*

*What is the difference between declaring God's forgiveness and simply forgiving someone yourself?*

### **Mark 2:13-15 The Fifth Disciple: A Despised Tax Collector**

Then Jesus went out again by the lake-side and the whole crowd came to him, and he continued to teach them.

As Jesus went on his way, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at his desk in the tax office and he said to him, "Follow me!"

Levi got up and followed him.

By the sea, near water, Jesus accompanied by huge crowds is walking along teaching. He sees Levi, a tax collector, sitting at his work. This man works for the Roman tyrants. Very few tax collectors were fair, and they were generally despised. Jesus picks out this man and says, "Follow me." Like the four fishermen earlier in Mark's story, Levi immediately drops his entire vocation and follows Jesus.

The word "following" in this story means walking with Jesus wherever he goes, literally on foot. Also, "following Jesus" is a metaphor for taking an inward journey. This journey begins with hearing a call, and this results in leaving everything and following that call.

*Is your profession or job mostly despised by society or mostly honored?*

*When have you left something big in order to respond to a call to a more authentic walk of your life?*

### **Mark 2:15-17 Healing for the Despised**

Later, when Jesus was sitting at dinner in Levi's house, a large number of tax-collectors and disreputable folk came in and joined him and his disciples. For there were many such people among his followers.



When the scribes and Pharisees saw him eating in the company of tax-collectors and outsiders, they remarked to his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax-collectors and sinners?”

When Jesus heard this, he said to them, “It is not the fit and flourishing who need the doctor, but those who are ill. I did not come to invite the ‘righteous’, but the ‘sinners’.

Jesus is eating with Levi and other tax collectors, and sinners. The act of eating with someone was strongly symbolic of comradeship in Mark’s and Jesus’ culture. The religious scholars in Mark’s story question Jesus’ behavior. In the scholars’ minds, he is “running with the wrong crowd.” Here Mark inserts one of the great sayings from the Jesus tradition: “Since when do the able-bodied need a doctor? Rather, it’s the sick. I did not come to invite religious folk, but sinners.”

What does this saying mean to Mark in 65 C.E.? Mark sees Jesus as a doctor, a healer, a restorer of authenticity in human beings. Mark implies that the sick are not just tax collectors and harlots, but religious scholars as well. “Coming to the doctor” only occurs to those who are admitting their deep illusions, estrangements, bondages, despairs, etc.—admitting the sicknesses that are running and ruining their lives. This is a core teaching: admitting our spirit sickness is the first step in following Jesus.

*When have you sought a Spirit doctor?*

*What maladies brought you to the doctor?*

*What healing did you receive?*

### **Mark 2:18-20 Feasting and Fasting**

The disciples of John and those of the Pharisees were fasting. They came and said to Jesus, “Why do those who follow John or the Pharisees keep fasts, but your disciples do nothing of the kind?”

Jesus told them, “Can you expect wedding-guest to fast in the bridegroom’s presence? Fasting is out of the question as long as they have the bridegroom with them. But the day will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them—that will be the time for them to fast.

The keepers of traditions, in this case the tradition of regular fasting, criticize Jesus in terms of what others usually do. They imply that Jesus’ disciples are practicing an inferior or lax religion. Jesus reminds them that fasting is inconsistent with a wedding celebration. He implies that his presence, like the presence of a bridegroom, calls for feasting or celebration. The underlying issue here is making your religion match the living reality of your life. The Spirit reality of your life has priority over doing what people normally do. Doing religious practices because “that is what is normally done” is not the Jesus way. Authenticity comes first, religious practice comes second. This is the guideline for our religious practices.

*When in your Spirit journey have you fasted or followed any type of ascetic religious practice?*

*When in your Spirit journey have you feasted or followed some type of celebrative religious practice?*

Mark makes clear in the second part of Jesus' reply (probably written by Mark himself) that there is nothing wrong with fasting in its proper place. When death and sorrow are present, fasting is appropriate. Mark makes allusion to Jesus' death, indicating that the "crucifixion" periods of our experience are the appropriate times for fasting. Here again the underlying teaching is the same: the Spirit reality of our lives precedes our choosing appropriate religious practices.

*How do your current religious practices relate to your current journey of Spirit?*

### **Mark 2: 21-22 New Wineskins**

"Nobody," he continued, "sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on to an old coat. If he does, the new patch tears away from the old and the hole is worse than ever. And nobody puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine bursts the skins, the wine is spilt and the skins are ruined. No, new wine must go into new wineskins."

At this point in his narrative, Mark includes this Jesus-parable to further elaborate the theme that Spirit precedes religious practices. Mark is telling us that following Jesus involves a new Spirit reality that cannot be held in the old religious wineskins of first century legalism. In case we do not get the wineskin metaphor, Mark is also telling us that this new Spirit of following Jesus requires a whole new piece of religious cloth, not merely a patch on the current religious fabric. Any patch that expresses this fresh Spirit will tear loose from the old religious garments. Mark, we must suppose, was already experiencing this tearing loose from traditional Judaism. In his writing of this Gospel narrative, Mark, is creating new religious wineskins for holding the fresh wine of Spirit that following Jesus includes. Or to use the second metaphor, Mark is creating a new whole cloth with which to clothe his new Spirit in historical dress.

With a deeper than usual discussion of Mark's narrative, we who are living today may be able to join Mark in doing for our own time a similar creating of new religious wineskins or whole-new-cloth religious forms that hold the Jesus spirit. So let us face this challenge of viewing our own ongoing theologizing and community building as pursuing the command or the calling of the Markian revelation to do for the 21st century what Mark was doing for the first century. This means finding and/or creating religious understandings, practices, and forms of communal life that can contain and proclaim the Spirit that expresses the enduring Christian revelation to which Mark is witnessing.

The Christian tradition is valuable, but traditionalism is a cop out. Tradition may lead to Spirit, but Spirit essentially preceded tradition. The inherited religious wineskins of Christian practice are not working, or not working well, in doing this calling that Mark is modeling for us. We live in a time of world-wide change in religious forms. This

complicated revolution is taking place in every religion, including Christianity. An effective movement toward a vital and relevant Christianity for our time will “tear loose” from our inherited “Christian” practices. Mark supports us in getting ourselves ready to do something different than minor reforms, and not be intimidated when a deeper obedience than following rules is required for healing our lives.

*What are the “rules” that you feel you must always obey?*

*Which of these “rules” might you need to consider breaking under some rule-breaking circumstance?*

The audacious freedom implied in this teaching shocks moralists in any century. If there are no rules which one has to always obey, how can we ever be certain that we are doing the right thing? The answer is, “We can’t.” Absolute certainty is forbidden the human species. Freedom is our essential lot. Here is the actual Spirit truth: in order to be authentic, we must act without certainty. We must obey the obligation to render free acts in the midst of moral uncertainty and ethical ambiguity. Time-tested rules can assist us in making our decisions, but the rules cannot give us certainty that we are doing the right thing. Rules can serve us, but they cannot justify us; and they must not run our lives. The authentic human is *lord of the rules*.

Both Jesus and Mark commend an unconventional sort of certainty--the certainty that you and I are free beings and thus “lord” over all the rules. We even create whatever new rules are needed to serve ourselves and others. ***But the rules do not rule us.*** *The rules may express Spirit, but Spirit is never contained in any set of rules.*

*What does it feel like to break good rules that are not good enough for guiding your authentic actions?*

# Chapter Three

## Mark 3:1-6 The Fifth Healing: A Crippled Religious Man

On another occasion when he went into the synagogue, there was a man there whose hand was shriveled, and they were watching Jesus closely to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath day, so that they might bring a charge against him. Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, “Stand up and come out here in front!”

Then he said to them, “Is it right to do good on the Sabbath day, or to do harm? Is it right to save life or to kill?”

There was a dead silence. Then Jesus, deeply hurt as he sensed their inhumanity, looked round in anger at the faces surrounding him, and said to the man, “Stretch out your hand!” And he stretched it out, and the hand was restored as sound as the other one. The Pharisees walked straight out and discussed with Herod’s party how they could have Jesus put out of the way.

Mark is implying that these obstinate rule-keepers are crippled and are crippling other people, whereas Jesus’ purpose is not to cripple, but to *bring life*. And he intends to do this on the Sabbath day or on every other day. To the moralistically crippled people of his era, Jesus says, “Hold out your crippled hand.”

Those who do this are restored. But the moralists are furious. They plot to get rid of this “authentic human” in their midst. He is an attack on their “certainty” that they are better than other people. Yet before the “judgement court,” of realism, their moral confidence is being shown to be hypocrisy.

*Where have you seen moralists become furious with those who manifest authentic freedom?*

*When have you yourself been furious at some one’s immorality?*

*What is the moralism that lies behind that fury?*

*How has your moralism been crippling to your own life?*

## Mark 3: 7-19 The Exodus of a New Israel

Jesus now retired to the lake-side with his disciples. A huge crowd of people followed him, not only from Galilee, but from Judea, Jerusalem and Idumea, some from the district beyond the Jordan and from the neighborhood of Tyre and Sidon. This vast crowd came to him because they had heard about the sort of things he was doing. So Jesus told his disciples to have a small boat kept in readiness for him, in case the people should crowd him too closely. For he healed so many people that all those who were in pain kept pressing forward to touch him with their hands. Evil spirits, as soon as they saw him, acknowledged his authority and screamed, “You are the Son of God!”

But he warned them repeatedly that they must not make him known.

Later he went up on to the hill-side and summoned the men whom he wanted, and they went up to him. He appointed a band of twelve to be his companions, whom he could send out to preach, with power to drive out evil spirits. These were the twelve he appointed: Peter (which was the new name he gave

Simon), James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother (He gave them the name of Boanerges, which means the “Thunderers”.) Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James the son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon the Patriot, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

In these verses Mark does a sort of review of all the recent themes of his narrative. He mentions again: going to the sea, being followed by huge crowds, unclean spirits crying out about Jesus’ identity, but being warned not to tell his secret. Then we see Jesus going up a mountain like Moses and forming a group of 12 who are to (1) be his companions, (2) be sent out to speak, and (3) be given authority to drive out demons.

Who is this guy, Jesus? What is he doing? Why is he doing it? Mark wants his story to raise such questions. Also, Mark’s first readers would have noticed some things in Mark’s story that we who are forgetful of our Old Testament stories might not notice. Moses also went down to the sea followed by huge crowds. Moses also went up a mountain to organize structures for that community of wanderers. When that Mosaic heritage got established in the promised land, there were 12 tribes. Twelve became a symbol for the wholeness of the People of God.

Mark clearly wants to indicate to his readers that a new or renewed people of God is being formed. The old traditions are not being entirely abandoned, yet a fresh sort of exodus experience is happening.

Also, let us notice this curious fact about the list of disciples: the name “Levi,” who was called earlier from his tax booth, is not included among the 12. Obviously, Jesus had many more disciples than 12. And we don’t actually know whether or not this idea of 12 originated with the historical Jesus or with later story tellers. Probably, Jesus did have a sort of inner circle—those who were in his “leadership training school,” his hope for leaving behind him a lineage of teachers. But the names of these persons are not actually known. This particular naming of the twelve probably represents Mark’s own creativity rather than that of the historical Jesus himself. So why does Mark not mention the name Levi, whose calling he has already included in his story?

It is worth noting that the ancient Israelites had an “odd tribe” called “Levi” which was not one of the 12 tribes. The Levites were a “tribe” of teaching priests who had covenant renewal functions. They were understood to be descendants of Moses. Surely Mark’s mentioning of the name Levi while leaving Levi off the list of twelve had something to do with this heritage of the Levites. But what? It probably fits into Mark’s whole image of Jesus as the instigator of a new Israel. Jesus himself is also an odd thirteenth person. Jesus is a Levite, in the sense of being a teacher of the heritage and who performs a covenant renewal function.

Clearly, Mark is not recording accurate historical details about the movement that was organized by the historical Jesus. Rather, he is writing a story in which he is painting a portrait of Jesus and his intimate circle as “first fruits of a new Israel.” These twelve are

being prepared to lead crowds through a new exodus, and thereby become a new community of trust in that All Powerful Final Reality that none of us can escape.

*What strikes you most about Mark's allusions to the Old Testament?*

*In what ways do you see yourself dedicated to a true continuation of a revered tradition that you feel others misinterpret?*

### **Mark 3:20-30 Has Jesus Lost his Mind?**

Then he went indoors, but again such a crowd collected that it was impossible for them even to eat a meal. When his relatives heard of this, they set out to take charge of him, for people were saying, "He must be mad!"

The scribes who had come down from Jerusalem were saying that he was possessed by Beelzebub, and that he drove out devils because he was in league with the prince of devils. So Jesus called them to him and spoke to them in a parable—"How can Satan be the one who drives out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, it cannot last either. And if Satan leads a rebellion against Satan—his days are certainly numbered. No one can break into a strong man's house and steal his property, without first tying up the strong man hand and foot. But if he did that, he could ransack the whole house.

"Believe me, all men's sins can be forgiven and their blasphemies. But there can never be any forgiveness for blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. That is an eternal sin." He said this because they were saying, "He is in the power of an evil spirit."

Now Jesus goes back home and the crowds gather. His relatives come to get him, for they think he has lost his mind. To be the authentic human in the midst of an inauthentic society appears to be madness. Apparently, one of the risks of participation in the Jesus-exodus of authentic Spirit was (and still is) being misunderstood by most people.

*When has your journey toward authenticity appeared to others as losing your mind?*

The religious authorities take an even dimmer view. They defend their false, shallow, and rigid righteousness by declaring this "authentic human" to be evil. Even though they actually see that truly evil stuff is being overcome in people's lives. Nevertheless, they cannot accept the implication that this "nut case" is an expression of goodness. Here is their "brilliant" explanation: "He drives out demons because he is under the control of the head demon."

Jesus pokes fun at their explanation: "If the government of evil is divided against itself, it will not stand. You can't enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless you first tie up the strong man."

Mark assumes here that Jesus has indeed wrestled the rule of Satan to the ground. Jesus has, inside himself, tied up this "potentiality for estrangement" so that it does not operate in his life. This is the key to his healing power: he has defeated Spirit-sickness



inside himself; therefore, he can call on this same defeat to happen in the lives of others—releasing that same authentic “Holiness of Spirit” that is the essence of us all.

Mark adds to this discussion a sobering warning: for anyone coming in touch with this essential “goodness,” everything “evil” in their lives will be forgiven, but those who defiantly condemn the “good Spirit” as evil are creating in themselves an unforgivable relationship with the goodness of their humanity. That is, the rejection of the good as evil creates a log jam in the process of healing, for such defiance means not repenting of the evil, or accepting that fresh start offered by the assurance of forgiveness..

This sober warning should not be taken moralistically—that is, we need not be taken up in worry about whether we have done some deed or other that is so gross it will not be forgiven. Rather, this frightful warning is given to the defensive person in this present moment—someone who instead of admitting his or her own guilt and thus being forgiven, defiantly renames good evil and evil good. This depth of defiance is unforgivable precisely because it is a rejection of forgiveness for our lives, a rejection of the fresh start within what we can experience as our essential goodness. Mark’s Jesus is saying to us, “Don’t do this! Admit your estrangement, accept your forgiveness, and live your fresh start. Forgiveness and a fresh start can be part of each and every choice we make. And forgiveness has to be accepted for it to be a fresh start.

*When most recently have you faced accepting forgiveness and a fresh start?*

### **Mark 3:31-34 Jesus’ New Family**

Then his mother and his brothers arrived. They stood outside the house and sent a message asking him to come out to them. There was a crowd sitting round him when the message was brought telling him, “Your mother and your brothers are outside looking for you.”

Jesus replied, “And who are really my mother and my brothers?”

And he looked round at the faces of those sitting in a circle about him.

“Look!” he said, “my mother and my brothers are here. Anyone who does the will of God is brother and sister and mother to me.”

Jesus’ family still thinks he is plain crazy. They have come to take him home and put him away until he cools down.

*What conflicts about human authenticity have arisen in your own biological family?*

In response to those who tell him that his family is looking for him, Jesus redefines the family. The biological family is demoted from its often preeminent (even sacred) position. “Who is my family? Whoever does the will of God is my brother, sister, and mother!”

The “will of God” in this teaching does not mean a set of religious rules that someone decided are Divine. The “will of God” points to the ongoing “actions” of the actual Mysterious Wholeness in relation to which Jesus is calling people to be in tune. “Doing the will of God” means being a realistic person, operating out of human authenticity rather than delusion. And delusion (or estrangement) is pictured in this New Testament period as a vast government, a powerful kingdom enslaving the entire human family, including our own biological parents, brothers, and sisters. The authentic human cannot find his or her support system in the biological family. We need a new family to support us in our journey toward full realism. Who is our family? Whoever is on the journey toward full realism.

*So who is your family by Jesus’ definition of having a “Spirit family”?*

It is also interesting that Jesus, the authentic human, does not consider his followers as sons and daughters (as his children), but as brothers and sisters and mothers--that is, as equal adults operating on the same playing field and seeking victories in the same game of living. It may also be that Mark intentionally avoided using the term “father” in this spin, for that word carried the meaning of authority in his time. In that sense, Jesus does not want “authorities” in his family. Authority is reserved for God alone. God/Reality gives Reality’s “authority” to the authentic humans, that is, to realistic living.

*What do you think about being a mother, sister or brother in the Jesus’ family?*

*What do you think about seeing yourself as the resurrected body of the New Adam, the New Eve, the restored humanity, the “Coming of the Messiah” part of humanity within Earth history?*

# 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 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 [humans] 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’s literary device of people and disciples who do not yet get the secret message 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,” and Mark is writing his gospel to assist us see this secret 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 clear that this parable is not merely 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 a planting in you of seeds that grew?*

*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 many and perhaps harmed by a few.

*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 [human] who has something will receive more. As for the man [human] who has nothing, even his [or her] 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 Reality?” 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 own 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 have honestly answered 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 that our religious community or our nation is possessed by a legion of demons, we 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 if 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 these 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 us about a demon-possessed Israel that is healed of a Legion of demons who drown in 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 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 Mark 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 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 seen 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 Reality, 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 spilled 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?*



# Chapter Seven

## Mark 7:1-13 Human Tradition and God's Commandment

And now Jesus was approached by the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem. They had noticed that his disciples ate their meals with "common" hands—meaning that they had not gone through a ceremonial washing. (The Pharisees, and indeed all the Jews, will never eat unless they have washed their hands in a particular way, following a traditional rule. And they will not eat anything bought in the market until they have first performed their "sprinkling". And there are many other things which they consider important, concerned with the washing of cups, jugs and basins.) So the Pharisees and the scribes put this question to Jesus, "Why do your disciples refuse to follow the ancient tradition, and eat their bread with 'common' hands?"

Jesus replied, "You hypocrites, Isaiah described you beautifully when he wrote - 'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. And in vain they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men'. You are so busy holding on to the traditions of men that you let go the commandment of God!"

Then he went on, "It is wonderful to see how you can set aside the commandment of God to preserve your own tradition! For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother' and 'He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death'. But you say, 'if a man says to his father or his mother, Korban - meaning, I have given God whatever duty I owed to you', then he need not lift a finger any longer for his father or mother, so making the word of God invalid for the sake of the tradition which you hold. And this is typical of much of what you do."

It is generally a good idea to wash our dishes and to wash our hands before eating. Most of the rules that you and I impose upon ourselves have some relative validity. Some of us eat no meat because it is taking the life of another animal. Like all rules, that one might be useful. However, if we give that rule over-riding seriousness, discredit all meat eaters, and hold ourselves righteous in comparison with others, we are embodying the attitude of these Pharisees and religious scholars that Jesus is confronting in this story.

First of all, Jesus points out what these moral teachers neglect a wholehearted obedience to the total demand to live a life of integrity and compassion. Then Jesus points out the contradictions in their own position. If the issue had been principled vegetarianism, the Jesus in Mark's story might have said, "Do you have no compassion for the death of carrots? All life feeds on other life." In other words whatever moral principles we espouse, the limitations of these principles show up at some point or another. The rules are always just humanly created rules that may help in some situations, but not all. All rules are nothing more than approximations of the command to love fully.

The deep issue here is not the contradictions in our moral behaviors, but our neglect of God's commandment. What does that mean? It does not mean a better set of rules, even though it remains true that some rules are better than others. While the commandment of God may be expressed in rules, the commandment of God is not rules. Rules, all rules, are human tradition. New Testament passages like this one are entirely misunderstood when they are interpreted to mean that your rules or my rules are better than the rules of these Pharisees and religious scholars. Rules are rules, and

while rules can be evaluated from the perspective of the commandment to love the Infinitely Real and every finite neighbor, rules are not now and never can be the final rules.

Neither Jesus nor Mark focused on initiating a new set of rules. Rather, their breakthrough was a fresh context for thinking about all rules. Their breakthrough had to do with seeing a deeper sort of obedience--obedience to a *Total Demand* which was infinitely more than obeying the rules, however good those rules may be. When we make judgments about which human rules are best to use in a specific situation, we need a context that is larger than the rules. This is the truth Mark is implying: our master context is obedience to the *Command* of the Final, Infinite, Overall Reality. So what is this *Great Command*? Stated in both Old and New Testaments, this *Great Command* is about living our whole lives in a realistic manner—in full affirmation of the Whole Reality that is our Source and Sustenance as well as the Whole Reality that is coming at us as our future. The future include all our real neighbors and their real lives—estranged lives, potential lives, and perhaps repentant lives. “Loving God and neighbor” is the short expression for this inexhaustible *Great Command for our future*.

Morality is a social creation; it is nothing more divine than brushing our teeth and all the other disciplines, habits, rules, taboos, customs and guidelines that each culture creates to give some order to our living together with other people. Such social creations are important and necessary, but not divine, not ultimate, and definitely not a container in which we must contain the Spirit that Jesus and Mark are revealing to us. Spirit gives us context for our creations of morality and our creative application of those rules, but morality, like all other human creations, is subject to revolution from the context of the Spirit depth that is the core of Mark’s gospel.

*When have you discovered that social norms could not be a container for your authenticity?*

### **Mark 7:14-23 What Defiles a Human Being?**

Then he called the crowd close to him again, and spoke to them, "Listen to me now, all of you, and understand this, There is nothing outside a man which can enter into him and make him 'common'. It is the things which come out of a man that make him 'common'!"

Later, when he had gone indoors away from the crowd, his disciples asked him about this parable. "Oh, are you as dull as they are?" he said. "Can't you see that anything that goes into a man from outside cannot make him 'common' or unclean? You see, it doesn't go into his heart, but into his stomach, and passes out of the body altogether, so that all food is clean enough. But," he went on, "whatever comes out of a man, that is what makes a man 'common' or unclean. For it is from inside, from men's hearts and minds, that evil thoughts arise—lust, theft, murder, adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, arrogance and folly! All these evil things come from inside a man and make him unclean!"

Mark may have included here an original teaching of Jesus, but Mark apparently thinks his audience are not understanding this teaching very well, for he has Jesus explain it further to these “still confused” disciples. Mark is indicating that it is harmless to our Spirit lives to eat unwashed food, un-kosher food, Gentile food. But more importantly,



Mark is indicating that the real origins of our Spirit defilement are located in the basic attitudes of our inner lives out of which flow all that we say and do. Mark is conducting a thoroughgoing rejection of the interior attitude we often call “moralism” and in so doing he raises this fundamental question: “What is the proper basic attitude of our inner lives?”

Clearly, Mark has more to say about this basic attitude, or faith, or ultimate obedience. And we can notice that Mark is indicating a detachment from both Jewish culture and Greek culture, a detachment rooted in something divine, absolute, universal to all cultures.

*How have you sought for a obedience that transcends your cultural upbringing?*

### **Mark 7:24-30 Healing a Greek Daughter**

Then he got up and left that place and went off to the neighborhood of Tyre. There he went into a house and wanted no one to know where he was. But it proved impossible to remain hidden. For no sooner had he got there, than a woman who had heard about him, and who had a daughter possessed by an evil spirit, arrived and prostrated herself before him. She was a Greek, a Syrophenician by birth, and she asked him to drive the evil spirit out of her daughter. Jesus said to her, “You must let the children have all they want first. It is not right, you know, to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.”

But she replied, “Yes, Lord, I know, but even the dogs under the table eat what the children leave.”

“If you can answer like that,” Jesus said to her, “you can go home! The evil spirit has left your daughter.” And she went back home and found the child lying quietly on her bed, and the evil spirit gone.

We find in this healing story, another Mark-constructed parable with many hidden and not so hidden meanings. A Greek woman asks for deliverance for her daughter. Jesus gives this very curious reply, “Let the children be fed first, since it isn’t good to take bread out of the children’s mouths and throw it to the dogs.” “Children” clearly refers to the children of Israel. “Dogs” refers to the Gentile world. Also Mark is continuing with the metaphor of feeding. Historically, it was indeed true that the actual life and death of Jesus had only fed the children of Israel. Jesus did not conduct a mission to the Greek world. The issue of Christian food for the inhabitants of Greek or Hellenistic culture came into prominence after Jesus’ death. The entire idea of feeding death/resurrection to Gentile children as well as the children of Israel was a controversial issue for the entire first century of Jesus’ followers.

Mark is upending the rules and tradition of his own Hebrew heritage at a central point, at a point where the historical Jesus had given no clear guidance. Mark does not deny that Jesus constructed his mission to “the lost children of Israel.” Mark, by telling this story, underlines that the mission of Jesus yielded extra food that is being eaten by Gentiles.

Mark is not implying that we should call other cultural groups “dogs.” Rather, he is attacking Jewish in-groupism. He has the Greek woman humble herself in faith and

boldly counter Jesus' challenge with this spunky retort, "Sir, even the dogs under the children's table get the scraps (dropped by) the children." This saying has many humorous overtones for Mark. Religiously trained Hebrews are indeed dropping the food being offered to them by Jesus. And untutored Greek people are turning up with an eagerness to snap it up. This Greek woman expresses faith, her trust in the healing power of the Jesus-message and movement. This woman has thereby bested those children of Israel who, though blessed by the long heritage of this "People of God" community, are showing up with little or no hunger for the food that heals and nurtures the human Spirit.

The Spirit of the Jesus-breakthrough is clearly able to abandon not only the old rules of classical Judaism but also the newer rules of Palestinian Christianity. Mark's Christianity continues Paul's critique of Christianity's first formations. The ongoing "self-criticism of Christianity" is an important topic. Most monastic movements have engaged in such self-criticism. The Protestant Reformation can be viewed as the establishment of religious self-criticism as a permanent factor in being Christian.

Just as the daily life of Jesus had to die to reveal the resurrection, so all Christian formations must die (self criticize) to be the witnesses to the resurrection. If we were to proclaim the message of Mark's gospel clearly and relevantly, we might find more unchurched people than churchgoers open to this message.

*Where in your current religious history have you noticed something similar to this struggle Mark was having with Jewish Christians rejecting Gentile Christians?*

### **Mark 7: 31-37 The Deaf Mute--The Ninth Healing of an Israelite**

Once more Jesus left the neighborhood of Tyre and passed through Sidon towards the Lake of Galilee, and crossed the Ten Towns territory. They brought to him a man who was deaf and unable to speak intelligibly, and they implored him to put his hand upon him. Jesus took him away from the crowd by himself. He put his fingers in the man's ears and touched his tongue with his own saliva. Then, looking up to Heaven, he gave a deep sigh and said to him in Aramaic, "Open!"

And his ears were opened and immediately whatever had tied his tongue came loose and he spoke quite plainly. Jesus gave instructions that they should tell no one about this happening, but the more he told them, the more they broadcast the news. People were absolutely amazed, and kept saying, "How wonderful he has done everything! He even makes the deaf hear and the dumb speak."

This is yet another Mark-constructed parable. From Mark's perspective, Mark's own religious community of people are deaf and dumb in Spirit awareness. The new Israel of Christ-way Jews and Gentiles does not hear the Spirit message and does not speak the truth of Spirit. "Israel" in this context does not mean Jewish biology or the practitioners of a Jewish religion. "Israel" means Mark's own religious upbringing, religious symbols, religious practices, and religious communal life. Mark is speaking first and foremost to the deaf and dumb Christ-way practitioners of his Hellenistic/Hebraic religious training.

For all of us today, whatever our religious practice or lack of one, Mark is alluding to a type of hearing and speaking that is rooted in an authenticity to which our religious practices might lead us, but which is a state of life that is infinitely deeper than our religious practices themselves. Religious practices are like parables; they hold a secret that we must discover in the depths of our own being.

In Marks story, it is not just Israel, but humanity that is learning to hear the Infinite Silence speak and to speak of what is heard. That is why those standing around were amazed and dumbfounded: “the deaf hear and the mute speak.” People standing around today will be no less amazed if such a thing happened to the Christian-identified people of our era, or to people anywhere in any cultural place and practice.

*What sort of Spirit deafness and muteness characterizes Christian-identified people you know?*

# Chapter Eight

## Mark 8:1-9 Feeding the 4000

About this time it happened again that a large crowd collected and had nothing to eat. Jesus called the disciples over to him and said, "My heart goes out to this crowd; they have been with me three days now and they have no food left. If I send them off home without anything, they will collapse on the way—and some of them have come from a distance."

His disciples replied, "Where could anyone find the food to feed them here in this deserted spot?" "How many loaves have you got?" Jesus asked them. "Seven," they replied.

So Jesus told the crowd to settle themselves on the ground. Then he took the seven loaves into his hands, and with a prayer of thanksgiving broke them, and gave them to the disciples to distribute to the people; and this they did. They had a few small fish as well, and after blessing them, Jesus told the disciples to give these also to the people. They ate and they were satisfied. Moreover, they picked up seven baskets full of pieces left over. The people numbered about four thousand.

Now why does Mark include another mass feeding event in his story? And why all this interest in numbers? They have **seven** loaves. They feed **4000** people. They have **seven** big baskets of leftover scraps.

Mark intends these leftover scraps to remind us of the story of the Gentile woman who, like the dogs, was ready to eat the scraps under the children's table. The number seven may allude to the then known kingdoms of the Gentile world. Mark's numbers are not documentary reporting nor casually chosen: they mean something in Mark's parable-like story telling.

In the first feeding story we had **twelve** baskets of leftovers, one for each of the tribes of Israel. In the first healing we told of **5000** being fed with **five** loaves and **two** fish. Mark is clearly trying to provoke us to probe these numbers for his secret meanings. Mark is suggesting we need to open our ears in some way in order to "get it."

I don't know how to track down all Mark's numerical meanings, but Mark is clearly interested in feeding Gentiles as well as Hebrews. Perhaps there is a parallel for our times, if we think of the Hebrews as the Christian establishment and the Gentiles as the secular world. Also, Mark is implying that it takes only a few bits of food to feed great masses of people.

*How do you see a few awake Spirit persons being food for both the religious establishment and the secular world?*

## Mark 8:10-13 No Sign will be Given.

Jesus sent them home, and then he boarded the boat at once with his disciples and went on to the district of Dalmanutha. Now the Pharisees came out and began an argument with him, wanting a sign from Heaven. Jesus gave a deep sigh, and then said, "What makes this generation want a sign? I can tell you this, they will certainly not be given one!"

Then he left them and got aboard the boat again, and crossed the lake

What is a sign? The Pharisees are asking for some sort of objective public proof that Jesus is indeed some kind of authoritative person sent by Infinite Authority. They want the sky to light up and shout to them that they must pay attention to this unauthorized person.

In the passage, Jesus says that no sign will be given this generation. This saying is consistent with Mark's continuing emphasis upon secrecy. The authority of Jesus is a secret seen only by those who have eyes that see--heard only by those who have ears that hear.

Members of the currently popular forms of Christian understanding often talk about objective, public proof that Jesus is the One. They interpret the healing stories as miracles that prove something. They interpret the resurrection of Jesus as a miracle that proves something. They interpret the Bible itself as some kind of miracle that proves something. But Mark has Jesus say (and perhaps the historical Jesus did say) that there will be no sign, no proof, no miracles in that sense. Mark is clear that the significance of Jesus is a secret that you have to be a Spirit person to know.

We don't have signs, we just have parables, and we have to be Spirit persons to understand these parables. Mark surely believed that the ministry of Jesus was filled with illuminating teachings, transformative callings, amazing healings, and wondrous happenings among those who follow Jesus, but we have to be Spirit persons to see these wonders. The meaning of Jesus is not obvious to our objective, controlling, news-reporter eyes. In the life of Jesus nothing happened that can force you or me to accept Jesus as a cosmically significant happening.

The significance of Jesus is a secret to everyone except those who are experiencing a profound inward change. To them, all is understood, callings are heard, lives are healed, and wondrous powers for human living are set loose.

*How have you required of Jesus or of the Bible some outward sign that it is true?*

*How have you discovered the truth of the biblical witness in your own life?*

### **Mark 8: 14-21 The Mystery of the Bread**

The disciples had forgotten to take any food and had only one loaf with them in the boat. Jesus spoke seriously to them, "Keep your eyes open! Be on your guard against the 'yeast' of the Pharisees and the 'yeast' of Herod!" And this sent them into an earnest consultation among themselves because they had brought no bread. Jesus knew it and said to them, "Why all this discussion about bringing no bread? Don't you understand or grasp what I say even yet? Are you like the people who 'having eyes, do not see, and having ears, do not hear'? Have you forgotten - when I broke five loaves for five thousand people, how many baskets full of pieces did you pick up?" "Twelve," they replied. "And then there were seven loaves for four thousand people, how many baskets of pieces did you pick up?" "Seven," they said.

"And does that still mean nothing to you?" he said

The disciples are out in the boat with Jesus. They have no bread except one loaf. Is Jesus that one loaf? Mark is surely talking about Spirit bread in another parable about physical bread. Jesus mentions the inadvisability of eating the yeast that the religious and secular authorities are offering. But the disciples are having difficulty getting their minds off physical bread and onto the Spirit level of this discussion.

Mark has Jesus call to the attention of these dumb-dumb disciples (and to us dumb-dumb readers) the two previously told stories about feeding the multitudes:

**five** loaves for **five thousand** with **twelve** baskets full of scraps left over, and

**seven** loaves for **four thousand** with **seven big** baskets full of scraps left over.

"You still don't understand do you?" says Jesus to his disciples.

"Well, do you understand?" says Mark to us.

Perhaps we have a few hints:

The first feeding satisfied a big crowd with minimal resources and there was food left over for the whole twelve tribes of Israel.

The second feeding satisfied a slightly smaller big crowd with slightly more resources and there was food left over for the whole seven kingdoms of the Gentile world.

Five fed the whole of Israel and seven fed the rest of the world. Five plus seven make twelve. There were twelve disciples.

Mark is asking us to think like this. But there is an even deeper thinking that we must do. How do the bodies (the lives) of so few become bread for so many?

And what must happen for Jesus' body or my body or your body to become bread for multitudes of people, indeed for all of human kind?

*What does it mean to you for Jesus' body or your body to be bread for others?*

### **Mark 8:22-26 A Blind Man Sees: The Tenth Healing of an Israelite**

So they arrived at Bethsaida where a blind man was brought to him, with the earnest request that he should touch him. Jesus took the blind man's hand and led him outside the village. Then he moistened his eyes with saliva and putting his hands on him, asked, "Can you see at all?"

The man looked up and said, "I can see people. They look like trees—only they are walking about." Then Jesus put his hands on his eyes once more and his sight came into focus. And he recovered and saw everything sharp and clear. And Jesus sent him off to his own house with the words, "Don't even go into the village."



In this story, it takes Jesus two tries to get this person to see clearly. Let us note that the disciples as well are not seeing clearly after their first encounters with Jesus. Also, it is interesting to note that this healing took place outside the village of Bethsaida, a town on the shore of the sea of Galilee. Simon and Andrew and James and John had all been called from their nets fishing on that sea. They had left their fishing nets and followed Jesus to become a new kind of fishers. Mark, in telling this blind man story at this point, is very likely alluding to one of these disciples. And indeed Simon Peter is revealed to be a blind man in the very next story.

The secrecy theme is also repeated in this story. The ex-blind man is ordered not to parade himself in the village. Mark is saying once again that the purpose of Jesus was not to become a popular miracle worker, but something deeper. And this something deeper is still a secret. We are given the hint that the blind disciples (and we blind readers) sort of see, but it is going to take Jesus a second try to bring fully clear vision. And it is going to take Mark a few more stories to deal with our blindness.

*When have you experienced yourself sort of seeing, but still needing more clarity?*

### **Mark 8:27-33 Peter Sees, but Does Not See Fully**

Jesus then went away with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who are men saying that I am?"

"John the Baptist," they answered. "But others say that you are Elijah or, some say, one of the prophets." Then he asked them, "But what about you—who do you say that I am?" "You are Christ!" answered Peter. Then Jesus impressed it upon them that they must not mention this to anyone.

And he began to teach them that it was inevitable that the Son of Man should go through much suffering and be utterly repudiated by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He told them all this quite bluntly. This made Peter draw him on one side and take him to task about what he had said. But Jesus turned and faced his disciples and rebuked Peter. "Out of my way, Satan!" he said. "Peter, you are not looking at things from God's point of view, but from man's!"

This story is like a watershed in Mark's whole story. Jesus himself now puts the question to his disciples, "How are people interpreting me?" And they answer with terms of great significance: John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets. But each of these designations interprets Jesus as a preparer of the way for the final revelation that is yet to come some day.

Then Jesus asks the disciples, "How do you interpret me?" And Peter blurts out, "You are the Anointed One." That is, Peter is saying that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the last word on what it means to be human. Peter is saying, "You are it; we don't need to wait for another."

Jesus does not deny that Peter is correct, but he also knows that Peter does not know what he is talking about. And so Mark has Jesus say at this point, "Don't tell anyone

about a Christ interpretation of Jesus.” That Jesus is “ the Messiah” is a secret. And it is going to take some additional Spirit maturity to *see* what this secret is all about.

So Jesus proceeds to teach them that the true messianic figure (the son of Adam) is destined to suffer, be rejected, and be killed. Jesus also mentions rising after spending three days in the tomb, but Peter only hears that Jesus is to be killed and he questions Jesus about saying such a thing. Clearly this does not jibe with Peter’s view of what is supposed to happen to the Messiah (or to those of us following the Messiah).

Jesus responds to Peter’s *blindness* in a most definite way. This perspective Peter is holding is evil, is Satan, is the greatest of all temptations. The Truth of God is the exact opposite of the view that Peter is holding.

The Anointed One is not privileged with divine intervention on behalf of his safety, but precisely the opposite. The Anointed One is vulnerable to the power held by the evil forces. The Anointed One will have to take the worst that these forces can do. Such tragic suffering is the first point of a true perspective on the essence of the Messiah—the destiny of the one who is to be the advent of all goodness and the defeat of all evil in human affairs. The second point is that the very worst that evil can do will not defeat Jesus, but this second point cannot be grasped until the first point is fully taken in.

None of this makes sense to Peter, nor to the rest of the disciples. And it will not make sense to us until we have been moved in our Spirit journey to a place from which it does indeed make sense of our own life experience. At this point in Mark’s story, the Messiahship of Jesus is still a secret. And don’t be too sure that you know the secret until you have heard the rest of Mark’s story.

When we have read and understood the rest of Mark’s Gospel in our own lives, we will have been asked to ponder these enigmas: the advent of the Final Truth about human living includes understanding that the finite must be sacrificed to the Infinite, the temporal offered up to the Eternal. In other words, the conditional loyalties of living are relativized in relation to an Unconditional Loyalty to the Absolute. Mark is going to poetize this deep truth about the journey of Spirit with his imaginative story of a totally realistic exemplar called “Jesus.”

*How is all this challenging to your thinking about what it means for Jesus to be the Christ?*

### **Mark 8:34-37 Walking in the Footsteps of the Messiah**

Then he called his disciples and the people around him, and said to them, "If anyone wants to follow in my footsteps, he must give up all right to himself, take up his cross and follow me. The man who tries to save his life will lose it; it is the man who loses his life for my sake and the Gospel's who will save it. What good can it do a man to gain the whole world at the price of his own soul? What can a man offer to buy back his soul once he has lost it?



In case we have misunderstood and think that this business of suffering, rejection, and dying applies only to Jesus and not to those who follow Jesus, Mark now talks about the “cross” of the followers. What is good enough for the master is good enough for the follower. In fact, following this master means abandoning everything for the sake of the Spirit life that is promised along this path.

When we think of taking up our “cross,” we may think of something romantic like being thrown in jail or having our house bombed or being shot in the head. But we need to consider as well the more pedestrian types of crosses. Let’s begin with paying the price of getting up an hour earlier every day in order to make time for a Spirit practice. Let’s move on from there to giving up Wednesday night television in order to attend a regular study group or social action group or an experiment in Christian community. Actually, what really has to be given up is the self-centered self that values its own indulgences, addictions, and familiar habits more than paying the cost of becoming a “great Spirit being” capable of making a significant contribution to the times in which we live. And to the extent that our contributions are profoundly significant, at least some people will want to shun us, ignore us, or even punish us for making these contributions. In these ways, the “cross” in an ordinary part of the everyday life of the followers of Jesus, indeed of the followers of any authentic exemplar.

So with these everyday “crosses” in our minds, let us translate the Jesus sayings in this passage as follows: “Those who try to save the life of their current customary ego are going to lose out entirely, but those who lose the life they normally crave for the sake of the good news (the offered path of an ever-opening Infinite relatedness), are going to save everything worth having. Indeed, what good does it do a person to acquire 793 billion dollars, but lose his or her essential being? Just how much would that person be willing to pay to get his or her true life back?”

*How much is having an authentic Spirit life worth to you?*

*What is difficult for you to sacrifice in order to have and keep a Spirit Life alive?*

### **Mark 8:38 Are We Ashamed of This Messiah?**

If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this unfaithful and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in the Father's glory with the holy angels around him."

We are inclined to ignore entirely passages like this one. Many use such passages to dismiss the entire Bible as gobbledygook. So what is Mark talking about that might make sense in our own lives? What does he think that the Jesus character that he is painting is talking about? Why would we be ashamed of Jesus and his message? And why would Jesus be ashamed of those who don't accept and live his message

Let' start with this question "Is our generation also adulterous and sinful? If Jesus is our portrait of true humanity as a sacrifice of all temporal loyalties to an overriding loyalty to the Eternal, then indeed our generation, like Jesus' generation, is an adulterous and sinful generation (that is, a generation estranged from Reality).

What does "the son of man" mean? That phrase can be translated "the son of Adam." meaning the offspring of a true humanity that replaces the old estranged humanity. The son of Adam" is also a phrase that means "the Messiah" or "the Christ." The historical Jesus might have used the phase "son of Adam" without meaning that he himself was the Christ. And he might have identified with this true humanity without making his message about his own true humanity. Mark, however, was clear in his mind that Jesus was the Christ, this true humanity. Mark was working to clarify what that means.

Both Jesus of Nazareth and Mark were surely familiar with this myth that the "son of Adam" was to appear in the final wrap-up of time to judge the living and the dead. In other words, true humanity would win in the end over estranged humanity. Trust in Reality means that Reality always wins in the end over the unreality. The phrase "come in the Father's glory accompanied by holy angels" is nothing more than further poetic elaboration of that trust in Reality over unreality.

So Mark is saying to us that if we are ashamed of Jesus and his words we are on "the wrong side of history" to use a more modern phrase. History, that is the Final Reality unfolding in history, will shame us if we do not see that the Jesus Christ revelation is opening us to the essence of our true humanity. Being this true humanity means rejecting the false humanity—repenting of the falseness in our own lives and opening ourselves to the Truth that has and is creating us, rather than some truth we ourselves have created.

*When have you seen someone on the wrong side of history?*

*When have you been on he wrong side of history?*

# Chapter Nine

## Mark 9:1 Victory in Your Lifetime and Mine

Then he added, "Believe me, there are some of you standing here who will know nothing of death until you have seen the kingdom of God coming in its power!"

In this passage, Mark makes very clear that the true life of humanity does not wait until the end of time to appear. It is appearing now in Jesus, in his words, and in our acceptance of him and his words that release in us our own true humanity. God's Imperial Rule or the Kingdom of God is already coming in power in the lifetime of the disciples. The world did not end; the stars did not fall; the Roman empire was not overthrown; the corrupt religious establishment was not yet purged; the widespread manifestation of rebellion against God was not yet put down. So what did it mean to Mark to say that God's Imperial Rule was already appearing and would be coming in power in the lifetimes of those standing with him? It means that this "new Adam" or "restored humanity" is walking and talking and living on earth now in Jesus and in his disciples, and might also abound in you and me.

Yet for now, God's Imperial Rule is a secret, a secret known only to those to whom this secret is being revealed? The overall parable-style of Mark's gospel prepares us to guess that for Mark this august coming of a new Adam means for now an inward transformation in the lives of relatively few people. So these images about the end of the world do not refer to an outward affair that a TV camera or a tape recorder could capture. Yet the estranged world did indeed come to an end in the lifetime of these disciples, but this cosmic sort to ending was not a public event that everyone could see. Only those with unusual eyes could see (figuratively speaking) the stars falling from the sky and notice that all rebellion against Reality, Truth, and Justice was indeed being overcome in the living here and now.

*When have you seen in the secrecy of your interior Spirit eyes, the end of the world?*

## Mark 9:2-10 Jesus is Transfigured in the Vision of Three Disciples.

Six days later, Jesus took Peter and James and John with him and led them high up on a hill-side where they were entirely alone. His whole appearance changed before their eyes, while his clothes became white, dazzling white - whiter than any earthly bleaching could make them. Elijah and Moses appeared to the disciples and stood there in conversation with Jesus. Peter burst out to Jesus, "Master, it is wonderful for us to be here! Shall we put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah?"

He really did not know what to say, for they were very frightened. Then came a cloud which overshadowed them and a voice spoke out of the cloud, "This is my dearly-loved Son. Listen to him!"

Then, quite suddenly they looked all round them and saw nobody at all with them but Jesus. And as they came down the hill-side, he warned them not to tell anybody what they had seen till "the Son of Man should have risen again from the dead". They treasured this remark and tried to puzzle out among themselves what "Rising from the dead" could mean.

This is one of the most intriguing stories in the Bible. It is dense with metaphors and allusions. It is clearly a fictitious story expressing an inward happening. If we think of this story as an objective record about a literal event, we miss its meaning altogether. It is about an inward happening that can still be reduplicated in our lives today.

Let's take notice of some curious things about this story. Jesus takes with him the most inner circle of the new Israel. He goes to the top of a mountain, like Moses. There Jesus is transformed in the eyes of these disciples. His dirty old peasant attire becomes brilliantly white. And two figures appear with him: (1) Elijah, the great-grandfather of all prophets and (2) Moses, the key founder of this entire religious tradition, the author, so it was supposed, of the five books of the Torah (the stories of the origin of all things, and the origin of Israel rooted in the Exodus revelation, constitution, and law books for that called people). These two figures and Jesus are conversing. This is a huge summit meeting.

The disciples are simply terrified. They do not know what to say or do. Peter suggests putting up three monuments of some sort. Jesus does not accept this panicky suggestion. Instead, a cloud moves in and casts a shadow over them. This heavenly cloud speaks, "This is my favored son, listen to him!"

The next verse is an extremely important part of this tale. *"Then, quit suddenly they looked all around them and saw nobody at all with them but Jesus."*

Jesus was just there in ordinary peasant garb that was no longer glowing white. Elijah and Moses have vanished. It is just an ordinary mountain with four ordinary persons hanging out together. The exciting part of this story is describing an interior happening in the life of someone, someone who first told this wonderful story. If Mark did not create this story himself, he probably elaborated on a story that someone earlier had created. Mark was not a literalist like our conservative post-scientific idolaters of Mark's writings. Mark surely knew that this story was a story.

So what does this wonderful story say? It says that Jesus is just an ordinary human being like any one of us. It also says that this ordinary human being was gleaming with the shine-through of the Infinite Unconditional Eternity, of the Power of all powers, of the Truth of truths, of the Awe of the Awesome.

This shine of Jesus is so shiny that two other shiny exemplars from the deep past are gathered up into the shining Awe. No wonder the disciples are terrified. They are looking straight into the "face" of the Infinite—they are seeing the beginning and end of all realities. They are hearing the Infinite speak in their own language that they should listen to this ordinary human being, Jesus, for an Infinite shine through of Truth with a capital "T."

And as they were walking down the mountain he (Jesus) “warned them not to tell anybody what they had seen till the Son of Man should have risen again from the dead”. They treasured this remark and tried to puzzle out among themselves what ‘Rising from the dead’ could mean”

We puzzle about resurrection ourselves, do we not? What does this rising from the dead mean? At this point in Mark’s story resurrection is still a secret. But Mark the parable writer, is giving us a big hint. This story about the transfiguration of Jesus is telling us something about resurrection. Resurrection means seeing Jesus in a new light—indeed in a divine shine.

Part of what is going on with this story is that the disciples never told this story before the resurrection, because the story was not written until after the resurrection. And the story was written to interpret what the resurrection means. The story tells us that the resurrection means a transfiguration in our view of Jesus. The story hints that the resurrection is a secret known only to those to whom this transfiguration of Jesus has happened. The resurrection has to do with seeing that Jesus is indeed a place in the history of time where the Infinite shines through, and in so doing joins together all the places of shining through into one overwhelming shine-through.

*When have you experienced an ordinary person shining with an extraordinary presence?*

### **Mark 9:11-13 Elijah, the Son of Adam, and Suffering**

Then they asked him this question, “Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come before Christ?” It is quite true,” he told them, “that Elijah does come first, and begins the restitution of all things. But what does the scripture say about the Son of Man? This: that he must go through much suffering and be treated with contempt! I tell you that not only has Elijah come already, but they have done to him exactly what they wanted—just as the scripture says of him.”

In this passage Mark deals with a bit of theological confusion that he wants to clear up. He adds this bit of dialogue to the story about the transfiguration of Jesus.

The disciples start questioning Jesus, “Why do the scholars claim that Elijah must come before Christ?” The question behind this question is: how could Jesus be the Anointed One, since Elijah has not come yet to set all things right? Another question hangs in the background: Why would the Anointed One have to suffer after all things had been set right? In other words, how could Jesus, the crucified one, be the Anointed One pointed to in the Messiah heritage?

Mark interprets the Messiah heritage in this way: “Elijah has already come.” This is an allusion to John, the Baptizer. Furthermore, the expectations contained in the scriptures were fulfilled. Here is the fulfillment: the corrupt authorities scorned and did away with both Elijah and the son of Adam. In other words, don’t expect a time to come

when evil will no longer persecute good. This is what the coming of the fully good looks like: it is persecuted by the evil, exposing the evil to be genuinely evil. And this is what evil looks like: rejecting the coming of the long expected fulfillment.

What do we commonly think about the coming of the fully good? Do we see the end of evil on the planet? Do we see the so-called good humanity whist off to some other place? If we see ourselves among the evil ones, engaged in being forgiven, and being offered repentance and a new life, then we must also welcome that fact that Jesus and Jesus' disciples will model God's forgiveness for us by facing the rage of estranged humanity. Mark is providing us a realism that we may not want to accept.

Indeed, if the gospel of Mark is truly interpreted today, will it be accepted by most of the world, or even by the pope, the bishops, the scholars, most of the clergy and the laity of the existing forms of Christianity? Indeed, can you or I truly see this crucified peasant teacher, of no Greek or Latin sophistication, as the true humanity we have been waiting for?

*What do typical Christians today want the coming of the Messiah to mean?*

*What do you want the coming of the Messiah to mean?*

### **Mark 9:14-29 The Eleventh Healing of a Hebrew Person—a Speechless Boy**

Then as they rejoined the other disciples, they saw that they were surrounded by a large crowd, and that some of the scribes were arguing with them. As soon as the people saw Jesus, they ran forward excitedly to welcome him.

"What is the trouble?" Jesus asked them.

A man from the crowd answered, "Master, I brought my son to you because he has a dumb spirit. Wherever he is, it gets hold of him, throws him down on the ground and there he foams at the mouth and grinds his teeth. It's simply wearing him out. I did speak to your disciples to get them to drive it out, but they hadn't the power to do it."

Jesus answered them, "Oh, what a faithless people you are! How long must I be with you, how long must I put up with you? Bring him here to me."

So they brought the boy to him, and as soon as the spirit saw Jesus, it convulsed the boy, who fell to the ground and writhed there, foaming at the mouth.

"How long has he been like this?" Jesus asked the father.

"Ever since he was a child," he replied. "Again and again it has thrown him into the fire or into water to finish him off. But if you can do anything, please take pity on us and help us."

"If you can do anything!" retorted Jesus. "Everything is possible to the man who believes."

"I do believe," the boy's father burst out. "Help me to believe more!"



When Jesus noticed that a crowd was rapidly gathering, he spoke sharply to the evil spirit, with the words, "I command you, deaf and dumb spirit, come out of this boy, and never go into him again!"

The spirit gave a loud scream and after a dreadful convulsion left him. The boy lay there like a corpse, so that most of the bystanders said, "He is dead."

But Jesus grasped his hands and lifted him up, and then he stood on his own feet. When he had gone home, Jesus' disciples asked him privately, "Why were we unable to drive it out?"

"Nothing can drive out this kind of thing except prayer," replied Jesus.

This long story has many new elements. An argument is going on about a boy being speechless and very much out of control. No message is getting through. No life is being healed. Perhaps we have all been in such arguments.

The disciples are not able to cast out this demon. Jesus tells them it is because of their lack of prayer. Apparently this is a real tough sort of demon. It not only makes the boy speechless, it throws him on the ground and into convulsions. He foams at the mouth, grinds teeth, and goes rigid. It seems to me I have met people like this. When Jesus commands the demon to leave for good, it screeches, comes out of the boy, and leaves him looking like a corpse. Everyone thinks he is dead. But Jesus takes his hand and *raises* him to his feet (notice the allusion to resurrection).

Mark is apparently trying to communicate to whoever he hopes will read this story that no demon, however intimidating, is too tough to cast out. Why can't the disciples do it? They lack prayer. Mark does not say what prayer is, but he implies that Jesus has done plenty of prayer, enough to handle this demon.

If we understand "prayer" as an exercise of practicing our essential freedom, and that a consistent, diligent practice of prayer (freedom) builds up our power of intentionality for our daily living, then we can see a relationship between our prayers and our power to provoke others toward a healing of their inner lives. Your time alone in solitary prayer can build up the energy of freedom that spills over into the living of your life. With these hints about the meaning of prayer, we can begin to grasp why prayer may be needed in our own lives, if we are going to cast out tough demons.

And we must not forget that our role in casting out demons means provoking the freedom that exists in the person being healed to share in this casting out that person's demons. Jesus, the man of prayer, knows that healing does not depend on him alone. It requires trust among those being healed. Jesus asks the father whose son is sick, if he has faith (trust in the healing potential of life itself). The man expresses a willingness to have even more faith than he now has. Faith (trust) as well as prayer (freedom) are necessary factors for casting out tough demons.

Again, what are demons? How are we to understand "demons" with our 21st century metaphors? We know that there is no literal spook-world hovering about us and

invading us with filmy evil gremlins. We can understand, however, how we might meet in ourselves and others some very debilitating, estranged relationships with Reality. Such “demons” are real enough in our experience. We experience “demons” as much as and perhaps even more than any other generation. The generation of Jesus and Mark used a different language to point to these demons. We cannot use their language without a disjuncture with everything else we know. But this does not excuse us from hearing what they were talking about with their language, and translating their experience of demons into our language about these same forces.

Furthermore, this speechless and deranged boy in the above story is symbolic of Israel of a whole. He is a child of Israel, the eleventh Israelite to be healed in Mark’s narrative. Israel, Mark is telling us, is in a sad state of dis-relationship. Israel is speechless, with limited faith, limited prayer, limited willingness to trust in the Power of Reality to deliver it from all its dis-relationships with Reality. Even after the vast energies of the demon left, those standing around (Israel) were still giving up on the now dead boy (Israel). But Jesus does not give the boy up for dead. This death leads to life, to resurrection. Jesus models another truth about this deep nature of human life: being released from our wild, demonic rides do not leave us merely dead. We can then get up, and walk our real lives.

So, when you and I who claim to be disciples of Jesus are about the work of assisting others to overcome their demons, we have our model. We come prepared as persons of deep prayer. We know that our freedom and the freedom of others can overcome any demon. Then when demons leave and we see these previously demon-driven people left demon-less, lying flat-out-like-dead on the ground, our work is not done. We also then take them by the hand and *raise* them to their feet. We don’t end our witness with the death of the demons, we complete this healing process with a resurrection to an authentic walking of the healed life. Demons are not a permanent factor of human nature. Demons are a estrangement from an authenticity that is never gone. Our authenticity is our enduring something-ness. Demons are a nothing-ness that has sick consequences in real persons and the real world. Only prayer can heal the demons because prayer is the freedom that both creates demons and expels them. Prayer/ freedom is our authenticity in action.

*When have you confronted Spirit sicknesses that seemed too tough for you to deal with?*

*What does not giving up on the world’s Spirit sicknesses mean to you personally?*

### **Mark 9:30-32 The Son of Adam Must Suffer**

Then they left that district and went straight through Galilee. Jesus kept this journey secret for he was teaching his disciples that the Son of Man would be betrayed into the power of men, that they would kill him and that three days after his death he would rise again. But they were completely mystified by this saying, and were afraid to question him about it.



In Mark's next story, Jesus takes time alone with his disciples. He talks with them about a secret not yet shared with the crowds. He tells them about death and resurrection. If we come to this passage with our all too common beliefs about Jesus' death and resurrection, we don't get it. Why is this a secret? Why do the disciples not understand it? Why do they dread even asking him about it?

Let us see if we can at least find a hint within ourselves why Mark's secrecy witnesses to our own experience. The son of Adam must suffer at the hands of his enemies and be killed. This term "son of Adam" refers to Jesus in Mark's mind. And at the same time this post-Adam new humanity is also a potential for these disciples and many other people—a perhaps you and me. The vastness of what we are dealing with here is not seen if we restrict "son of Adam" to one peasant preacher, Jesus.

What does it mean to say that this new humanity will be turned over into the hands of enemies and be killed? Perhaps we can identify with those disciples who are following this manifestation of this new humanity? If we, like these disciples, want to become this new humanity, can we see that we might resist the teaching that this new humanity must suffer at the hands of the old humanity? Can we see that this message might simply not make good sense to these disciples, or to us? So here is a hint about why resurrection is such a secret: people, you and me, all of us do not want to know the whole story about how this new humanity of authentic living comes about or the full consequences of living this new humanity.

And what if we got a glimpse of the notion that the resurrection was about you and me becoming that new humanity who suffer at the hands of the old humanity? Well, that might seem rather dreadful! Perhaps this is why those disciples did not want to ask Jesus any more questions about all this. Perhaps we don't either.

*What are your feelings right now about the whole idea of participating with Jesus in passing through the death of ultimacy to all our temporal loyalties and hence to the resurrection of an authentic life that is rejected by the existing society?*

### **Mark 9:33-37 Who Wants to be First?**

So they came to Capernaum. And when they were indoors he asked them, "What were you discussing as we came along?"

They were silent, for on the way they had been arguing about who should be the greatest. Jesus sat down and called the twelve, and said to them, "If any man wants to be first, he must be last and servant of all."

Then he took a little child and stood him in front of them all, and putting his arms round him, said to them, "Anyone who welcomes one little child like this for my sake is welcoming me. And the man who welcomes me is welcoming not only me but the one who sent me!"

In this story we see the disciples arguing over which of them is to be the greatest. Who is to become the Great One when Jesus is gone? Who is to be the Bishop, the Pope, the Spirit Guide, the Leader? In any movement, leadership has to be figured out.

But Jesus teaches that leadership in his movement is to be different. It is not something to argue over. Who is number one? It is the one who makes himself last of all, the servant of everyone else. Is this the role of leadership we are seeking? The total servant is number one, this servant is also one who does not really care what number he or she is. Leadership in this movement is not a status position; it is a servant role. And the first among servants is the one who serves the most.

Implied in these words is the further challenge that laying down our entire lives for our friends or for our society is the full meaning of service. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. In this context he is asking his disciples if it is indeed his sort of leadership that they are battling over.

The servant leadership of Jesus, however, is not some sort of passive slavery to the will of others. Jesus is a strong assault on the times in which he lives. He does not ask others how they want to be served. He serves them as he sees they need to be served. There is a boundless strength in this sort of servanthood. This strong man is a servant, but his servanthood is something very different from a slavery of being owned by other people.

The ritual with the child underscores again the point of humble service. It is the humble one who is to be accepted. Jesus himself is like this child. To accept Jesus as our leader is not to follow some great person, but rather to accept the ONE who is sending Jesus, an ordinary person, to us in totally humble service. Only the ONE, the Infinite Sender of the servant is great. Jesus is just a child, just a servant of the ONE. In the kingdom of God, only God is king. The rest of the members of this commonwealth of realism are just children. Anyone who wants to be the king of the kingdom of God is confused about this kingdom. Nevertheless, it is paradoxically true that the humble child, the humble servant, is indeed a king in this kingdom of the Almighty KING.

*How does this radical servant leadership challenge your own longings for status and leadership?*

*What would it mean for you to be a total servant?*

### **Mark 9: 38-41 Who is One of Us?**

Then John said to him, "Master, we saw somebody driving out evil spirits in your name, and we stopped him, for he is not one who follows us."

But Jesus replied, "You must not stop him. No one who exerts such power in my name would readily say anything against me. For the man who is not against us is on our side. In fact, I assure you that the man

who gives you a mere drink of water in my name, because you are followers of mine, will most certainly be rewarded."

Every religious group asks the question about who is and who is not one of our adherents. But Jesus is teaching us about something more profound than who is or who is not a member of our religious group. If the Buddha's followers are performing Christ-type miracles in the healing of human lives, don't stop them. If they are not against this healing mission, they are for it. And if a member of some other movement gives one of us a cup of water (or perhaps a big contribution) because we are true followers of Jesus, that member of that other movement will, in the deep dynamics of true living, be rewarded for that sensitive deed.

*How have you experienced the need to operate beyond the boundaries of who is and who is not a member of your religious group?*

*How does it suit you that the league of resurrected humanity includes people who are not followers of Jesus in a Christian practice sense?*

### **Mark 9: 42-49 The Cost of Integrity**

"And I tell you too, that the man who disturbs the faith of one of the humblest of those who believe in me would be better off if he were thrown into the sea with a great mill-stone hung round his neck!"

"Indeed, if it is your own hand that spoils your faith, you must cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than to keep both your hands and go to the rubbish-heap. If your foot spoils your faith, you must cut it off. It is better to enter life on one foot than to keep both your feet and be thrown on to the rubbish-heap. And if your eye leads you astray, pluck it out. It is better for you to go one-eyed into the kingdom of God than to keep both eyes and be thrown on to the rubbish-heap, where 'their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched'. For everyone will be salted by fire."

This passage begins with a challenge to respect and honor all the trusting persons in our lives, however humble of body, mind, or consciousness they may be. Basically, we are not to lead others into our lack of trust. We are not to lead others into our despairs. The cost to us of such behavior is profoundly serious. The images used in this passage are a barrage of tough sayings--drowned in the sea, thrown into unquenchable fire.

Most of us in the modern world stumble over the image of "hell." For so long we have been taught literal ideas about some awful place people go after they die. This tends to cloud the everyday interpretation of the term "hell." A full metaphorical translation of the Gospel of Mark for our time requires us to raise this question: "What state of being that we all experience might be pointed to with this word 'hell'?" "Despair" is a fruitful answer to that question, but what is despair? Despair is finding yourself trapped in a life that you hate, and from which you wish only to escape, but from which there is no escape.

With that understanding of "hell" in mind, let us listen again to the tough sayings in these verses. If we do not honor those who trust the Eternal Mystery of the All, then we

are living in despair ourselves, and we are leading others into despair. Despair is the worst of all possible outcomes for a human life. Losing a hand, a foot, or an eye would be preferable to being in despair. So if you or I ever need to make a choice between being one-eyed and being in despair, this passage advises us to choose the former.

*How are you been tempted to allow your trust in the Eternal Mystery of it All to be side-tracked?*

*How do you feel challenged by the strong images of this passage?*

### **Mark 9:50 The Dynamics of Fire and Salt**

"Salt is a very good thing; but if it should lose its saltiness, what can you do to restore its flavor? You must have salt in yourselves, and live at peace with each other."

All of us will be salted by the fire of despair, despair over our clinging to the temporal factors of our lives. The fire of despair is not unknown to most of us, even though we often keep it deeply suppressed. The content of verse 9:50 indicates that our Spirit saltiness though related to the fire of despair is also a good thing. Despair is the doorway to a trust in the Infinite Reality that both occasions our despair and leads us to the overcoming that despair through repentance of the causes of that despair, forgiveness, and the courage for a redeemed life.

Trust means walking through the fire of despair and not being burned up in that fire. The Spirit has these two forms of saltiness: (1) the salty wonder of trust and (2) the salty horror of despair. In either case we are salty: we are being fired by Spirit. This passage ends with the challenge to keep our saltiness, lest our lives be without seasoning.

We might wonder what is being referred to by the ancient image of un-salty salt. In the days in which Jesus and Mark lived, the product used for salting was impure, so its saltiness might be used up, leaving only the impurities that were not salty. The Spirit meaning of this metaphor is quite clear. If we do not keep our Spirit saltiness, we are useless for the work of the Kingdom of God--that is, for the Commonwealth of authentic Realistic Living that salty people have before them.

Finally, these verses make the point that Spirit saltiness is a precondition for living at peace with one another. There is indeed a cosmic war going on between trust and despair; but among those salted with Spirit trust, no war exists. All are at peace with one another--in vital communion with one another. We may still have disagreements and misunderstandings and common conflicts, but the deeper truth is that we are united in the communion of the salty. Being at peace with Reality as a Whole makes us members of a salty community in which peace reigns.

*How have you experienced these dynamics of Spirit fire and saltiness in your own life?*

# Chapter Ten

## Mark 10:1-9 Moses and Divorce

Then he got up and left Galilee and went off to the borders of Judea and beyond the Jordan. Again great crowds assembled to meet him, and again, according to his custom, he taught them. Then some Pharisees arrived to ask him this test-question. "Is it right for a man to divorce his wife?"

Jesus replied by asking them, "What has Moses commanded you to do?"

"Moses allows men to write a divorce-notice and then to dismiss her," they said.

"Moses gave you that commandment," returned Jesus, "because you know so little of the meaning of love. But from the beginning of the creation, God 'made them male and female'. 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'. So that in body they are no longer two people but one. That is why man must never separate what God has joined together."

In this passage Mark pictures Jesus fighting cultural morality in a different manner than pictured earlier in his Gospel. Earlier we see Jesus and his disciples not washing their hands when they are supposed to and continuing their healing mission on the Sabbath in spite of the fact that this violated a strict interpretation of Sabbath work customs. In these instances, Jesus is pictured as attacking the strictness of customary morality—seeing this strictness as an overemphasis on the trivial and an underemphasis on the profound intent of the Mosaic tradition.

In the current passage, the Pharisees are advocating a looser view than Jesus. Jesus is countering with a perspective that is far more strict. These male Pharisees want to retain the custom of divorcing a wife whenever they see fit by a simple writ. Jesus does not deny that this rule exists in the Mosaic heritage, but he dismisses it as an adaptation that came into being because of obstinacy or untouchability on the part of hardhearted members of this lineage. Jesus refers his listeners to the original intent he finds in the creation narrative. Men and women are to leave parents to become one flesh, one person, one operating unit. Having been so joined by the Infinite Determiner, they must not be separated by an arbitrary human action. Clearly this is not what these questioning Pharisees want to hear. Their moral righteousness is once again being undermined by Jesus' teachings.

Mark was probably supporting the custom of no divorce as the appropriate practice within the communities for which he was writing. But we need not understand Mark as supporting the divorce customs of the medieval and modern churches. Conservative Catholics have interpreted this passage to mean that a marriage ritualized by the Church was not to be dissolved unless it could be shown to have not been a true marriage in the first place. Many conservative Protestants have also considered divorce as something completely out of bounds. This strict view of no divorce has become objectionable, however, to many contemporary Christians who realize that many

current marriages are dysfunctional and should be dissolved for the well-being of all concerned.

So, how can these teachings of Mark (and perhaps also Jesus) be understood as instructive for us? Let us notice, first of all, that in this teaching we see a defense of women against the arbitrary willfulness of men. In the customs of Jewish life in the times of Jesus and Mark, only the man, not the woman, could ask for this writ of divorce. The teaching, therefore, is a challenge to men to see women as something more than objects of their convenience. God made humanity male and female. And when joined, the two are one body. So for a man to cast away his wife is likened to casting away his leg. Such loyalty to marital intimacy remains a valid challenge. This teaching asks us to overcome arbitrary egoism and surrender ourselves into full responsibility for other human beings.

Nevertheless, we need not understand this teaching as support for the moral position that divorce in the modern world is never appropriate. Even though “no divorce at all” was the custom within the first century church, it does not have to be the custom in the twenty-first century church. The Bible is not a rule book for all time. The Bible is just a witness to what it means to live realistically in the times when each scripture is written. This includes rule-making. Morality and law is an important part of life in every society. For our own rule-making today, we need to reassert the ethical context of both Jesus and Mark toward all morality—namely, that the rules are made for humanity, not humanity for the rules. Present and future Christian communities can take to heart the radical responsibility for one another implied by this teaching; and within that context they can still evolve different divorce customs than those used in the first-century Christian communities.

*When have you seen marriages that needed to be dissolved for the benefit of all involved?*

*When have you seen marriages dissolved too arbitrarily?*

*What do you see to be the deepest issue at stake in these matters?*

### **Mark 10:10-12 Divorce and Adultery**

On reaching the house, his disciples questioned him again about this matter. “Any man who divorces his wife and marries another woman,” he told them, “commits adultery against his wife. And if she herself divorces her husband and marries someone else, she commits adultery.”

Again, Mark is having his Jesus character talk further about something in private with his disciples. We need to assume that the disciples, as depicted in Mark’s gospel, are asking the questions that Mark has experienced being asked within the Christian communities to whom Mark is speaking. Mark’s communities were surely provoked by Jesus’ teachings on divorce. So Mark has Jesus reassert his teaching even more strongly.

New Testament scholars have pointed out that the historical Jesus could not have actually said the words in this passage, for these words reflect Roman customs rather than the traditional Jewish customs within which Jesus lived. In Jewish customs only the man could divorce the woman. In Roman customs the woman could also divorce the man.

So Mark, in these verses, is clarifying what he believes Jesus would say if he were still talking to us, namely that divorce is adultery whether initiated by the man or the woman. It is important for us to realize that in the New Testament gospels Jesus goes on teaching decades after his death—just as Moses in the first five books of the Bible goes on teaching centuries after his death. Mark (as well as Matthew, Luke, and John) has no qualms about deciding what Jesus would say to each new situation. The Gospel writers saw themselves as the body of Jesus, the Christ. They saw themselves as the extension of Jesus into their times. Here is a crucial implication of these facts: *we in the twenty-first century who are indeed followers of Jesus Christ may also see ourselves as extensions of Jesus into our times.* If we are indeed “in Christ” in the sense of being in that radical freedom and compassion, then we can decide what Jesus would say to these times about marriage and divorce—and on any other ethical topic. Indeed, contemporary Christians must decide what Jesus would say on topics which the historical Jesus never had an opportunity to address. If we are “in Christ,” we are his resurrected body; therefore, we are not only permitted, but responsible to speak for Jesus.

*What do you have to say to our times about adultery, divorce, marriage and related topics?*

*What are some topics that Jesus had no opportunity to address that need to be addressed in our times?*

### **Mark 10:13-16 Children in God's Domain**

Then some people came to him bringing little children for him to touch. The disciples tried to discourage them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant and told them, “You must let little children come to me - never stop them! For the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Indeed, I assure you that the man who does not accept the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” Then he took the children in his arms and laid his hands on them and blessed them.

With high probability, this teaching about children and the Kingdom of God is rooted in the actual teachings of the historical Jesus. But as Mark uses this teaching, the disciples are depicted as an expression of what we might call “adultism.” The disciples think that Jesus surely has more important things to do than bless children. It is as if the disciples are saying, “There are many adult projects and many unanswered questions. Why waste time greeting these children?”



Jesus is pictured as indignant toward this attitude. He goes on to explain that we are all children relative to participation in the Kingdom of God. "The Kingdom of God" is Jesus' term (and Mark's term) for a fully restored society of humanity that manifests the "Reign" of these God-given qualities: trust of the Final Reality, essential freedom, and unconditional love. This "Kingdom" is the domain of living for which we were created in the beginning, from which we have fallen, but to which we can be restored through the message which Jesus is embodying. In this *divine* domain of living, there are no self-important adults. We are all children in tone. We are all ignorant learners receiving authentic life from the hand of our all-powerful *Parent*. To put this paradox even more starkly, we might say that to be grown up in Spirit means to be like children and to respect children as what we want to be like.

Accepting the fullness of life as a child means reaching out your hands and taking the food you need, opening up your arms and taking the love offered, running enthusiastically toward the gift of life being given to you. On the subject of receiving life, it is quite true that children are often wiser than self-important adults who think they must somehow deserve what they get.

Also implied in this passage is the view that the Spirit life is not an achievement. The Spirit life is a free gift. Openness to the Spirit life is the only requirement. Human-made impediments are the only problem. The Spirit life is our natural inheritance, from which we have fled or strayed, rebelled or defied.

*What are these teachings about children and adults saying to you right now about your own Spirit journey?*

*Where do you need to be more like a child in your living?*

### **Mark 10:17-22 The Man with Money**

As he began to take the road again (after welcoming the children), a man came running up and fell at his feet, and asked him, "Good Master, what must I do to be sure of eternal life?"

"I wonder why you call me good," returned Jesus. "No one is good—only God. You know the commandments, 'Do not commit adultery,' 'Do not murder,' 'Do not steal,' 'Do not bear false witness,' 'Do not defraud,' 'Honor your father and your mother'."

"Master," he replied, "I have kept carefully all these since I was quite young."

Jesus looked steadily at him, and his heart warmed towards him. Then he said, "There is one thing you still want. Go and sell everything you have, give the money away to the poor—you will have riches in Heaven. And then come back and follow me."

At these words his face fell and he went away in deep distress, for he was very rich.

The first happening in this story is an exchange about being "good." Jesus seems to reject being called "good." "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God



alone.” Some interpreters of this verse have argued that Jesus was good because he was God. But there is no support anywhere in the New Testament for the notion that Jesus, the man, was synonymous with the Wholeness of the Infinite Mystery. Jesus, seen as the Christ, was the Message or the Word from the Wholeness of the Infinite Mystery. In Jesus Infinite Silence speaks to us. The paradoxical New Testament proclamations are about meeting the fullness of the Absolutely Mystery’s care for us in Jesus, the Christ. This does not mean confusing this particular human being with the Final Power that is pictured as creating, sustaining, and destroying the cosmos. We are all connected to that Power, but the quality of that connection is relatedness not identification.

So what does this phrase “No one is good except God alone” mean? Jesus is challenging the perspective of this man who is apparently assuming that Jesus has made himself good and is thus deserving eternal life. The man is saying, “If you have done it, how can I do it?” Jesus does not claim to have achieved goodness. He rejects that entire program of standard religion. “God alone is good” means that anything about humanity that we can call “good” is God’s action within us, God’s creation of us—including God’s restoration of our human essence from our despairing flight or fight from the always Present Mysteriousness of the devotion to that Mysteriousness called “God.”

Jesus continues with the other part of the man’s question, the question about what to do. He lists the ancient teachings of Moses. “Do that,” he says. The man says he has done that his entire life. Jesus likes this man; he appreciates him for his diligent practice of their common religious heritage.

Jesus also sees through what it is keeping this man from experiencing the eternal life that the man himself senses he is missing. This man needs to make a bold move. Jesus suggests one. Sell what you have, give the proceeds to the poor, and come along with me traveling from village to village and living off the generosity of those who are accepting our message. This is a viable proposal to this man. He might have actually done what Jesus proposed. What an opportunity—to travel along with this most outstanding teacher!

But this man is stunned by this suggestion. He goes away dejected. For he is clinging to a vast fortune of wealth.

*What gets in the way of your taking advantage of the best teaching available to you about bolder taking on your essential humanity?*

### **Mark 10:23-27 The Eye of the Needle**

Then Jesus looked round at them all, and said to his disciples, "How difficult it is for those who have great possessions to enter the kingdom of God!"

The disciples were staggered at these words, but Jesus continued, "Children, you don't know how hard it can be to get into the kingdom of Heaven. Why, a camel could more easily squeeze through the eye of a needle than a rich man get into the kingdom of God."

At this their astonishment knew no bounds, and they said to each other, "Then who can possibly be saved?"

Jesus looked straight at them and said, "Humanly speaking it is impossible, but not with God. Everything is possible with God."

Again, Jesus is pictured as speaking to his disciples in private. This time Mark is using sayings that may have been uttered by the historical Jesus. "How difficult it is for those who have great possessions to enter God's domain." Mark pictures the disciples as amazed by these words; apparently the disciples hold the common view that wealth should be an advantage rather than a disadvantage. So the point is made even more emphatically by Jesus in this story, "It's easier for a camel to squeeze through a needle's eye, than for a wealthy person to get into God's domain."

Interpreters through the ages have tried to water this saying down. Some have suggested that the needle's eye meant a narrow gate which a camel would find it difficult but not impossible to pass through. But the more likely meaning of Mark in the passage is that Jesus is picturing the much more humorous picture of a big lumbering camel clambering through the eye a sewing needle.

Why does wealth provide such an obstacle to entry into God's domain? Living in God's domain means being loyal to the Infinite Mystery which provides all wealth and takes all wealth away. To enter this domain, one must relate to wealth with detachment, with non-clinging—that is, with a willingness to see wealth pass away and as well as arrive. Those who have great wealth have quite commonly blown up their ego with attachments to wealth that are indeed the size of a camel. With such a self-understanding, detachment would certainly seem like passing through a needle's eye.

The disciples are still shocked by Jesus' explanations. So Mark has Jesus assure them that all things are possible for God. The implication of this teaching is that detachment is indeed possible for anyone, whatever the extent and object of their attachment.

*What attachments do you have which seem impossible to surrender?*

*What would it mean for a huge corporation or business to act in detachment from wealth in dealing with workers, with local communities, with poverty, with the environment?*

### **Mark 10:28-31 So What about Us?**

Then Peter burst out, "But look, we have left everything and followed you!"

"I promise you," returned Jesus, "nobody leaves home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or property for my sake and the Gospel's without getting back a hundred times over, now in this

present life, homes and brothers and sisters, mothers and children and land—though not without persecution—and in the next world eternal life. But many who are first now will then be last, and the last now will then be first."

Peter voices for the rest of the disciples and perhaps for all of us in every generation, "What about us who have left everything to follow you?" Jesus replies that the follower will be rewarded here and now a hundred fold. There will be persecutions, but there is also eternal life. When we see the metaphor "in the age to come," we should not jump to the conclusion that Mark is talking about the immortality of the soul. "The age to come" is Mark's mind means a very down-to-Earth possibility—a future in which humanity is putting service to God before service to wealth or status or any other finite thing. God's domain (profound humanity living realistically) is always an age to come, but this (end of time) domain of realism is also a present possibility into which humans can enter in the here and now of everyday living.

The central point of this passage is that living fully our authentic, profound, real human lives is worth every possible sacrifice. It is worth it right now, and for all time to come.

*How do you find your Spirit life rewarding?*

*What might you be unwilling to sacrifice for your Spirit life?*

### **Mark 10:32-34 The Son of Adam Will Suffer, Die, and Rise**

They were now on their way up to Jerusalem and Jesus walked on ahead. The disciples were dismayed at this, and those who followed were afraid. Then once more he took the twelve aside and began to tell them what was going to happen to him.

"We are now going up to Jerusalem," he said, "as you can see. And the Son of Man will be betrayed into the power of the chief priests and scribes. They are going to condemn him to death and hand him over to pagans who will jeer at him and spit at him and flog him and kill him. But after three days he will rise again."

This is not a story about the strange predictive powers of Jesus. The historical Jesus of Nazareth probably knew that going to Jerusalem was dangerous. He certainly knew that his actions were making many people angry enough to kill him. He probably knew that this march on Jerusalem was a continuation of his death-risking attack on the status quo of his times. But we need not assume that Jesus the real man knew exactly what was going to happen to him any more than you and I would know in a similar situation. Death is certain, but the time of death and the manner of death are uncertain. That is the human situation.

Mark is telling this story in retrospect. Mark is preaching his gospel. The disciples in Mark's story are a portrait of the people in Mark's community of hearers. Indeed, people of any time and place may not wish to know that the authentic person (the son of Adam) is invariably hated by the defenders of the status quo and is vulnerable to ridicule, suffering, and death at their hands.

Jesus, in Mark's story, is a hero figure who knows this truth that authentic persons are ridiculed, suffer, and perhaps die at the hands of those who do not wish to be audited relative to their authenticity. And this hero figure knows something else: even if killed the authentic person is not defeated. Authenticity rises again. Authenticity cannot be killed, because it is authenticity supported by the Final Reality.

The disciples in this story do not understand rising again and do not even question Jesus about it. They are simply apprehensive and frightened by the obvious danger of making a frontal attack on the cultural capitol of their times.

Surely we can identify fully with these disciples. We too quite commonly steer away from making a frontal attack on the cultural capitol of our times. We are not even at work building up some sort of following and/or strength to make such an attack effective. We probably think that people who do operate in this fashion have some sort of martyr complex or act in some other form of foolishness. Perhaps we view such people as dangerous persons with whom we do not want to be associated. By our actions, we commonly say, "If ridicule and suffering at the hands of the cultural status quo is what it means to be an authentic person, then count me out."

*When have you experienced fear relative to the dangers of living your calling to be authentic in some public enactment?*

### **Mark 10:35-40 James' and John's Unholy Request**

Then Zebedee's two sons James and John approached him, saying "Master, we want you to grant us a special request."

"What do you want me to do for you?" answered Jesus.

"Give us permission to sit one on each side of you in the glory of your kingdom!"

"You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said to them. "Can you drink the cup I have to drink? Can you go through the baptism I have to bear?"

"Yes, we can," they replied. Then Jesus told them, "You will indeed drink the cup I am drinking, and you will undergo the baptism which I have to bear! But as for sitting on either side of me, that is not for me to give—such places belong to those for whom they are intended."

James and John want to be heroes, and they want recognition for it. They ask to be second and third in the hierarchy of Jesus' heroic victory. They apparently think that they are willing to pay the price for this honor. But Jesus mocks them, "You have no idea what you are asking for. Are you really willing to drink the cup I'm drinking and undergo the baptism I'm undergoing? "

Mark has woven the liturgical life of the first century Christian community into this challenge of Mark's Jesus character. The Eucharist feast has to do with drinking the cup of death. The baptism ritual also has to do with accepting death, with being washed by death of all your temporal attachments. The type of thoroughgoing inward death that

is signified by these familiar rituals is a form of heroism on the battlefield of honor, but a transformation of life that when lived out typically leads to some sort of ridicule and rejection. Indeed, James and John do not know what they are asking for. There is no honor of a customary sort to be found on this Jesus-path or in this Jesus-victory on this risky path.

There are those who walk the Jesus-path more fully than others. There are those who are especially effective in being the healing presence of authenticity to others. In this sacred economy of authentic living, we might speak of second and third places to the first place that Jesus symbolizes. But these secondary places do not belong to Jesus to hand out to others. Jesus is not a typical king who can hand out positions. The king that Jesus is to be seen to be is a very strange sort of king. This strange king is the servant of servants in a kingdom of servants, and this king has no authority to designate who is or who is not the best servant.

This passage, like several others, turns the whole subject of honor on its head. Yes, authenticity is an honor, but it is unlike all other honors. First of all we do not achieve this honor or deserve it. And this authenticity is rejected vigorously by most people. Living out this authenticity entails embracing ridicule, suffering, and death. This is the cup that the disciple of Jesus is being invited to drink. If we are expecting some sort of customary honors for following Jesus, we are not drinking the cup he offers.

*What are the parts of this powerful story that challenge you?*

*How have you faced choices between seeking the safety of customary honors and risking being your uncustomary authenticity?*

### **Mark 10:41-45 The Number One Servant**

When the other ten heard about this, they began to be highly indignant with James and John; so Jesus called them all to him, and said, "You know that the so-called rulers in the heathen world lord it over them, and their great men have absolute power. But it must not be so among you. No, whoever among you wants to be great must become the servant of you all, and if he wants to be first among you he must be the slave of all men! For the Son of Man himself has not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life to set many others free."

The other ten disciples are annoyed with James and John. This is the way community works when the customary view of honor is operative. Some are first, and the rest are annoyed.

Jesus makes it clear that the customary hierarchical patterns of civilization are not to be the model in the community he envisions for his followers. In this strange community the greatest honor goes to the slave. "Slave" in this context means "servant of others." Perhaps the word "slave" has contemporary meanings that do not communicate what Mark means here. His Jesus character used power words to contradict powerful misunderstandings. This "slave" or "complete servant" is the one who self-consciously

makes the focus of his/her life the well-being of the rest of the community. This strange slave/servant must not be confused with codependent weakness or with the style of knuckling under to tyranny and oppression. It is impossible to find that style of living in the exemplar Jesus. No, the slave that Jesus himself demonstrates is a bold self-confident servant—a kingly sort of slave who boldly abandons all the customary honors of living in order to be what is needed in the contingencies of his or her times.

Finally, this passage states the paradox of all paradoxes: the one who gives up all honors to become the servant of all others is the number one person in the Domain of the Final Reality.

*How have you faced choices between having status and being an authentic servant to the times in which you live?*

### **Mark 10:46-52 The Twelfth Healing Story of a Hebrew Persons—Blind Bartimaeus**

Then they came to Jericho, and as he was leaving it accompanied by his disciples and a large crowd, Bartimeus (that is, the son of Timaeus), a blind beggar, was sitting in his usual place by the side of the road. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth he began to call out, "Jesus, Son of David, have pity on me!"

Many of the people told him sharply to keep quiet, but he shouted all the more, "Son of David, have pity on me!"

Jesus stood quite still and said, "Call him here." So they called the blind man, saying, "It's all right now, get up, he's calling you!"

At this he threw off his coat, jumped to his feet and came to Jesus.

"What do you want me to do for you?" he asked him. "Oh, Master, let me see again!"

"Go on your way then," returned Jesus, "your faith has healed you." And he recovered his sight at once and followed Jesus along the road.

With this story, Mark tells his last healing story. It is the twelfth healing story in which a Hebrew person is healed. Let us recall that all of these healing stories are parables about the healing of Israel and of you and me as potential members of the people of God. With that in mind, let us look again at the list of Mark's twelve Hebrew healing stories:

1. A man controlled by an unclean spirit
2. A woman down in bed with a fever
3. A leper--an unclean outcast from society
4. A man paralyzed and prone on a mat like dead
5. A Sabbath synagogue worshiper with a crippled hand
6. An uncontrollable man in the tombs by the sea with a "Legion" of filthy spirits who enter 2000 pigs who are drowned in the sea
7. A woman unclean with a 12-year-old flow of vaginal blood

8. A 12-year-old daughter of a synagogue leader who is in a sleep like death
9. A man who can't hear and can't speak
10. A blind man who needs two tries to open his eyes widely enough to see clearly
11. A violent mute-spirit the disciples can't heal because it takes more prayer
12. The brash, blind beggar at Jericho named Bartimaeus (the son of Timaeus). Timaeus means "highly prized."

In this twelfth healing Jesus heals the son of "highly prized" and this man follows Jesus on the road, the road to Jerusalem. Israel is indeed highly prized, but Israel has been blind. As we saw in the tenth healing story, even Peter, the leader of the new Israel, is blind in relation to the rejection, suffering, and death of Jesus. This is what the old Israel and the new Israel are having a hard time seeing: *how could a person suffer such a fate and still be the Messiah?* In the tenth healing, a blind man can't see clearly after the first encounter with Jesus. He only sees humans as trees walking. But after a second encounter with Jesus he sees clearly. This blind beggar in the twelfth Israelite healing sees right away.

One encounter with Jesus is enough for the blind beggar named "son of highly prized." He cries out to have his sight, and he runs to Jesus when called. He boldly asks to see, and he is told by Jesus that his trust has cured him. Immediately, he regains his sight, and, unlike some of the others who were healed, he follows Jesus on the path from Jericho to Jerusalem. The road to Jerusalem, the cultural capitol of the people of Israel, is where Jesus will be rejected, tortured, and killed. This blind man sees in spite of having to see this tough future.

This very small portion of Israel sees clearly. This is the New Israel. We, the hearers of Mark's story, still have several chapters to go. Do we see? Do we get it? Do we really understand what Mark is driving at with his entire gospel? How can it be that this country teacher, slain by the authorities in the cultural capitol, is also the exemplary messenger from the Source of the entire cosmos? Is this ordinary person Jesus indeed revealing to us what it is to be authentic human beings—sons and daughters of the Absolute All-Powerful Infinite Mysteriousness that is providing us with all things?

*Today, what are the spiritually blind people blind to?*

*What would it mean for us to see?*

*Who do you know that does see?*

# Chapter Eleven

## Mark 11:1-10 A Kingly Entry into Jerusalem

When they were approaching Jerusalem and had come to Bethphage and Bethany on the slopes of the Mount of Olives, he sent off two of his disciples with these instructions, "Go into the village just ahead of you and as soon as you enter it you will find a tethered colt on which no one has yet ridden. Untie it, and bring it here. If anybody asks you, 'Why are you doing this?', just say, 'The Lord needs it, and will send it back immediately.' "

So they went off and found the colt tethered by a doorway outside in the open street, and they untied it. Some of the bystanders did say, "What are you doing, untying this colt?", but they made the reply Jesus told them to make, and the men raised no objection. So they brought the colt to Jesus, threw their coats on its back, and he took his seat upon it.

Many of the people spread out their coats in his path as he rode along, and others put down straw which they had cut from the fields. The whole crowd, both those who were in front and those who were behind Jesus, shouted, "God save him! - 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!' God bless the coming kingdom of our father David! God save him from on high!"

Mark has constructed this story with influence from Zechariah 9:9:

*Look, your king comes to you  
triumphant and victorious  
human and riding on an ass  
on a colt, the foal of an ass.*

Jesus is pictured as making his dramatic entry into the cultural capitol seated on a baby donkey, not a silver stallion. Such images signal that this is a strange and humble sort of king. Nevertheless, people celebrate him as the coming successor of David, who was a sort of "King Arthur" in their common memory. Mark is a master of irony. He pictures Jesus as the king, the successor of David, yet Mark knows that the people singing "Hosanna" are blind to what this means. As the time comes for Jesus to be fully established as his sort of king, these same people will all flee away.

Also, it is interesting to note that Mark inserts a bit of humor into this story—the bold borrowing of the colt. Jesus has the disciples say that "its master has need of it." This brash ruse seems to quiet any objections to the semi-theft of this colt. Mark is also hinting to the readers of his tale that Jesus is indeed the master of this colt, (as well as every other being in the cosmos). Jesus, who is being considered to be less than nobody by the somebodies of his time, is viewed by Mark as somebody beyond our wildest most exaggerated expectations.

But this somebody-hood of Jesus is a secret. It is not obvious at all—not to the disciples who travel with him—not to the people who sing "Hosanna." Seeing the secret of Jesus' greatness requires a new set of eyes. And it will take Mark a few more chapters



to get these eyes issued to the readers. Even then, we, the readers, may not get it. It takes a very special set of eyes to see Jesus as King of the People of God.

*If you are inclined to celebrate Jesus, what is the significance that you are celebrating?*

*What issues still haunt you about this old mythic talk about the significance of Jesus.*

### **Mark 11: 11-14 A Fig Tree with No Fruit**

Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the Temple and looked round on all that was going on. And then, since it was already late in the day, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

On the following day, when they had left Bethany, Jesus felt hungry. He noticed a fig-tree in the distance covered with leaves, and he walked up to it to see if he could find any fruit on it. But when he got to it, he could find nothing but leaves, for it was not yet time for the figs. Then Jesus spoke to the tree, "May nobody ever eat fruit from you!" And the disciples heard him say it.

Mark includes this strange little story at this point as a context for Jesus' critique of the temple practices. The temple of the people of God is supposed to produce fruit. It is supposed to feed people. When people are hungry for Spirit nurture, the temple is supposed to have food. As we will see, the temple in Mark's story is fruitless. We must be careful not to use this story as a means of demeaning of Jewish religion. Any religion, at various times in its development, becomes obsolete and fruitless.

The appropriate response to a fruitless religion is honest critique, but not the critique of one religion in terms of some other religion. The appropriate critique of any religion comes from a place beyond religion, from the Spirit foundations of human life, from the authenticity of being human which all religions fragmentarily express or, in their perversions, flee from expressing. All religion can be critiqued, including the religion that you are or I am attempting to practice.

Mark's story of the fig tree suggests how we should relate to all religion that has become obsolete or perverted. Expose it as the fruitless reality that it is! It does not matter how heroically on target that heritage has been in the past. Today is the day of judgement on all things including my and your religion.

*What have been your experiences with fruitless religion?*

*What would it mean for you to be an open critic of fruitless religion?*

*How might you be affirmative toward creating religion that bears fruit?*

### **Mark 11:15-19 The Temple as a Hideout for Crooks**

Then they came into Jerusalem and Jesus went into the Temple and began to drive out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money-changers and the benches of the dove-

sellers, and he would not allow people to carry their water-pots through the Temple. And he taught them and said, "Doesn't the scripture say, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations?'. But you have turned it into a 'den of thieves!' "

The chief priests and scribes heard him say this and tried to find a way of getting rid of him. But they were in fact afraid of him, for his teaching had captured the imagination of the people. And every evening he left the city.

In this story Mark may be working with an actual memory of the actions of the historical Jesus. It is probable that Jesus actually did carry out bold criticisms of the temple practices of his day. In Mark's story, we see Jesus chasing out vendors and shoppers, overturning tables and chairs, and stopping the delivery of goods. This is a direct action protest. This is intended to get widespread popular attention. Any protest needs interpretation and this is the meaning Jesus gives to what he is doing: "Do not the Scriptures say, 'My house is to be regarded as a house of prayer for all people?'. But you have turned it into 'a den of thieves!' "

This critique angers the authorities to such an extent that they keep looking for a way to get rid of him, but he is protected by the crowds who are simply astonished at his teachings.

A thoroughgoing critique of religion is almost always astonishing. Religion usually assumes some sort of absolute authority. So challenging that authority can reveal deeply defended delusions. Such work is dangerous. Jesus and his disciples did not stay in the city after dark.

*What valid critique of our contemporary Christian religious practices would enrage the authorities and astonish the masses?*

### **Mark 11:20-25 The Power of Prayer**

One morning as they were walking along, they noticed that the fig-tree had withered away to the roots. Peter remembered it, and said, "Master, look, the fig-tree that you cursed is all shriveled up!"

"Have faith in God," replied Jesus to them. "I tell you that if anyone should say to this hill, 'Get up and throw yourself into the sea', and without any doubt in his heart believe that what he says will happen, then it will happen! That is why I tell you, whatever you pray about and ask for, believe that you have received it and it will be yours.

Apparently withering a fig tree is not difficult for a person of prayer. Even moving a mountain is possible with sufficient conviction. Indeed, if we fully trust God, whatever we ask for will be given. Many of the teachings of Jesus seem to be characterized by gross exaggeration. Jesus shoves his listeners out of their normal boxes of thought and action by making these preposterous statements.

We can intuit the Spirit power of these sayings when we locate those items in our life that seem like mountains to us. Does the economic well-being of all citizens seem like a

mountain to us? Sufficient trust and conviction can move that mountain. Does creating the family life we want seem like a mountain to us? Sufficient trust and conviction can move that mountain. Does overcoming our destructive habits seem like a mountain of impossibility? Sufficient trust and conviction can move that mountain.

So, what is this powerful trust and conviction that can move such mountains. It is the power of our inherent Spirit-level human freedom. Our lives are not like disks of recorded music, playing themselves out. Each of our human lives is an unwritten story that we ourselves have ample power to write. Of course most of us most of the time have sold our inherent freedom to some victim image of slavery. We are guilty of self disempowerment at a basic level of our living. Jesus' statements are intended to shock us into deeper thinking about the possibilities of realism and bolder action in the exercise of our essential freedom.

Prayer is about the exercise of our essential freedom. Prayer is the trust and conviction that Jesus and Mark are telling us about. Prayer has to do with dying to our present limited sense of reality and allowing our real possibilities to open before us.

*What do you most want in your life right now?*

*What would it mean for you to pray for that outcome in the depth of trust and conviction that would indeed allow some realistic version of that hope to happen?*

### **Mark 11:26 Praying for Forgiveness**

And whenever you stand praying, you must forgive anything that you are holding against anyone else, and your Heavenly Father will forgive you your sins."

When forgiveness for our own wretched past is what we want, this saying provides us with the key to such realization. We need to trust in Reality's forgiveness for everyone, including ourselves. Are we holding anything against anyone? Our parents? Previous lovers? Present family members? Present friends? Present enemies? If we want forgiveness for our own wretched living, the key is accepting forgiveness for all these people as well.

Forgiveness comes like rain for everyone, or there is no forgiveness for anyone. Forgiveness is a for all or for none deal. The Infinite Overall Powerfulness that sustains the whole cosmos stands ready to welcome all persons home to the actual here and now of realistic living. If we harbor the hope that the Infinite will crush those we hold something against while dealing leniently with us, we are confused about the essence of forgiveness. Clinging to our supposed *need* for revenge clouds our trust that we ourselves are forgiven—yes forgiven in spite of all our misdeeds, remembered and forgotten. Accepting our own forgiveness is quite simple, but it costs us a renunciation of excluding others from the domain of forgiveness. As we read elsewhere in the New Testament, we tend to see our own vision as clouded by a tiny speck, while the vision of

others is clouded by a tree trunk. Such feelings of comic superiority over others has to go, when we seek and accept forgiveness for ourselves.

Accepting forgiveness for ourselves does not mean that we do not see what we see in the lives of others. It means seeing more than we think we see. In spite of the greatest delusion, dysfunction, and downright wickedness of a human life, the possibility remains for realistic living to start again—living this next moment in a more realistic and powerful fashion. Starting over that way may seem like a mountain that will not move, but if in trust and conviction we say to any mountain of estrangement, “Move,” it will move. That mountain will get up and run pell mell into the sea and be drowned. In other words, estrangement is not part of the really Real. Estrangement is a made-up world of beliefs and commitments that comes into being through using the gift of human freedom to refuse the exercise of the gift of human freedom. Estrangement is a bondage because it has spent human freedom to be in bondage.

*What are you holding against someone?*

*What would it mean for you to surrender that holding and thus accept forgiveness for everyone including yourself?*

### **Mark 11: 27-33 By what Authority?**

So they came once more to Jerusalem, and while Jesus was walking in the Temple, the chief priests, elders and scribes approached him, and asked, "What authority have you for what you're doing? And who gave you permission to do these things?"

"I am going to ask you a question," replied Jesus, "and if you answer me, I will tell you what authority I have for what I do. The baptism of John, now—did it come from Heaven or was it purely human? Tell me that."

At this they argued with each other, "If we say from Heaven, he will say, 'then why didn't you believe in him?' but if we say it was purely human, well . . ." For they were frightened of the people, since all of them believed that John was a real prophet.

So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." "Then I cannot tell you by what authority I do these things," returned Jesus.

Jesus tricked these ranking priests and scholars into admitting that they did not act by the authority of some deep truth, but by the fear of public opinion. They pretended to be authorities, but actually they were mere slaves of the reigning views. They did not have the courage to confront the people or Jesus.

Many of those in the crowd listening to Jesus must have smiled to see the hypocrisy of these high-ranking people exposed. Also, the listeners were themselves left with this question: "By what authority did Jesus do what he did?" Perhaps Jesus, like John, was a genuine prophet. Perhaps they said to themselves, "We will hear this man out."

The power of a person speaking from his or her own inward conviction of authenticity is a power deeply respected by the best intuitions of everyone. Authenticity will only be feared and attacked by people who are fleeing from their own authenticity. Such flight is especially obvious in people who are clinging to some possession of authority (the Bible, the Pope, the Koran, or simply current opinion).

*What authorities have you been tempted to cling to?*

*When have you spoken with your own authority, like Jesus, knowing just what to say?*

*What prevents you from always speaking thus?*

# Chapter Twelve

## Mark 12: 1-12 The Parable of the Greedy Tenants

Then he began to talk to them in parables.

"A man once planted a vineyard," he said, "fenced it round, dug out the hole for the wine-press and built a watch-tower. Then he let it out to some farm-workers and went abroad. At the end of the season he sent a servant to the tenants to receive his share of the vintage. But they got hold of him, knocked him about and sent him off empty-handed. The owner tried again. He sent another servant to them, but this one they knocked on the head and generally insulted. Once again he sent them another servant, but him they murdered. He sent many others and some they beat up and some they murdered. He had one man left - his own son who was very dear to him. He sent him last of all to the tenants, saying to himself, 'They will surely respect my own son.' But they said to each other, 'This fellow is the future owner - come on, let's kill him, and the property will be ours! So they got hold of him and murdered him, and threw his body out of the vineyard. What do you suppose the owner of the vineyard is going to do? He will come and destroy the men who were working his vineyard and will hand it over to others. Have you never read this scripture —'The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes?' "

Then they tried to get their hands on him, for they knew perfectly well that he had aimed this parable at them—but they were afraid of the people. So they left him and went away.

This parable is clearly directed toward the religious teachers who feel themselves in charge of the vineyard of Israel. The owner of this vineyard is none other than God; the religious teachers are just tenants. These wicked tenants wish to own the vineyard for themselves and not serve the owner, which is their true function. Prophets come, the wicked tenants mistreat or kill them. The owner's own son comes, and they kill him, too. Obviously this parable is meant to discredit those who had consented to Jesus' death and encourage those listening to this parable to honor Jesus in spite of his rejection and death. It is also obvious that Mark has given his character Jesus a bit more to say than the historical figure Jesus probably said.

So in this parable, what happens to the vineyard? It is given to others. Religious teachers are disposable. The heritage of Israel can pass on into other hands. Contemporary clergy, bishops, popes, and institutions are also disposable. The Christian heritage can pass on into other hands.

Mark has his character Jesus strike a final blow by quoting a Scripture about the rejected stone becoming the cornerstone of the building. Jesus is to be the new cornerstone in Mark's new building.

The religious teachers listening to Jesus in this story got the point being made. They would have arrested Jesus then and there except for their fear of the people. These teachers wanted to be intimidators of everyone, but they cannot intimidate Jesus. In the end of this story, they become intimidated by their own fear of those they wished to intimidate.

Both Jesus in this story and Mark writing this gospel take delight in enabling the people to laugh at the tyrannizing authorities. Even the hostility of the authorities toward Jesus is shown to be laughable. In the stories that follow, Mark continues to use this style of attack on the antiquated religious community. Laughing at unreality is established here a tool of redemption.

*What would it mean for you to take delight in laughing at smug religious authorities?*

*Have you ever felt that the true prophets and their followers were laughing at you?*

### **Mark 12: 13-17 The Pharisees Question Him about Taxes to Caesar**

Later they sent some of the Pharisees and some of the Herod-party to trap him in an argument. They came up and said to him, "Master, we know that you are an honest man and that you are not swayed by men's opinion of you. Obviously you don't care for human approval but teach the way of God with the strictest regard for truth—is it right to pay tribute to Caesar or not: are we to pay or not to pay?"

But Jesus saw through their hypocrisy and said to them, "Why try this trick on me? Bring me a coin and let me look at it."

So they brought one to him. "Whose face is this?" asked Jesus, "and whose name is in the inscription?"

"Caesar's," they replied. And Jesus said, "Then give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God!"—a reply which staggered them.

This story is another example of Mark encouraging us to laugh at the panic of religious authorities to discredit the true prophet, Jesus. The religious authorities obviously believed that people generally hated paying taxes to Caesar and that a truly honest person like Jesus would support that popular position. Then they could turn Jesus over to the authorities for seditious teachings. But Jesus turns the tables on them. He points out that they are all using Roman money that belongs to Rome. So "give to Caesar what is owed to Caesar." And then Jesus indicates where the fundamental audit is located in the lives of these religious authorities: "and give to God what is owed to God."

What we owe our governing authorities is fairly definite and limited, but what we owe God is much more inclusive. If "God" means the The Final Reality we face, then we owe to this Reality the obedience of being realistic, we owe honesty and integrity, we owe a whole life of behavior that fits the situations in which we live, we owe openness to our actual futures and an abandonment of our binding pasts.

*What specifically do you sense that you owe God at this time in your life?*

### **Mark 12: 18-27 The Sadducees Question Him about Resurrection**

Then some of the Sadducees (a party which maintains that there is no resurrection) approached him, and put this question to him, "Master, Moses instructed us that if a man's brother dies leaving a widow but no child, then the man should marry the woman and raise children for his brother. Now there were seven brothers, and the first one married and died without leaving issue. Then the second one married the

widow and died leaving no issue behind him. The same thing happened with the third, and indeed the whole seven died without leaving any child behind them. Finally the woman died. Now in this 'resurrection', when men will rise up again, whose wife is she going to be—for she was the wife of all seven of them?"

Jesus replied, "Does not this show where you go wrong—and how you fail to understand both the scriptures and the power of God? When people rise from the dead they neither marry nor are they given in marriage; they live like the angels in Heaven. But as for this matter of the dead being raised, have you never read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the bush, how God spoke to him in these words, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? God is not God of the dead but of living men! That is where you make your great mistake!"

In order to understand this passage, it is important to understand that Jesus, the Pharisees, and most of the peasant population held a belief about the resurrection of the dead at the end of time. The gist of that belief was that no one was going to get away with anything. In this present life, they may not be appropriately rewarded for their righteousness or punished for their unrighteousness, but in the resurrection at the end of time there would be a final reckoning. This notion that we return to dust and are then reassembled at the end of time may seem very strange to us, but Jesus and the early church apparently supported this belief. The idea of the immortality of the soul was not known to them or honored by them. Immortality was a Greek idea that entered into the Christian discussion later.

Also, it is interesting to note that the Sadducees mentioned in this passage were a first century Jewish group who maintained that there is no resurrection. Perhaps this belief fitted them well, for the Sadducees were deeply compromised with the Roman rule and loosely obedient to the Mosaic heritage.

This dialogue in its present form was created by the early church, but it probably reflects ideas that Jesus did hold. Mark apparently uses this story here in order to tell us once again that the resurrection is a more mysterious happening than we are prone to assume.

In this story, the Sadducees come to Jesus with a highly literal hypothetical about the resurrection at the end of time. They want to see what Jesus will say about resurrection, a belief which they consider silly.

Jesus does not accept their crass literalism. He (Jesus in Mark's story) suggests that the resurrection will be something more innovative than a mere repetition of our current finite lives. To even talk about marriage among resurrected beings is a false assumption.

Then Mark includes an even more astonishing spin. He talks about a common way in which the Hebrew heritage speaks of God—namely, as the God of its three primal ancestors: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He infers that since God is the God of the living not the dead, that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob must still be among the living. *They are already resurrected!* He tells the Sadducees that this is where they make their mistake.



Apparently, resurrection has for Jesus (and certainly for Mark) a more mysterious meaning than these literalistic Sadducees had in mind with their clever question.

*What would it mean for you to be among the living and thus worship the God who is the God of the living?*

### **Mark 12:28-34 The Greatest Commandment**

Then one of the scribes approached him. He had been listening to the discussion, and noticing how well Jesus had answered them, he put this question to him, "What are we to consider the greatest commandment of all?"

"The first and most important one is this," Jesus replied—"Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, and with all your strength". The second is this, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself". No other commandment is greater than these."

"I am well answered," replied the scribe. "You are absolutely right when you say that there is one God and no other God exists but him; and to love him with the whole of our hearts, the whole of our intelligence and the whole of our energy, and to love our neighbors as ourselves is infinitely more important than all these burnt-offerings and sacrifices.

Then Jesus, noting the thoughtfulness of his reply, said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God!" After this nobody felt like asking him any more questions.

In this conversation with a friendly scribe, Mark establishes that Jesus is grounded in the very heart of the Hebrew tradition. Both Jesus and this scribe agree that the heart of that tradition is something deeper than rules about burnt offerings, sacrifices, or any other particular matters. The core of the heritage is to love God with every aspect of our being and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

According to Mark, clarity about this radical obedience makes us "close to the kingdom of God"—that is, in the vicinity of an authenticity of obedience toward the Absolute Mysteriousness. For us to enter this obedience has to do with love—love for the Infinite Mystery met in every event. It also has to do with loving each of the beings that is placed in our lives by this Infinite Presence.

What such loving means could be the theme of many discourses; here I will point out this one central meaning. Loving the actual neighbors that come into our lives is at the same time loving the Infinite Provider of these neighbors. Loving each real, specific, glorious or wretched neighbor is loving that Infinite Source of all neighbors.

Such love need not mean liking or approving these neighbors. It certainly does not mean coddling them or knuckling under to them. Such love is not an emotional feeling; it is an action of compassion. Such love is the action of affirming the presence and needs of all neighboring beings in our lives. We need not affirm what these neighbors think they need. When enacting this love, we act with our own insights concerning what these neighbors need. We may be wrong, but we ask Reality, not that neighbor,

about what that neighbor needs. We must listen to that neighbor, for the realism we seek to employ; but we listen not for the opinions of that neighbor, but for what Reality is saying to us about realistic love for that neighbor. We are not coddling, but serving the neighbor. And serving, not coddling, also applies to loving ourselves.

Affirming our own lives and affirming our neighbors' lives are parts of the same affirming—the affirming of the Source of all things. Clearly, such affirming has to do with promoting realism, not coddling, whatever we or others may think or tend to think is real.

The instruction to love others as we love ourselves also gives us guidance on what loving others means. Loving others means everything it means to love our own selves. If we know what affirming ourselves means, then we know in a basic way what affirming our neighbor means. There is no need for confusion about this. There is, however, a need for maturity in understanding what loving ourselves means. All of us start out misinformed about what is truly good for us. As we shall see, Mark in his portrait of Jesus is going to teach us that what is good for us is loving God with all our inward and outward strengths.

*What do you know today that you did not always know about loving yourself?*

*What do you know today that you did not always know about loving others?*

*How do you now talk about what it means to love God?*

### **Mark 12:35-40 Beware of the Teachers of the Law**

Later, while Jesus was teaching in the Temple he remarked, "How can the scribes make out that Christ is David's son, for David himself, inspired by the Holy Spirit, said, 'The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool'.

David is himself calling Christ 'Lord'—where do they get the idea that he is his son?"

The vast crowd heard this with great delight and Jesus continued in his teaching, "Be on your guard against these scribes who love to walk about in long robes and to be greeted respectfully in public and to have the front seats in the synagogue and the best places at dinner-parties! These are the men who grow fat on widow's property and cover up what they are doing by making lengthy prayers. They are only adding to their own punishment!"

Whether or not the Messiah is the son of David is a theological issue that arose in the early church. How could Jesus be the Messiah if he is not of royal lineage stretching back to David? Luke's and Matthew's gospels imply that Jesus was a descendent of David; however, since the historical Jesus was apparently from a class of landless carpenters, the claim for his Davidic ancestry is probably a piece of theological fiction.

Mark's gospel does not attempt to say that Jesus was a biological son of David. Instead, Mark has Jesus reject the need of the Messiah to be David's descendent. Mark has Jesus say that David, speaking by the inspiration of spirit (Mark is referring to Psalm 110:1),

addresses the Messiah as Lord. So how could the Messiah be David's son? It was common belief in Mark's time that Psalm 110 was speaking of the Messiah. And it was also a common belief that David had written this Psalm. We now know, with high scientific probability, that both of these beliefs are false, but that is not important for interpreting Mark's point.

Mark's theological point was that nit-picking scholars had no grounds for rejecting Jesus as the Messiah because of doubts about Jesus' Davidic ancestry.

Immediately following this remark about David, Mark includes a saying that may have been actually said by the historical Jesus, "Look out for the scholars who like to parade around in long robes and insist on being addressed properly in the marketplaces and prefer important seats in the synagogues and the best couches at banquets." This saying is a stiff challenge to all clergy and religious scholars in all ages and in all religions. Jesus is indicating that the religious leaders we need to follow are those who are servants of our Spirit needs rather than those who assume religious leadership for whatever status and honor it might bring to them.

Mark also condemns these clerical practices: preying on widows, saying long prayers, and putting on airs. Mark apparently believed that Spirit genuineness among religious leadership was hard to find. This can be true in any era. We also should be on our guard against all clergy, all religious scholars, and we should be especially on our guard when such persons manifest that they are simply playing this role for the status which it brings them.

*How do you practice a certain wariness about religious leadership?*

*How are you tempted to status flaws in your own leadership roles?*

### **Mark 12:41-44 The Giving of a Poor Widow**

Then Jesus sat down opposite the Temple alms box and watched the people putting their money into it. A great many rich people put in large sums. Then a poor widow came up and dropped in two little coins, worth together about a halfpenny. Jesus called his disciples to his side and said to them, "Believe me, this poor widow has put in more than all the others. For they have all put in what they can easily afford, but she in her poverty who needs so much, has given away everything, her whole living!"

This seems to be a fairly straightforward story. The so-called "big givers" to the religious establishment may not be so big after all. A seemingly little giver may be the biggest of all. Sincerity in placing one's entire life on the altar is the bottom line for the giving that Jesus and Mark recommend. Implied here is that a religious establishment would contribute more to Spirit health if they replaced their plaques to big donors with plaques that challenge us to sincerity. A religious establishment should be wary about doting on its big givers who pay for buildings and staff salaries. Instead, leave plenty of room for announcing honor toward any and all expressions of full sincerity.

*How would you describe the difference in your own experience between giving part of what you have for status and giving your whole life in service?*

*What does this teaching tell us about the qualities needed in the contemporary reorganization of Christian community?*

# Chapter Thirteen

## Mark 13:1-2 The Temporality of Religious Temples

Then as Jesus was leaving the Temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Master, what wonderful stonework, what a size these buildings are!"

Jesus replied, "You see these great buildings? Not a single stone will be left standing on another; every one will be thrown down!"

Jesus, as Mark presents him, is not enthralled with beautiful temple buildings. To get the thrust of this passage, we have to realize that Jesus' words apply not only to Jewish temples or to one particular Jewish temple, but to all religious buildings, all Christian cathedrals, all modern church buildings, even all skyscrapers and other buildings of humanity. All of them will be thrown down. None of them are permanent. And the sacred is something far more profound than a building. This passage does not imply that we should be contemptuous of ancient Buddhist statues or Medieval cathedrals or Hindu temples or any other artistic treasure. Good art is something valuable, and it needs to be preserved for the enrichment of ourselves and future generations. Nevertheless, all art and all artistic buildings are finite attempts to express the inexpressible. However glorious religious buildings may be, they are not the essence of any religion. In the movement of Spirit-deepening that Jesus and Mark understood themselves to be initiating, magnificent buildings were peripheral. Furthermore, the God of history would eventually destroy them all. All finite things do indeed pass away, and may become irrelevant even though they remain standing.

In particular, the glorious temple that Israel had built and dedicated to the God of history, was not going to be protected until the end of time by the Almighty in whose name it was built. Indeed, when Mark wrote his gospel, he already knew that this temple had been torn down by the Romans. For Mark and his audience the destruction of the temple implied that the end of time was already happening. This ancient expectation of the end of time expresses a deep secret that we all know, but may not want to know: *time is always ending everything that can come to an end.*

*What are the most impressive and/or beautiful buildings you have seen?*

*What does it mean to you to experience a sacredness that is more impressive than these buildings?*

## Mark 13:3-10 When Will These Things Happen?

Then while he was sitting on the slope of the Mount of Olives facing the Temple, Peter, James, John and Andrew said to him privately, "Tell us, when will these things happen? What sign will there be that all these things are going to be accomplished?"

So Jesus began to tell them: "Be very careful that no one deceives you. Many are going to come in my name and say, 'I am he', and will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, don't be alarmed. Such things are bound to happen, but the end is not yet. Nation will take up arms against nation and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in different places and terrible famines. But this

is only the beginnings of 'the pains'. You yourselves must keep your wits about you, for men will hand you over to their councils, and will beat you in their synagogues. You will have to stand in front of rulers and kings for my sake to bear your witness to them—for before the end comes the Gospel must be proclaimed to all nations.

The disciples ask the question “When?” Sure, all things pass away, but when? The words that Mark has his character Jesus say in this passage are not words that we can attribute to the historical Jesus. Mark is telling about history that has happened since the death of Jesus. A few of Jesus’ sayings may be mingled into this thirteenth chapter of Mark, but in the main this long speech attributed to Jesus is a literary construction put together by Mark and other Christians after the Roman conquest of Jerusalem 66-70 C.E. Many of the images of extreme suffering depicted here reflect events that had already happened. The conquest of Jerusalem was indeed this awful.

In this war between rebelling Jewish Zealots and Rome, the land was devastated and terrible famines happened as well. According to Mark, even earthquakes complicated the picture. Perhaps it only felt like earthquakes. Mark was recalling some very tough decades in overall Jewish history. Actually, Mark was giving a positive interpretation to all the terrible things that had happened. He was saying that all this trauma, including Christians being beaten in synagogues and arrested and standing before rulers and kings, had been part of the drama of getting the good news of the Christian breakthrough proclaimed to all the nations of the earth.

Mark’s audience hears Mark telling a story about how Jesus anticipated all these things, but the actual message Mark is communicating to his audience and to us is this: Don’t panic! Don’t give up! Don’t be thrown off course by horrific events! Everything is taking place in the way it must take place. Be cool. Keep the faith. Do your Christian living. Proclaim the good news.

*What times in your life were experienced by you as full catastrophe living?*

*In such times, what did it mean (or might it have meant) not to panic but to continue believing in the good news of your acceptance and authorization by the Infinite Reality?*

### **Mark 13:11 Don’t Worry about What to Say!**

But when they are taking you off to trial, do not worry beforehand about what you are going to say—simply say the words you are given when the time comes. For it is not really you who will speak, but the Holy Spirit.

This teaching is not about leaning on magic and never preparing talks or court cases. It means that we can prepare—for years, for weeks, for days—and each situation is still new and challenging. We are, in spite of all our planning, dragged into unexpected and even threatening situations. So: “Do not worry, words will be given.” By whom? By the Holy Spirit? So, what is this Holy Spirit?

The Holy Spirit is not you or me in a narrow sense—such as, our personality, self image, or whims. Holy Spirit is our essential profound humanness, the Reality-given Spirit that is really me or really you. The Holy Spirit is definitely not the you or me that is worrying about what to say. The Holy Spirit is always confident. The Holy Spirit has no need to worry: the Holy Spirit is *Eternally* given and grounded. The Holy Spirit is simply the *Truth*, the *Truth* that is present when I get my “worrying me” out of the way. In other words, if we are genuinely committed to live the *Truth* of our own deep authenticity, an authenticity that includes our freedom, we are prepared to provide a true witness in any and all circumstances. “Holy Spirit” is sometimes pictured as a wind that blows through us. So we might picture this Spirit wind blowing through our worried self. And we can also affirm that this *alien wind* of Holy Spirit is our true self, our profound humanness that Infinite Reality is creating and sustaining. We can be forgiven now for having abandoning this Holy Spirit. We can find ourselves restored anew to a fresh start in living this Holy Spirit. Holy Spirit is simply *there* to empower us when our “worried self” is set aside.

I recall a vivid personal experience that may illustrate this dynamic. My mentor who was a very effective and popular speaker had to cancel a series of three talks at a college campus for a religious emphasis week. He asked me to substitute for him. So here I am on an airplane going to Billings, Montana worried about the fact that these teachers and students were expecting Joe Matthews, and they were going to get just me. I had never done this before. I had done many courses, but addressing large gatherings like this and conducting fire-side chats like this was new to me. Somehow on that plane I decided, “Well I’ll just have to do my best, and let that be.”

Flaws I am sure there were, but freedom was also there to make my witness and to respond helpfully in those students in those fireside chats. If anyone was disappointed, they did not say so.

As I was flying home I felt sort of rocked. I had experienced something that robbed me of all my excuses about facing such challenges in the future.

This everyday example of overcoming a bit of anxiety about what to say in a speaking engagement cannot be compared with those who were hauled before judges on trial for their lives, but perhaps it does illustrate how this dynamic of Spirit applies to everyday living as well as to those most extremes challenges.

*When have you found yourself worried about saying the right thing?*

*When have you been willing to set aside your worrying self and lean on the Spirit of Truth that blows or dwells at the core of your being?*



## Mark 13:12-23 The Abomination of Desolation

"A brother is going to betray his own brother to death, and a father his own child. Children will stand up against their parents and condemn them to death. There will come a time when the whole world will hate you because you are known as my followers. Yet the man who holds out to the end will be saved.

"But when you see 'the abomination of desolation' standing where it ought not —(let the reader take note of this)—then those who are in Judea must fly to the hills! The man on his house-top must not go down nor go into his house to fetch anything out of it, and the man in the field must not turn back to fetch his coat. Alas for the women who are pregnant at that time, and alas for those with babies at their breasts! Pray God that it may not be winter when that time comes, for there will be such utter misery in those days as had never been from the creation until now—and never will be again. Indeed, if the Lord did not shorten those days, no human beings could survive. But for the sake of the people whom he has chosen he has shortened those days.

"If anyone tells you at that time, 'Look, here is Christ', or 'Look, there he is', don't believe it! For false christs and false prophets will arise and will perform signs and wonders, to deceive, if it be possible, even the men of God's choice. You must keep your eyes open! I am giving you this warning before it happens.

Again, Mark is using this literary device— having his character Jesus speak of historical events that have already happened in Mark's lifetime. Why would Mark have done this? What did this passage mean to the people Mark was addressing or for us now. I suggest that Mark is saying that those devastating events—these desecrations of Mark's own religious heritage—were not signs that God no longer cares for us. Such things happen as part of the process of liberating humanity. We need to pay attention to such events, but we do not need to panic or lose our faith that God loves us.

The phrase "the abomination of desolation" is a phrase taken from the book of Daniel. Mark, I am guessing, is using this phrase to allude to the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE. Perhaps Mark was also alluding to future *abominations* that Christians may face in the future.

Mark is also recalling that some Christians were indeed carried away by these passing panics, giving in to some wild enthusiasm of some false messiah. Even today, in both orderly times and horrid times false *christs* do arise and proclaimed "comforting foolishness." Such lies are passionately followed by many.

This passage is also a witness to the fact that Christianity has had the vitality not to only survive, but to spread its victorious message during very difficult times. We still living members of this faith have no valid excuse not to make our witness to our own challenging times.

*What are some of the most devastating and perhaps desecrating events you have experienced in your lifetime?*

*How have or might such events strain your faith that God loves you?*

*What false christs have you noticed that require our awareness and avoidance?*



## Mark 13:24-37 Look to the Future and Stay Alert!

"But when that misery is past, 'the light of the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give her light; stars will be falling from the sky and the powers of heaven will rock on their foundations'.

Then men shall see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory. And then shall he send out his angels to summon his chosen together from every quarter, from furthest earth to highest heaven.

"Let the fig-tree illustrate this for you: when its branches grow tender and produce leaves, you know that summer is near, at your very doors! I tell you that this generation will not have passed until all these things have come true. Earth and sky will pass away, but what I have told you will never pass away! But no one knows the day or the hour of this happening, not even the angels in Heaven, no, not even the Son—only the Father. Keep your eyes open, keep on the alert, for you do not know when the time will be.

"It is as if a man who is traveling abroad had left his house and handed it over to be managed by his servants. He has given each one his work to do and has ordered the doorkeeper to be on the look-out for his return. Just so must you keep a look-out, for you do not know when the master of the house will come—it might be late evening, or midnight, or cock-crow, or early morning—otherwise he might come unexpectedly and find you sound asleep. What I am saying to you I am saying to all; keep on the alert!"

This passage of New Testament writing is one that many of us would prefer to skip. Obviously, any literalistic handing of this fantastic poetry to predict specific catastrophes in our history is bogus biblical interpretation. And in addition to that objection, we may be asking, "Why has Mark put such extreme language in his narrative?" And what is the relevant spirit message to us today?

"the light of the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give her light"

This may allude to a total solar eclipse. Such an event would have been quite frightening in Mark's century when most people had no satisfying scientific explanation to sooth the shock of such a happening. Sun and moon were then seen as permanent friends, almost gods for many people. For the sun to go dark and the moon to be a black dot signaled some sort of end of time—a cosmos that was on the way out. And for the stars to being falling meant that the whole of nature was coming apart:

the powers of heaven will rock on their foundations.

Stars have been for most people a symbol of permanence and dependability. For Mark to imagine stars falling is a statement of their impermanence, of their un-godlike quality. This is also a witness to the overarching power of Eternity, and to the vulnerability of all things thought dependable. Our modern science also tells us that each star was not always present, and will not always be here. We even see with our telescope-assisted eyes the clear evidence of exploding and passing stars. We can know that all things and all our thoughts about these things are impermanent.

Mark is telling us that this total impermanence require our attention. Also, in this thirteenth chapter of Mark's narrative, he is preparing us for the story of Jesus' crucifixion. The disciples are going to experience all their expectations of order and

permanence being shaken to the foundations in experiencing Jesus' crucifixion. Their lives are going to move into an experience of total emptiness that has end of time qualities. Contemporary theology has spoken about this emptiness as "realized eschatology—the end of the world now.

However, this end of the world is not the end of Mark's story. This total emptiness of the disciples will be pictured by Mark as part of path to an equally massive fullness. Resurrection is Mark's main theme. Mark's final address in this wildly cryptic thirteenth chapter of his narrative is about paying attention to the appearance of resurrection as the back side of the cross. Anticipating this quality of hopefulness that comes into play soon after this end of the world emptiness is contained in these phrases: "You must keep your eyes open," and "What I say to you I say to all; keep on the alert."

So for what do we 21st Century spirit adventurers need to keep on the alert? We need to be alert to the very same things as these disciples: the coming of false prophets and the end of the world as we know it. Mark is claiming that the end of the world will happen in the lifetimes of the generation to whom Mark's Jesus is speaking. Mark meant the world had come to an end and was still coming to an end in lifetime of Mark and his audience. So how did the end of the world actually happen in Mark's lifetime? Mark's Jesus said, "The light of the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give her light; stars will be falling from the sky and the powers of heaven will rock on their foundations."

Did all this happen in Mark's generation? Yes, it did! But not everyone noticed that it took place. It was a secret happening. We have to have special eyes to see this happen. Mark's address has been passed on to us to warn us of our own 21st century need for alertness. Can we see the end of the world in our generation? Can we see beyond the experience of complete emptiness to the resurrection of profound humanness.

I tell you that this generation will not have passed until all these things have come true. Earth and sky will pass away, but what I have told you will never pass away!

*When have you experienced events that ended the world as you knew it at that time?*

*And can we see "resurrection" on the back side of that world coming to an end?*

# Mark 14

## Mark 14:1-9 A Holy Waste

In two days' time the festival of the Passover and of unleavened bread was due. Consequently, the chief priests and the scribes were trying to think of some trick by which they could get Jesus into their power and have him executed. "But it must not be during the festival," they said, "or there will be a riot."

Jesus himself was now in Bethany in the house of Simon the leper. As he was sitting at table, a woman approached him with an alabaster flask of very costly spikenard perfume. She broke the neck of the flask and poured the perfume on Jesus' head. Some of those present were highly indignant and muttered, "What is the point of such wicked waste of perfume? It could have been sold for over thirty pounds and the money could have been given to the poor." And there was a murmur of resentment against her. But Jesus said, "Let her alone, why must you make her feel uncomfortable? She has done a beautiful thing for me. You have the poor with you always, and you can do good to them whenever you like, but you will not always have me. She has done all she could—for she has anointed my body in preparation for burial. I assure you that wherever the Gospel is preached throughout the whole world, this deed of hers will also be recounted, as her memorial to me."

The story of Martin Luther King Jr. has become a treasure in our recent common memory. We can see how he and his leadership team were supported by the crowds while being opposed by establishment enemies. If there were no crowds, no swath of the population and its social forces hearing his message and supporting it, King's enemies would have simply shut him up in one way or another. These dynamics are present whenever something new is breaking upon the scene. We can see it in early labor movements, in the apartheid struggle of South Africa, in Gandhi's freedom fight in India, even in the Beatles' impact upon popular music. The prophet is the bringer of new truth to the dynamics of society. There will always be enemies of any new truth. The prophet goes to those who will hear and then confronts his enemies with the crowds who support him or her. The enemies have to listen to the prophet because of the crowds. Otherwise they would simply dismiss him or her. The existence of the listening crowds makes conversation with the prophet's truth a possibility even for the prophet's enemies.

Mark has begun the closing chapters of his story by showing us Jesus' relation to his crowds and to his establishment enemies. Mark is leading up to telling us about Jesus' arrest, crucifixion, and burial as well as its vital meaning for our lives. Next Mark tells us a story about a woman anointing Jesus' body in preparation for his burial. Mark views Jesus as the Anointed One, the chosen of God for illuminating the Truth about every event that happens to human persons and societies. This whole-hearted and enthusiastic woman is pouring out her expensive perfume on Jesus' body. This event provides the only anointment ritual that Jesus is going to receive. Jesus is also being prefigured as being himself a precious perfume that is going to be wasted, or so it seems.

The crux of the story is the dialogue between Jesus and those who see this woman's deed as a wicked waste of expensive perfume: "It could have been sold and the money

given to the poor.” Jesus’ reply indicates that honoring a prophet in our midst has an importance even more valuable than giving alms to the poor.

Jesus is surprisingly direct. “You have the poor with you always, and you can do good to them whenever you like, but you will not always have me.” It may now be possible to do away with poverty, but there will always be opportunities for charity and reform rather than the deeper thing that Jesus was doing. Clearly, all values do not revolve around improving the economic conditions of humanity. The value of truth and the value of the truth-teller are even more precious. And these truth values deserve whatever resources we need to honor these rare gifts. In terms of the more typical values of human living, honoring Jesus with a precious ointment may seem like a waste. For Jesus did not change the economic and political conditions, and it is still unclear to many people how he reset our whole sense of truth. Indeed, the grim ending of Jesus’ life can still seem like a waste of a good man.

*When have you felt that something precious has been wasted?*

*What might it mean to find other meaning within that seeming waste?*

## **Mark 14:10-26 Betrayal by One of the Twelve and a Last Meal**

Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went off to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them. And when they heard what he had to say, they were delighted and undertook to pay him for it. So he looked out for a convenient opportunity to betray him.

On the first day of unleavened bread, the day when the Passover was sacrificed, Jesus' disciples said, "Where do you want us to go and make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?"

Jesus sent off two of them with these instructions, "Go into the town and you will meet a man carrying a pitcher of water. Follow him and say to the owner of the house to which he goes, 'The Master says, where is the room for me to eat the Passover with my disciples?' And he will show you a large upstairs room all ready with the furnishings that we need. That is the place where you are to make our preparations."

So the disciples set off and went into the town, found everything as he had told them, and prepared for the Passover.

Late in the evening he arrived with the twelve. And while they were sitting there, right in the middle of the meal, Jesus remarked, "Believe me, one of you is going to betray me—someone who is now having his supper with me."

This shocked and distressed them and one after another they began to say to him, "Surely, I'm not the one?"

"It is one of the twelve," Jesus told them, "a man who is dipping his hand into the dish with me. It is true that the Son of Man will follow the road foretold by the scriptures, but alas for the man through whom he is betrayed! It would be better for that man if he had never been born."

And while they were still eating Jesus took a loaf, blessed it and broke it and gave it to them with the words, "Take this, it is my body."

Then he took a cup, and after thanking God, he gave it to them, and they drank from it, and he said to them, "This is my blood which is shed for many in the new agreement. I tell you truly I will drink no more wine until the day comes when I drink it fresh in the kingdom of God!"

Then they sang a hymn and went out to the Mount of Olives.

Mark does not do a psychological analysis of Judas' motives. He just confronts us with the plain fact that one of the twelve betrayed Jesus to his enemies. The story also points out that the enemies will pay money for such betrayal. The story does not indicate that Judas did this deed simply for money. We can surmise that he was discouraged or upset with Jesus for his own reasons. Perhaps some expectation was disappointed, or one of his favored overviews of life was undermined by Jesus or by some challenge presented by Jesus. Perhaps the whole Jesus mission was just too overwhelming. Whatever it was, Judas bolted.

This incident also tells us about a universal pattern in all prophetic movements. Some people bolt. Some of these people may have been members of the inner circle. Some of these people may have been chosen by the prophet and seen by him or her to have had great potential.

Mark does not sweep this dynamic under the rug as if a movement should be ashamed of such betrayals. Rather, Mark communicates that such betrayals are to be expected. Such betrayals do not indicate that something is wrong with the truth that Jesus is saying and being and doing. Truth, when pristinely lived, spawns betrayals as well as enemies.

Mark's narrative about Jesus' last meal, a Passover meal with his disciples, was created as an interpretation of Jesus' death. Throughout his book, Mark has been talking about eating and feeding. He has been building up to this "final feeding." Having just told us a story about the woman anointing Jesus' body for burial and the story of Judas' decision to betray Jesus to his enemies, Mark tells us about a meal.

Those who first heard Mark's gospel knew what the Passover was all about. The word "Passover" called up in their minds the sacrifice of a lamb and the scattering of blood on the door posts of each Jewish house. The Passover feast called to mind the people of Israel preparing to leave Egypt and pass through a great Exodus from their slavery within hierarchical society toward a new life in the wilderness beyond corrupt civilization.

Mark is not just relating details that he thinks may have happened. Mark is telling us that Jesus' death needs to be understood as something more than another miscarriage of justice, another irrational violence toward a good and promising young man. Jesus' death, according to Mark, is to be understood as a meal, a feeding, a source of food for our deepest lives.

Mark is also giving a new twist to the entire meaning of the Passover heritage. A new lamb is being sacrificed. A new deliverance from slavery is being accomplished. A new freedom is being won. A new wilderness is being entered.

At this meal Jesus says, "One of you is going to betray me." What a shocking way to begin a meal conversation! Why does Mark tell this story? Why does he tell it in this way? We move off the track if we ask how did Jesus know that one of the twelve was going to betray him. Mark is writing this story, not Jesus. Mark knew that one of the disciples had betrayed Jesus. Mark also knew that betrayal was still a possibility for himself and everyone else listening to his gospel.

So Mark knew that his audience would identify with hearing the disciples say, "Surely I am not the one." Perhaps we also identify with these disciples. Mark indicates that such betrayal is quite serious: "It would be better for that man if he had never been born." This saying is still capable of effecting a sober feeling in the pit of the stomach.

But Mark turns immediately from this sober beginning to some deep symbolism. Jesus tells them the significance of his death. "This piece of bread I am passing around to you is my body, take and eat."

"Then he took the cup and after thanking God . . ." (let me pause in the middle of this sentence to note that Jesus, the hero figure in Mark's story, is thanking God for this cup, this cup which Jesus is going to associate with his own death, his own blood.) A very deep journey of Spirit is being indicated by Jesus' remarkable gratitude. Mark is sharing his own journey (as well as that of many others) from being shocked and horrified by Jesus' early and tragic death to being grateful for the "food" that this same death brought to many lives.

"Then he took the cup and after thanking God, he gave it to them, and they all drank from it, and he said to them, 'This is my blood which is shed for many in the new covenant.' "

So what is this new covenant? It is a new agreement with the Final Mystery—a new covenant that renews the covenant made at the first Passover. In the Exodus events we, the people of God, were delivered from slavery into freedom. We found new life in making that first covenant with the Final Mystery? Now we are going to be delivered even more decisively from slavery into freedom through a new covenant with that same Final Mystery.

The whole idea of a covenant or agreement implies a choice on our part. We have to enter into this agreement by being part of the agreement. The idea of covenant also implies an offer on the part of the Final Mystery—an offer to lead us across the Reed Sea into a fresh experiment in authentic living on behalf of all the nations of the Earth. So what is this new offer that the Final Mystery is making in Jesus' death? The offer is



leading us across the deep river of Jesus' death into a fresh experiment in authentic living on behalf of all the nations of the Earth.

The death-crossing with Jesus replaces the Reed Sea crossing in the older story. Why does Mark and the entire Christian heritage place such emphasis upon Jesus' death? Why all this interest in blood and a physical body broken on our behalf. How is it that we are fed by this bread and wine?

There is no special magic in the bread and wine that is sanctified by an authorized Christian priest. And there was nothing magical about Jesus' own blood or body or about his particular death. Jesus was just one more realistic, down-to-Earth person who offended people with his realism and got violent responses from those who preferred their familiar illusions. His blood was the same as any one else's blood. His body was the same as the body of any other human being.

To understand how Jesus' sacrificed body and blood became food for us, we have to imagine how our own sacrificed body and blood might become food for still others. Since our body and blood is the same as his, if our body and blood does not potentially have the same power as his, then his body and blood had no power either.

The key to this story, is that Jesus' death, our death, death itself is a Reed Sea that can be passed through to the other side where freedom and authenticity are to be found. The thing that traps us in our lousy, inauthentic living is our fear of death. Death has made us slaves to some sort of Egypt-type hierarchy. Picture yourself on the other side of the Reed Sea looking back at all the bodies of the drowned Egyptian soldiers, dead bodies that could have been your own. In this picture, you have passed through death, yet you are alive—more alive than ever before.

Jesus' death is like that Reed Sea crossing. Picture yourself among the disciples of Jesus who had expected grand historical victories of some sort. Instead, they faced the disgrace and utter put-down of their leader. They also felt disgraced and put-down. All their expectations had been killed. With his killing they were also killed. Imagine them coming to realize that this killing of all their expectations was an experience that rendered them more alive than they had ever been before. Imagine them realizing that passing through this death-experience was actually food that fed them in a way that they had never been fed before. Imagine them coming to realize that this feeding had delivered them from the fear and control of death. Imagine them discovering that this deliverance from the fear and control of death was like a fresh offer from the Final Mystery of a new way to live their entire lives.

So can we also accept this offer? Can we make this agreement? Can we join Jesus in the quality of life that he lived? Indeed, those who make this agreement become members of that "kingdom" Jesus spent his entire ministry announcing. We democracy-loving

modern people understandably have difficulty with “the Kingdom of God” symbol. “The Reign of Reality” might suit us better. Jesus knew of no other temporal social reign than a kingdom of some sort. He was not anti-democratic. He might even be viewed as pro-democratic. Nevertheless, he meant something very understandable by “the Kingdom of God.” In opposition to the kingdoms of this world, built on illusion and sustained by oppression and harsh violence, there is a Rule of Reality that will in the end rule over all illusion-based human constructions. This Rule of Reality is dawning in the teachings of Jesus, and in the people who hear him and follow him.

In addition, understanding the word “God” through the word “Reality” helps us understand Mark’s New Testament language. Like all biblical writers Mark uses the ancient story-form of a Creator in a parallel realm acting in this temporal realm. If we notice the text of both Old and New Testaments carefully, we can see that their use of the word “God” points to something we have experienced—that this Infinite Reality confronts us in every event that happens to us, and to our societies. We all experience this Infinite Reality as surely as we experience breathing. When we see an Old Testament passage speak of “the Lord, our God,” we need to understand that this phrase is pointing to the experience that we might verbalize as, “the Final Reality, our core devotion.” The story-form of God as an otherworldly Actor visiting us in this world’s events is narrative, fiction made up by human beings. That fiction, like all fiction, can express truth. Jesus’ “Kingdom of God” has come in our lives when we are unreservedly dedicated to the realism the Jesus event reveals. Living such realism is what following Jesus is about.

If we truly follow Jesus, we become the body of those who are the living body of Jesus here on Earth. And what specifically does following Jesus mean? *Cross and Resurrection!* Mark claims that passing through Jesus’ death, we have been fed a new life that is no longer threatened by death, a new community, a new kingdom, a new aliveness.

Do we simply see Jesus’ death as one more unfortunate tragedy? Or can we imagine how, spiritually speaking, we can eat this dead corpse and drink this spilled blood as a life-giving food?

*What might it mean for you to “eat” the death of Jesus and thereby pass beyond the fear and control of death into a quality of life that is more alive than you have ever known before?*

## **Mark 14:27-42 The Night Vigil**

"Every one of you will lose your faith in me," Jesus told them, "As the scripture says: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered'.

Yet after I have risen, I shall go before you into Galilee!"

Then Peter said to him, "Even if everyone should lose faith, I never will."



"Believe me, Peter," returned Jesus, "this very night before the cock crows twice, you will disown me three times."

But Peter protested violently, "Even if it means dying with you, I will never disown you!" And they all made the same protest.

Then they arrived at a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to the disciples, "Sit down here while I pray."

He took with him Peter, James and John, and began to be horror-stricken and desperately depressed.

"My heart is nearly breaking," he told them. "Stay here and keep watch for me."

Then he walked forward a little way and flung himself on the ground, praying that, if it were possible, he might not have to face the ordeal.

"Dear Father," he said, "all things are possible to you. Please—let me not have to drink this cup! Yet it is not what I want, but what you want."

Then he came and found them fast asleep. He spoke to Peter, "Are you asleep, Simon? Couldn't you manage to watch for a single hour? Watch and pray, all of you, that you may not have to face temptation. Your spirit is willing, but human nature is weak."

Then he went away again and prayed in the same words, and once more he came and found them asleep. They could not keep their eyes open and they did not know what to say for themselves. When he came back for the third time, he said "Are you still going to sleep and take your ease? All right—the moment has come: now you are going to see the Son of Man betrayed into the hands of evil men! Get up, let us be going! Look, here comes my betrayer!"

"After I am raised again I will go on before you into Galilee." Let us ask why this rather cryptic phrase about Galilee was thrown into this story. We might consider this question unimportant if this reference to "going before you to Galilee" were not repeated in the very last chapter of Mark's gospel when the angel speaks to the terrified women at the empty tomb. Galilee means something special to Mark. Most of his story takes place in Galilee. Why must the disciples meet the resurrected Jesus back in Galilee? And what is resurrection anyhow? Was resurrection going on back in Galilee? If we read that part of the story again would we see more clearly what resurrection means? Mark will return to these themes later.

The story about Peter's confidence that he will die with Jesus rather than flee is not a condemnation of Peter in relation to the other disciples. They all fled. The shepherd was struck and the sheep scattered. This is probably what actually happened. They all fled. Even Simon, also called Peter, the rock, a leader in the Jesus movement, fled. Indeed, when it comes to dying with Jesus, we all flee. (At least that is our first response.) Plain human fortitude does not extend into the depths of the dying that Jesus will pass through—will lead us through. No one by sheer will power takes this path. No one knows what he or she will do at this full extremity.

Soldiers quite commonly die for their country. People risk their lives in many situations. Why is following the path of Jesus so hard? The death involved here is a death to all elements of the self. The soldier can die for his country without dying to his patriotism or his honor. Parents might die for children, but they do not thereby die

to their parental bonds and parental selfhood. Let us notice that it is often easier for people to commit suicide than to die to their particular attachments, longings, or tragedies that characterize their “normal” living. Following Jesus to and through the cross has to do with dying to our attachments, our cravings, and our most cherished self-images. For all of us, this may be far harder than we think it will be.

This exchange with Peter sets up a later part of the story in which Peter actually does what Jesus predicts, disowns Jesus three times before the rooster crows twice. In that second story the crowing cock will mean Peter’s realization that he is far weaker than he thought. Peter’s story challenges us to wonder about our own strength and weakness.

Then, in Mark’s Gethsemane story, Mark tells us something extremely profound. He tells us that Jesus is a real human being with all the feelings of a real human being. Many view Jesus as some sort of super-person who does not have anxieties, or anguishes, or intense sorrows. In general, people in our culture are inclined to think it is unbecoming for our super-heroes to feel as bad as Jesus does in Mark’s Gethsemane. Even the translators of this passage have struggled to say in English words how horrific Mark is picturing Jesus’ interior state to be:

*The Revised Standard Version:* (He) began to be greatly distressed and troubled. . . . “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death.”

*J. B. Phillips:* (He) began to be horror-stricken and desperately depressed. . . . “My heart is nearly breaking.”

*The New English Bible:* Horror and dismay came over him. . . . “My heart is ready to break with grief.”

*The Five Gospels:* . . . he grew apprehensive and full of anguish. . . . “I’m so sad I could die.”

These are the feelings that occur to human beings at the full extremities of our humanity. Two of the translations imply the possibility of suicide. The other two speak of “breaking.”

Maybe that is what suicide is, “a breaking.” Anyhow, Jesus does not break. He does not commit suicide. Unlike his sleepy disciples, he stays awake to his actual feelings and to the actual horror of his situation.

When life becomes that horrific, most of us ask for sleeping pills, or we simply doze off. But Jesus asks his three most intimate associates to stay awake. Perhaps Mark is implying that Jesus is asking these three disciples to stand guard over Jesus, deemed vulnerable to committing suicide. After an hour of prayer, Jesus returns to them and

finds them asleep. He chastises them, “Couldn’t you stay awake for one hour? Be alert and pray that you won’t be put to the test! Though the spirit is willing, the flesh is weak.” Even after being chastised, they can’t stay awake. Jesus, however, stays awake to his life. And he does so without support from his closest friends.

The line “Though the spirit is willing, the flesh is weak” deserves a bit of explanation. What is “the flesh”? Flesh, in this vocabulary, meant more than muscles; it also meant mind, emotions, and desires. All these dynamics of our temporal being are weak when facing the sort of extremes faced in the above story. Only spirit is willing. So what is spirit, and is there such a thing? Spirit is not some spook from outer space. Spirit is our profound consciousness in an attitude of “Yes” to living our real lives. Spirit, my true spirit, your true spirit, everyone’s true spirit, when activated, is willing to deal with anything—any challenging circumstance, all the way up to being tortured to death.

The flesh does not go away, and the flesh remains weak. When faced with extreme challenges the flesh is not up to the task. The challenge that Jesus is facing is a challenge that only spirit can face. Spirit includes a freedom that can be accessed to deal with each situation of our lives. The Spirit is indeed *willing*. Such *willing* or active *freedom* is an aspect of every human being’s profound being—along with universal love, trust of realism, and active tranquility.

What does Mark mean “prayer” in this passage? Jesus is asking his three friends to be alert—that is what prayer means—prayer means to be alert, to be alert to that profound freedom that human beings can sometimes access to deal with whatever situation is taking place.

Jesus remained alert, and that is the core content of Jesus’ prayer. He addresses the Final Mystery *for whom all things are possible* with his affectionate form of address, “Abba” (something like Papa). Clearly Mark assumes (and Mark assumes that Jesus assumes) *that all things are possible* for this Infinite Reality to whom the freedom of prayer is properly addressed. Mark’s implication is that “Papa” will be *permitting or not permitting* this horrific destiny that appears imminent. Jesus is indeed facing death at the hands of his enemies; and, he is also facing death at the hands of the Oneness of Reality he calls “Papa.”

Clearly this stretches trusting God (trusting Reality) to the furthest extreme (to the breaking point). And what does Jesus ask of this all-is-possible God? It is a very simple request, one that all of us might make: “Let this cup pass.” The use of the word “cup” here is significant. “Cup” associates Jesus’s horror with the wine cup at the “last meal.” Jesus is saying, “Let me drink another drink than this.” This request is not weakness or selfishness; it is simple honesty: “This is not what I want.” This story gives us full permission to pray for what we want—to expect Final Reality to listen and give consideration to what we want and what we don’t want.

But Jesus' prayer does not end with expressing his wants. Jesus surrenders his wants to what God wants. This is the depth of the test that Jesus faces—to trust rather than flee from the Final Reality at this extremity of possible experience. Jesus is choosing to pray something like this: "I am clear what I want, but what Reality wants is best for me and for all involved."

The disciples were not ready to pass this test at this time in their lives. They don't pray this through. They fall asleep. They cannot inwardly deal with the situation. Jesus, however, does not give up on these sleepy friends. He rouses them from sleep and says something like this: "We're done here. Up, let us go forward. Here comes the one who is going to turn me in." This line expresses as well as can be expressed the profound courage that profound freedom is found to be.

*When have you found your life being so horrific that you could not stay awake to it?*

*How do you feel challenged by this story about the persistently praying Jesus?*

*When have you prayed through a challenge and actually faced what may have seemed to be the un-face-able?*

## **Mark 14:43-65 Betrayal to the Religious Authorities**

And indeed, while the words were still on his lips, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived with a mob armed with swords and staves, sent by the chief priests and scribes and elders. The betrayer had given them a sign; he had said, "The one I kiss will be the man. Get hold of him and you can take him away without any trouble." So he walked straight up to Jesus, cried, "Master!" and kissed him affectionately. And so they got hold of him and held him. Somebody present drew his sword and struck at the High Priest's servant, slashing off his ear. Then Jesus spoke to them "So you've come out with your swords and staves to capture me like a bandit, have you? Day after day I was with you in the Temple, teaching, and you never laid a finger on me. But the scriptures must be fulfilled."

Then all the disciples deserted him and made their escape. There happened to be a young man among Jesus' followers who wore nothing but a linen shirt. They seized him, but he left the shirt in their hands and took to his heels stark naked.

So they marched Jesus away to the High Priest in whose presence all the chief priests and elders and scribes had assembled. (Peter followed him at a safe distance, right up to the High Priest's courtyard. There he sat in the firelight with the servants, keeping himself warm.) Meanwhile, the chief priests and the whole council were trying to find some evidence against Jesus which would warrant the death penalty. But they failed completely. There were plenty of people ready to give false testimony against him, but their evidence was contradictory. Then some more perjurers stood up and said, "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this Temple that was built by human hands and in three days I will build another made without human aid.'"

But even so their evidence conflicted. So the High Priest himself got up and took the centre of the floor. "Have you no answer to make?" he asked Jesus. "What about all this evidence against you?"

But Jesus remained silent and offered no reply. Again the High Priest asked him, "Are you Christ, Son of the blessed one?"

And Jesus said, "I am! Yes, you will all see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power, coming in the clouds of heaven."

Then the High Priest tore his robes and cried, "Why do we still need witnesses? You heard the blasphemy; what is your opinion now?"

And their verdict was that he deserved to die. Then some of them began to spit at him. They blindfolded him and then slapped him, saying, "Now prophesy who hit you!" Even the servants who took him away slapped his face.

This arrest is being accomplished by the chief priests, lawyers, and elders of the religious community of which Jesus is a member. They are being assisted by "one of the twelve" most trusted persons in Jesus' life. Being opposed by anyone is painful enough. How much more painful it is to be opposed by those closest to you, those you attempted to serve, those you chose to be your companions in doing your life work. The sadness of such opposition is dramatized by Mark's picturing Judas betraying Jesus with a kiss.

Jesus did not oppose the arrest, but he did step into the situation with a challenging comment that both indicated his surrender to them and yet his criticism of their behavior. Let us look at these words, "Do you take me for a bandit, that you have come out with swords and cudgels to arrest me? Day after day I was within your reach as I taught in the temple, and you did not lay hands on me." These words imply that those arresting Jesus were cowards with respect to the crowds who revered him as a teacher of truth. So what is this opposition to Jesus about? Mark wants us to notice that it was a sneaky and irrational refusal to accept the truth spoken by and represented by this man.

Mark's narrative also implies that Jesus did a strategic act in not violently resisting arrest, but surrendering to this unfolding destiny. Rather than being killed, all the disciples ran away. Mark seems to see a double meaning in this running away. First of all it seems to be part of Jesus' action to encourage them to run away. There is no use resisting this arrest. The value here is to save the lives of those who were to continue the mission that Jesus began.

But secondly, Mark sees this running away as part of the humiliation through which the disciples are going. Perhaps Mark places himself in this story in the person of the young man who is grabbed by his clothing and who leaves his shroud behind running away naked.

"Naked" is a powerful symbol for the final humiliation through which the followers of Jesus are passing. They are powerless to do anything to stop the tragedy that is unfolding. They are robbed of their hopes that their cause is going to win the day in some obvious fashion. They are left with nothing but bare skin, with bare human life as it comes from the womb.

No disciple was there to observe the trial of Jesus. This story was written later, made up to teach a theological perspective. Two aspects of the story stand out. Those testifying against Jesus were twisting the facts and their testimonies did not agree. A weak case was being trumped up to cover the truth that the opposition to Jesus was actually a spirit malady within the religious establishment. The second feature that stands out is that Jesus does not argue with these confusing charges. He is silent. And his refusal to answer is not passivity: it is his action. His refusal to speak is his opposition to their falsity. Their case is so weak, so confused, so off the wall that it does not deserve an answer.

Indeed, the action these religious authorities are doing is a judgment upon themselves. Nothing needs to be said. An innocent man is being put to death. This is Mark's judgment upon the evil quality of these vigorous religious opponents who still exist in the world of Mark's day.

Finally, the chief religious authority questions Jesus about his view of himself. He asks Jesus if he is "the Anointed One, the son of the Blessed One." He asks him this, knowing that he and those present disagree with this assessment, and that they are going to use any positive answer against him. Indeed, they consider it blasphemous for Jesus to make such a claim.

This time Jesus does answer. He says, "Yes, I am," and he underlines his "Yes" with a firm expansion on what this "Yes" means. He attacks their entire context and he does so knowing that this attack will only confirm their opposition to him. Furthermore, this is not some sort of defensiveness or self promotion. Jesus represents a life that is devoid of self promotion. This is part of Mark's message to us: Being devoid of self promotion is the quality of the Anointed One. A life surrendered to Reality, without self promotion, is the Blessed One of Reality, the true leader of the people of God, the exemplar of a renewed humanity. Mark wants us to face this paradox: the Anointed One is a weak, powerless, misunderstood, utterly human person who is soon to be tortured to death as a disturber of the status quo.

Mark is also telling us with this story that making accommodations for the sake of persuading people does not work when your audience is committed to profound illusions. Those illusions have to be undermined, whether the hearers have ears to hear or not. Perhaps some will hear later, even if it is generations later.

What does it mean when Jesus says, "You will see the son of Adam sitting at the right hand of Power and coming with the clouds of the heaven"? Clearly "the right hand of Power" refers to God (The Infinite Power that powers all). "Coming with the clouds of the heaven" refers to the final judgment of God on all evil. For Mark "the son of Adam" refers to Jesus and this phrase also means "the coming of the true humanity" in which Mark also participates. For both the religious authorities and Mark, "the Anointed"



means the Messiah, the Christ, the final arrival of God's ultimate purpose. And "the son of the Blessed One" means being in the intimate family of God—a representative of God's new humanity.

Most scholars doubt that the historical Jesus actually referred to himself as the Christ. But most scholars do admit the possibility that Jesus used the messianic phrase "son of Adam." I am willing to guess that the historical Jesus identified with his picture of a coming humanity, and that he strove in every way to manifest this new humanity. So, I am comfortable with Mark calling Jesus the Christ, the Anointed One, the new Adam. And for our full understanding, I want to add "the new Adam and Eve," for this new humanity is clearly not for men only—however unclear and unconscious much Christian reflection has been about the equal role of women in this already here and still coming profound humanity.

Further, all this strange talk about God's Anointed One remains cryptic until we identify in our own experience with what Mark is pointing to with the word "God." Here is my carefully thought-through conclusion about biblical interpretation. The meaning of most biblical texts are indecipherable until we understand that "God" means the Mysterious Source of every reality, the Irresistible Power going on in every event, the Power experienced in the relentless movement of *time* itself. Furthermore, God is that Final Tomb into which all things are returning. All of us experience, or can experience, this Final Power in our own lives. But until we name this Final Power "God," very few verses in the Bible can be understood fully. In the biblical writings, "God" is not an idea that makes sense of things. "God" is not a person in some other realm. When the biblical writers picture God as a personal being living in heaven, we need to remind ourselves that this is story-telling theology: this is ancient poetry for talking about our experiences of that Final Mysterious Power which we all confront in our daily lives. The word "God" means devotion to this Final Mysterious Power as my God-Devotion.

Thus to be "a son or a daughter of this Power" means to be on the winning side in all of history. Being "the son or daughter of the Blessed One" means being obedient to that Power which is the Power that actually powers all things. To be "the Anointed One" means to be the manifestation of what devoted to this Final Power looks like. To be "sitting on the right hand of God" means to be a friend and ally of the Ultimate Reality, a devotee of flawless realism as our obedient dedication to our God.

Clearly, the religious authorities did not wish to grant such standing to this Galilean upstart who preached full forgiveness and acceptance to all sinners and outcasts as well as those still trapped in their upper-class hypocrisy. Jesus' calling is addressed to the outcasts and the in-group alike—a calling to a life of selfless servanthood toward all beings. In the view of the religious establishment, Jesus, understood as the Messiah, fails to fulfill their expectations with regard to that expected event. They expected the

coming fruition to be the honoring of those who, unlike the common “riffraff,” had practiced a strict observance of the law of Moses.

Jesus’ claim to be the Anointed One, the history-shattering offspring of God, did not strike these religious authorities as mere meaningless prattle; rather, it struck them as blasphemy. Jesus was using their own language against them: he was implying that they were the actual blasphemers of God. Jesus was confronting these authorities with a decision for or against the “truth” about the way life actually works. And Mark, by elaborating and including the above stories in his “good news,” is confronting us with the same choice that Jesus, in Mark’s story, is putting to the religious authorities. Are we going to live Jesus-wise or otherwise?

So we are left with this raw challenge: Are we going to be the blasphemers of the biblical God or are we going to follow Jesus in being the sons and daughters of this Infinite, all powerful “Silence” that nevertheless speaks loudly in every event? This seemingly preposterous “either-or” choice is the meaning of Jesus response to the chief priest’s question.

*When have you been challenged to stand up to people who were committed to illusions?*

*How have you experienced challenges to your own illusions?*

*What do you imagine this has to do with following Jesus?*



# Mark 15

## Mark 14:66-15:21 Humanity on Trial

In the meantime, while Peter was in the courtyard below, one of the High Priest's maids came and saw him warming himself. She looked closely at him, and said, "You were with the Nazarene too—with Jesus!"

But he denied it, saying, "I don't understand. I don't know what you're talking about." And he walked out into the gateway, and a cock crew.

Again the maid who had noticed him began to say to the men standing there, "This man is one of them!"

But he denied it again. A few minutes later the bystanders themselves said to Peter, "You certainly are one of them. Why, you're a Galilean!"

But he started to curse and swear, "I tell you I don't know the man you're talking about!"

Immediately the cock crew for the second time, and back into Peter's mind came the words of Jesus, "Before the cock crows twice, you will disown me three times." And he broke down and wept.

The moment daylight came the chief priests called together a meeting of elders, scribes and members of the whole council, bound Jesus and took him off and handed him over to Pilate.

Pilate asked him straight out, "Well, you—are you the king of the Jews?" "Yes, I am," he replied.

The chief priests brought many accusations. So Pilate questioned him again, "Have you nothing to say? Listen to all their accusations!"

But Jesus made no further answer—to Pilate's astonishment.

Now it was Pilate's custom at festival-time to release a prisoner—anyone they asked for. There was in the prison at the time, with some other rioters who had committed murder in a recent outbreak, a man called Barabbas. The crowd surged forward and began to demand that Pilate should do what he usually did for them. So he spoke to them, "Do you want me to set free the king of the Jews for you?"

For he knew perfectly well that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him through sheer malice. But the chief priests worked upon the crowd to get them to demand Barabbas' release instead. So Pilate addressed them once more, "Then what am I to do with the man whom you call the king of the Jews?"

They shouted back, "Crucify him!"

But Pilate replied, "Why, what crime has he committed?" But their voices rose to a roar, "Crucify him!"

And as Pilate wanted to satisfy the crowd, he set Barabbas free for them, and after having Jesus flogged handed him over to be crucified.

Then the soldiers marched him away inside the courtyard of the governor's residence and called their whole company together. They dressed Jesus in a purple robe, and twisting some thorn twigs into a crown, they put it on his head. Then they began to greet him, "Hail, your majesty—king of the Jews!"

They hit him on the head with a stick and spat at him, and then bowed low before him on bended knee. And when they had finished their fun with him, they took off the purple cloak and dressed him again in his own clothes. Then they led him outside to crucify him.

They compelled Simon, a native of Cyrene in Africa, who was on his way from the fields at the time, to carry Jesus' cross.

The cock-crowing story is a wondrously perceptive tale about how disquieting it is for self-knowledge to dawn upon us. As we heard earlier, Peter imagined himself a strong person who would follow Jesus into death itself. Jesus predicted that this would not be so. But Jesus' words alone were not convincing to Peter. Even Peter's own behavior did not convince him until the cock crowed a second time. Then Jesus' prediction and Peter's own behavior came together like an explosion that rocked Peter, the rock, into viewing himself differently. Sadness and tears swept over him.

As we may have experienced, such tears can express many things all mingled together and not too clearly distinguished: shame over having been so wrong about ourselves, shame over having been so weak in relation to our commitments, relief over no longer having to pretend to be something different than the weak persons that we are, and perhaps gratitude over being able at last to have an honest cry about all of these things.

This was indeed a moment of humiliation for Peter, but as some Eastern sage put it, "Humiliation is the path to enlightenment." In this case, humiliation was Peter's path to the healing that made him the true rock of leadership which he did indeed become.

In order to get Jesus put to death, the Jewish temple leaders had to get the Romans to do the grim deed, for the death penalty was reserved for the Roman government. Pilate, in disbelief, asks Jesus, "Are *you* the king of the Jews?" Pilate seems to be implying a second question, "How could a man of your humble station be considered a king?" Clearly, Pilate is feeling no threat from this so-called king.

Jesus' answer to Pilate is difficult to translate. It is not clear whether his answer means "It is as you say," or "Such words are yours not mine." I think Mark means to say to all of us that we have to decide whether or not Jesus is the King of the People of God. However that may be, Mark, it turns out, is setting up one of his secret ironies. On the one hand, we see Jesus' kingship from Pilate's point of view: for Pilate this kingship is a bitter joke about the weakness of the Jewish people. At the same time, Mark wants his readers to get the secret that Jesus is indeed King of the Jews—that is, Jesus is the foremost leader of the people of God.

Mark is a theologian: he has experienced in the events of Jesus' life and death the "holy" life of authenticity which he associates with an invisible but very real "kingdom of Final Reality." But Pilate is not interested in such theology. According to Mark's story, as Pilate listens to the fabricated charges against Jesus, he does not believe any of them or even care about them. He asks Jesus if he has anything to say about these charges. But Jesus, to Pilate's astonishment, makes no further reply. Apparently, most people in such a situation have a detailed defense. But Jesus' silence is all Pilate needs to convince him of Jesus' innocence. Pilate knows that these religious authorities have brought Jesus to him out of spite.

So Pilate has some fun with the Jewish leaders and the Jewish people. He asks them if they would like for him to release to them the King of the Jews. No, they would rather

have Barabbas, a murderous rebel. Pilate keeps after them, "So what would you have me do with the man you call 'King of the Jews'?" "Crucify him," they reply. To satisfy the mob, Pilate has him flogged and hands him over to be crucified.

What a story! And it is a story. Pilate was indeed ruler at the time, and Jesus was crucified, but whether Jesus ever actually came before Pilate, no one knows. This entire narrative is created by the early church and elaborated here by Mark to express a theological truth about messiahship.

Mark wants us to be clear that it was the so-called "moral" religious authorities who wanted to get rid of Jesus. Pilate was not able to see a threat to the Roman state. As it turned out, Jesus and Christianity became a threat to the Roman state. This threat began by bringing deep healing to singular persons—persons sick with the illusions of both Jewish and Gentile cultures. Mark's narrative treats the Judean religious establishment harshly: Mark pictures these authorities telling lies and enduring Pilate's put-downs in order to get rid of this supposed monster in their midst. Indeed, according to Mark's story, they were willing to have a murdering terrorist, Barabbas, in their midst, rather than this nonviolent teacher who challenged their religion.

Like Pilate, the guilt of the Roman world is not an open hostility toward Jesus. Rather the guilt of the Roman world is being completely oblivious to the whole thing. It does not matter to them one way or another. Pilate has his agenda, keeping the peace in a volatile and distasteful part of the world. He couldn't care less about all this religious wrangling. Pilate's unconsciousness of the importance of these deep spirit matters is Mark's commentary on the guilt of the Roman world.

*When have you observed contemporary secular and religious structures acting in ways that are similar to the ones in this story?*

*What is the most sobering truth that this story brings to the surface for you?*

## **Mark 15:22-39 Tortured to Death**

They took him to a place called Golgotha (which means Skull Hill) and they offered him some drugged wine, but he would not take it. Then they crucified him, and shared out his garments, drawing lots to see what each of them would get. It was about nine o'clock in the morning when they nailed him to the cross. Over his head the placard of his crime read, "THE KING OF THE JEWS." They also crucified two bandits at the same time, one on each side of him. And the passers-by jeered at him, shaking their heads in mockery, saying, "Hi, you! You could destroy the Temple and build it up again in three days, why not come down from the cross and save yourself?"

The chief priests also made fun of him among themselves and the scribes, and said, "He saved others, he cannot save himself. If only this Christ, the king of Israel, would come down now from the cross, we should see it and believe!" And even the men who were crucified with him hurled abuse at him.

At midday darkness spread over the whole countryside and lasted until three o'clock in the afternoon, and at three o'clock Jesus cried out in a loud voice, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

Some of the bystanders heard these words which Jesus spoke in Aramaic - Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?, and said, "Listen, he's calling for Elijah!"

One man ran off and soaked a sponge in vinegar, put it on a stick, and held it up for Jesus to drink, calling out, "Let him alone! Let's see if Elijah will come and take him down!"

But Jesus let out a great cry, and died.

The curtain of the Temple sanctuary was split in two from top to the bottom.

And when the centurion who stood in front of Jesus saw how he died, he said, "This man was certainly a son of God!"

Mark's narrative continues the "King of the Jews" theme. The soldiers dress Jesus in a purple robe and make fun of him. The placard that names his crime says, "King of the Jews." This is a joke to the Romans, and it is a blasphemous and embarrassing harassment to the Judean religious authorities. But to Mark, who is putting this story together, "King of the Jews" is simply the truth. Jesus is being crucified for being the most preeminent leader of the People of God.

To the Christian community and to potential members of the Christian community, Mark is saying that such rejection and scorn are the marks of leadership. Power and purple robes are not the marks of leadership among the people who serve the Infinite Wholeness of Being. Rejection, scorn, suffering, and death take the place of worldly power and purple robes. This proclamation is a reversal of the typical view of leadership in any age.

Among those who expected a Messiah with purple robes and power—one who would do something about Roman rule and other miseries—seeing the suffering Jesus as King, as Christ, as Messiah was an appalling interpretation. The assertion of "Messiahship" was like a slap in the face. To make this claim even more biting, Mark pictures nature (and by implication God) participating in this drama. Darkness spreads over the whole countryside and lasts until three o'clock in the afternoon when Jesus dies. And when he dies the curtain of the Temple sanctuary splits in two from top to bottom.

This curtain of which Mark speaks separates the holy of holies from the people. Only the priests enter this room. So Mark is implying that the death of Jesus, seen as King of the People of God, is opening the holy of holies to everyone. All hierarchical views of religious authority are demolished. Experiencing the holy is an intimate experience open to all—as open to everyone as dying itself.

Jesus models such an attitude toward dying. He does not avoid it or drug his way through it. He cries out in a loud voice quoting the first verse of Psalm 22 "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" and then lets out another great cry and dies. The Roman captain of a hundred men who is standing by knows nothing of splitting temple curtains or Old Testament scriptures. He simply sees the quality of Jesus' dying and exclaims, "This man was certainly a son of God." Mark seems to be implying that any awake person might see in Jesus an amazing holiness.

Mark has written a victory narrative. This is not a story of tragic demise. Its tragic elements are merely aspects of this overall drama of victory. This victory does not mean some sort of immunity from full participation in suffering, rejection, and dying.

Mark has woven into this story the emotionally moving 22nd Psalm. After “My God, my God why have you forsaken me,” the Psalm continues, “and are so far from saving me, from heeding my groans? O my God, I cry in the daytime but thou does not answer, in the night I cry but get no respite.” The soldiers casting lots for Jesus’ clothes is an allusion to the 17th and 18th verses of that same Psalm: “I tell my tale of misery while they (a band of ruffians) look on and gloat. They share out my garments among them and cast lots for my clothes.”

Jesus, like all of us at such extreme moments, experiences God as Silent, as unresponsive, as not answering our urgent pleas nor heeding our laments. Mark is implying that this Silence of God is the answer, and that our proper response is to keep on saying, “my God, my God.” To the gifts of life and pleasantness we say “my God.” And to the gifts of suffering and death we also say “my God.” And this is what it means to be God’s son or daughter.

This strange attitude of persistently saying “my God” to all the events of our lives is the power that splits the temple curtain from top to bottom. The wretched of the Earth are not excluded from the holy of holies. Their very wretchedness is a doorway to holiness.

Concerning Mark’s picture of Jesus uttering “Why have you forsaken me?”, some interpreters of this passage imply a loss of faith on the part of Jesus—that Jesus has descended into apostasy—that he has given up trusting Reality. I do not believe that is the best interpretation of Mark’s Jesus or of the 22nd Psalm. We can view Jesus as trusting God in spite of a profound ignorance of God’s actions. He asks “Why?” because he, like all other humans, is profoundly ignorant before the Final Holiness. In spite of his ignorance of Infinite Reality, Jesus trusts Infinite Reality as his God and delivers himself into God’s power. This trusting surrender is the victory into which we are all asked to follow Jesus. We can ask “Why?” and still be living in trust of Reality concerning this or that or everything.

Trust in Reality, (faith in God) includes the trust that such trust is the very best case scenario for our lives, no matter what we are facing in the moment. The Markian Jesus is a model of such faith.

*What elements of this emotionally gripping narrative affect you most?*

*What fresh perspective on the crucifixion story is emerging for you from these reflections?*

# Mark 16

## Mark 15:40-16:8 Women of the Resurrection

There were some women there looking on from a distance, among them: Mary of Magdala, Mary the mother of the younger James and Joses, and Salome.

These were the women who used to follow Jesus as he went about in Galilee and look after him. And there were many other women there who had come up to Jerusalem with them.

When the evening came, because it was the day of preparation, that is the day before the Sabbath, Joseph from Arimathaea, a distinguished member of the council, who himself prepared to accept the kingdom of God, went boldly into Pilate's presence and asked for the body of Jesus. Pilate was surprised that he should be dead already and he sent for the centurion and asked whether he had been dead long. On hearing the centurion's report, he gave Joseph the body of Jesus. So Joseph brought a linen winding-sheet, took Jesus down and wrapped him in it, and then put him in a tomb which had been hewn out of the solid rock, rolling a stone over the entrance to it. Mary of Magdala and Mary the mother of Joses were looking on and saw where he was laid.

When the Sabbath was over, Mary of Magdala, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they could go and anoint him. And very early in the morning on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb, just as the sun was rising.

"Who is going to roll the stone back from the doorway of the tomb?" they asked each other.

And then as they looked closer, they saw that the stone, which was a very large one, had been rolled back. So they went into the tomb and saw a young man in a white robe sitting on the right-hand side, and they were simply astonished. But he said to them, "There is no need to be astonished. He has risen; he is not here. Look, here is the place where they laid him. But now go and tell his disciples, and Peter, that he will be in Galilee before you. You will see him there just as he told you."

And they got out of the tomb and ran away from it. They were trembling with excitement. They did not dare to breathe a word to anyone.

A group of women who had followed Jesus saw the crucifixion from a distance. This group of women included two women named Mary and a Salome who had looked after him in Galilee. These women also learned that a man named Joseph asked for Jesus' body, wrapped it in a linen sheet, and laid it in a tomb. This Joseph was said to be a distinguished member of the ruling religious council, a man who was nevertheless open to the kingdom of God.

These two Marys and this enigmatic Joseph are not Jesus' parents. Mark does not tell a story about Jesus' birth. He does not say what names Jesus' parents had. The only reference to Jesus' family in the gospel of Mark implies that Jesus' mother and brothers consider him to be insane. Jesus' father does not appear at all in Mark's gospel. Jesus himself says that his family are those who believe his message and follow it.

Three women and a Joseph take on the family duties of Jesus' burial. The male disciples, remember, had all fled. We need to be aware that this tender touch of Jesus' burial is more of Mark's poetic narrative. Some scholars speculate that the actual body



of Jesus of Nazareth was most likely thrown on a pile along with others and eaten by the birds.

But in Mark's narrative this loyal group honor and treasure Jesus' body, taking the role of his true family. This story is important for Mark to include, because Mark views his own body and the bodies of his companions "in Christ" as the body of Jesus being honored. Their own bodies are being treasured as bodies of the living "body of Christ." If we too see our own bodies as members in the "body of Christ," then our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. Such bodies deserve an honored place. In Mark's view of things, the human body is not to be despised or considered irrelevant. The human body is the medium through which God is experienced and through which body the Holy Spirit responses move toward God (that is, toward the Final Reality that confronts us in every event of our lives). Honoring Jesus' body is honoring the whole body of Christ.

On Sunday morning the women visit the tomb intending to further honor Jesus' body with spices. They are surprised to find the stone rolled away. They are shocked to find a figure in white sitting alive in the tomb. Some have suggested that this figure is the same young man that ran away buck naked when Jesus was captured. It may be that tricky Mark is painting himself into his narrative. Mark (or you or me) is the young man fleeing unclothed from the crucifixion, but reappearing at the tomb in clothes of pure white.

According to Mark's story, these women are terrified by what they find. They experience "great fear," according to some translations. The women run from the tomb. They can't even speak. "Trembling with excitement" may not be the best translation. Why are these women pictured as apprehensive, even terrified? Most congregations of current Christian practice interpret the resurrection as a relief, a happy ending to a grim story. But such a happy-ending interpretation of "resurrection" would not make anyone apprehensive. Therefore, when the young figure at the tomb says to the women, "Don't be alarmed," this can seem strange, for why should we fear Jesus' resurrection? Why should we be alarmed by the message that Jesus is not in the tomb, but risen? Why would Mark end his gospel with this picture of women running from this tomb in terror and saying nothing to anyone?

Clearly these women were not responding with: "Thank God, we won't die." Rather, they were terrified by the appearance in their consciousness of a dread secret which seemed to them too overwhelming to even talk about. Later, of course they did find the courage to talk about it. Mark does not tell this part of the story, but he implies it.

So, what is this dreadful secret called "resurrection"? The clue verse in Mark's story is in the instruction of the young man to the women, "But go and tell his disciples, including 'Rock' (Peter), that he (Jesus) is going ahead of you to Galilee! There you will see him, just as he told you." The reader is meant to recall these earlier words in Mark's

gospel (Mark 14:28) in which Jesus says, "But after I'm raised I'll go ahead of you to Galilee."

What is this "going ahead of you to Galilee" all about? This is a key part of Mark's literary innovation. He ends his gospel with the male disciples fleeing back to Galilee, the place where in Mark's story all the wonderful healings and feedings took place. The women at the empty tomb are running too--in the same direction. Strange as it may seem to our too-literal minds, Mark is apparently saying to us, "If you want to understand the resurrection, you need to read the first three-fourths of my book again, because I have been talking about resurrection from start to finish."

In order to further understand what Mark means by "resurrection," we have to set aside our literalistic perspective and read the healing stories again, viewing each story as a potential story about our own lives. We will get to see that "resurrection" is a Spirit level happening that has something to do with having demons cast out; being lifted up from a disabling fever; overcoming a paralysis like death; having an unclean leprosy healed or a disgraceful flow of blood stopped; experiencing a rising from a sleep like death; overcoming our deafness with hearing, our dumbness with speaking, our blindness with seeing, our hunger for food with abundance; and many more wondrous events *about resurrection!*

Mark will show us how "resurrection" transforms some quite ordinary women and men (people who are profoundly sick in a spirit way) into a powerful historical movement. These same persons were unconscious of their profound greatness, but had instead become ambitious fools who are also cowards in the living of whatever authenticity they are currently experiencing. Their experience of "resurrection" released into history an alive group of people, one among whom creates the gospel of Mark.

Mark is a literary trickster: his whole gospel is a kind of secret poetry that needs to be decoded in a spirit manner. Mark's story of the physical healing of a woman with a 12-year-long disgraceful flow of menstrual blood can be read as a parable. The 12-year old girl raised from a sleep like death can be read as a parable. These stories have *resurrection* meanings. "Twelve" is a symbol for the twelve tribes of Israel. Israel is the unclean women, the dead girl, the outcast leper, the demon-possessed person, the deaf-and-dumb person, the blind person, etc. There are 12 healing stories of Israelites in the Gospel of Mark. (plus one gentile woman who eats crumbs beneath the children' table.) Israel (the 12) is being healed from her disgraceful spirit sicknesses, her incompetences, and her corpse-like existence. It is the people of God who are being healed by Jesus' words of judgement, forgiveness, and his call to rise up to an authentic life. Such is the *resurrection* that we can still enjoy and hope to participate in today.

A spirit-level transformation of the people of God and of humanity is the miraculous happening being poeticized by Mark's fantastic stories. How do such "miracles" happen? Here is the path Mark lays out for us: we follow Jesus through the *cross* of our



own complete humiliation of the false understandings of our lives and of our false expectations about the future, including what the Messiah is supposed to look like. In the tortured death of Jesus we see our own paralyzing addictions to our familiar lies about ourselves and our world. Only then can we know in our own experience *resurrection*, a rather startling experience. Yes, “resurrection” is the terrifying experience of being fully alive in spite of this thoroughgoing killing of our lies.

*Having now explored these 16 chapters of Mark’s text and the accompanying commentary, what insight about resurrection has been most memorable to you?*

*How are you experiencing this resurrection discussion emotionally?*

*What questions about resurrection remain for you?*

## Afterword

Mark's remarkably innovative narrative can trick us into noticing where humiliation is about to happen to our own lives, a happening that can be a doorway into a strange new aliveness that is truly beyond the control of death. This resurrection of aliveness renders even our suffering and death to be a lively part of our living, a resurrection of aliveness that makes all our living and dying "Living" with a capital "L."

In instructing the women to return to Galilee, Mark is asking his readers to read again the first 13 chapters of his narrative. As we continue to reflect on these earlier chapters of Mark, let us notice which of the miracle stories assist us to see something about our own journey into the realism of profound humanness, and into these strange profound-humanness-pointing symbols: cross and resurrection.

In our further dialogue with the Gospel of Mark, let us also keep in mind that this author is portraying two journeys of our own spirit life: (1) the journey toward our resurrection, and (2) the journey of the resurrected person (i.e. Jesus) in living out the resurrected life unto death. These two journeys are in one sense sequential, but in another way, both go on all the time. The journey toward resurrection is never complete, for we continue to have rude awakenings to the deeper levels of our estrangement from realism. And our resurrection living begins after our very first step into the every-present "Commonwealth" of our profound humanness. As Paul said to all his "saved by grace" communities, we "press on to the full stature of Christ Jesus."

Finally, we 21st century Christians are being challenged to learn to interpret parables and speak in parables. As we strive to proclaim this Gospel to others we need to maintain our understanding that this good news remains a secret to everyone who has not yet yielded their sense of truth to the truth of cross and resurrection. Mark intended for his followers to get this secret, and thereby for every verse of his narrative to make perfect sense. Mark assumed that some of his hearers were, like the disciples, ready for a bit more explanation than most people. But whether you find yourself right now as "most people," or as "disciples," or as "tomb visitors" with the surprised women, Mark wants you to get the secret that Mark is hiding and revealing to us.

*For those of us who are still avoiding such a radical transformation, the secret remains. The whole Gospel of Mark is a parable, a "koan" to use the Zen-Buddhist term. Jesus spoke in parables. Mark tells his whole story of Jesus as a parable. We get it or we don't get it.*

In principle, Mark's narrative reveals Good News for everyone, whatever their religious practice or lack of one. Yes, there are Buddhists who have gotten this Good News, even if they have never heard of Jesus or Mark. The same can be said of Hindus, Muslims, Jews, and any other human beings of any other religious practice or lack of religious practice. Mark's Gospel is just a human message, Good News for everyone. And hearing this secret requires nothing more than our own death and resurrection—a transformation that requires no religious presupposition. Jesus himself asserted, according to Mark, that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were among the living. Paul used

Abraham as a model of faith consistent with Paul's death and resurrection mode of living. The writer of John's Gospel has Jesus say that he "has sheep who were not of this fold." Yes, there is a Christian fold, and some in that fold have heard the secret. But this secret is about a profound humanness that can show up anywhere—at any time and place, and in any culture of understanding.

Finally, if rebuilding Christian practice is what we want to do, we will need to begin with Mark's secret; with getting this secret; with proclaiming this secret to others; and then further with organizing, training, and supporting in world mission these Markian secret lovers.

*What have been your gleanings for the living of your life from the study of this commentary on the Gospel of Mark?*

## About the Author

My name is **Gene Wesley Marshall**. I began my education as a mathematician and physicist. In 1953 I chose to leave a promising mathematics career and attend seminary at Perkins School of Theology in Dallas, Texas, where New Testament scholar Edward Hobbs introduced me to the enigmatic secrecy of the Gospel of Mark. For all those years since, I have engaged in an ongoing study of New Testament scholarship with special attention to the Gospel of Mark. Meanwhile my life has been devoted to very practical pursuits. I served as a local church pastor, a chaplain in the army, and in 1962 joined a religious order of families (the Order: Ecumenical), and traveled across the United States, Canada, Latin America, Europe, and Asia as a teacher and lecturer of religious and social ethics topics. For six years I served as dean of an eight-week residential academy that trained leadership for religious and social engagement work throughout the world. I was an activist in the civil rights revolution and an organizer of the bioregional movement. In 1984 my wife Joyce and I organized a nonprofit educational organization, Realistic Living, and began publishing journals, books, and essays. This book is my tenth book-length project. A decade or more have been spent writing versions of this commentary.