

The End & Back Again: to the beginning
Returning to the Journey with Jesus in Mark's Gospel:
Part II

Week 1: READ: Mark 3:7-35

Show Time

The lights flicker indicating that intermission is ending and it is time to return to our seats. The smokers outside the theater take their last drag on their cigarettes. The crowd around the concession stand throw back the last few swallows of their wine. People begin the rush back to find their seats. The orchestra starts to play. The house lights begin to fade as the last "excuse me" is spoken as stragglers step back into their seat. It is show time once again.

As a reminder before the curtain lifts, the Gospel of Mark is a collection of stories about Jesus, his followers and ministry. These stories retell the "good news," as communicated by the early followers of Jesus in their preaching and teaching. This is not a biography of events but an overall story of Jesus retold in a selection of individual stories. There were many stories about Jesus ministry never recorded in any Gospel. Yet the essential message of Jesus is captured in each of the Gospels (John 21:25). It's time to begin again.

A new section of Mark's Gospel (3:7-6:6a) starts with a summary of Jesus ministry (3:7-12) just as the last section (1:14-3:6) did (1:14-15). The last section concluded with the religious leaders colluding with the governing leaders to destroy and put Jesus to death (3:6). This is the initial foreshadow of the cross in Mark. The scene changes from the synagogue in the seaside village of Capernaum to the Sea of Galilee as Jesus and his crew trek back to the lake (3:7).

Big Crowds Follow Jesus (3:7-12)

The growth and strong response to Jesus' ministry is obvious in Mark. Jesus tells his disciples to have a boat ready just in case the crowds "crush him." The magnitude of response to Jesus is a literary technique of Mark paralleled later in 6:31-34. While John the baptizer had all of the people of Judea (Southern Palestine) and Jerusalem coming to him to be baptized (1:5), Jesus had crowds from Galilee (Northern Palestine), Judea, Jerusalem (similar to John) and Idumea (see Appendix 1). In other words, the stories of the works and words of Jesus had spread and now people from throughout Palestine were flocking to see and hear him.

Jesus occasionally tells those he heals to keep what he has done a secret – to tell no one. We have unclean spirits who give clues to his identity. Let's begin with the latter statement and work our way back to the question of the "secret." Like any novel or play that is going to hold your interest, there are various characters who play certain roles. The plot is never fully revealed but clues are given throughout to hold your attention. In Mark, unclean spirits or demons are from the spirit world and know spiritual things about Jesus. They function as witnesses to Jesus identity.

The first demonic witness to Jesus identity was in 1:23-25 who cried out: *What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.* This is a significant clue to Jesus identity but not as powerful as calling him *the Son of God* (3:11). The first encounter happened in the synagogue in Capernaum when Jesus silences the demon as he casts him out of the man. In Jesus' battle with the demons in 3:7-12, he commands them to be silent as well. This idea of demons knowing his identity and being silenced by Jesus is also true in 1:32-34.

Another man who had so many demons that they were called "Legion" shouted and called out to Jesus: *What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God (5:7)?* These clues find additional meaning when the centurion at the cross affirmed: *Truly this man was God's Son! (15:39)!*

The witness of the unclean spirits and the gentile Centurion stationed at the cross of Jesus all point to the universal vision of God to reach the whole world with the good news of Jesus. It is worth noting that demons "fell down before Jesus" (3:11; 5:6; 9:20). This is in keeping with the spiritual truth of an early Christian hymn recorded by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the church in Philippi, Macedonia:

*Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God,
Did not regard equality with God
As something to be exploited,
But emptied himself,
Taking the form of a slave (Incarnation),
Being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
He humbled himself
And became obedient to the point of death –
Even death on a cross.*

*Therefore God also highly exalted him
And gave him the name
That is above every name,
So that at the name of Jesus
Every knee should bend,
In heaven and on earth and under the earth,
And every tongue should confess
That Jesus Christ is Lord,
To the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:6-11).*

To kneel down is a position of subservience. In the Roman Empire, the pledge of obedience to the Emperor

was: Caesar is Lord. In the early church, the confession of faith was: *Jesus is Lord* (1 Corinthians 12:3; Romans 10:9). To whom do you bend the knee in obedience?

As important as clues are to a good mystery, the gradual revealing of secrets throughout a book keep a mystery interesting. Despite Jesus words telling people to keep his activity a secret, many made him known (1:45; 7:36; 5:20; 7:24). Jesus' demand to keep his identity secret hides this fact until after his resurrection when the early church understood the mystery of the faith: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. Empowered by the Spirit, the church began to proclaim what they had heard and seen in Jesus.

Jesus Appoints Twelve Apostles (3:13-19)

The scene shifts from the lakeshore to the mountain, a familiar biblical landscape for important God encounters. For example, Abraham offered his son Isaac as a sacrifice on Mount Moriah (what later is identified as the temple site in Jerusalem). It is on Mount Sinai that Moses talks with God and receives the Ten Commandments. Later in Mark, Jesus will be transfigured on a mountain (9:2-8). The traditional site for the Transfiguration is Mount Tabor is southern Galilee. The story of Jesus selection of his disciples does not name the mountain but it happened somewhere in the Galilee region.

At this point, Jesus has called only five people to follow him: Simon, Andrew, James and his brother John and Levi the tax collector. The selection of the twelve apostles (apostle means "sent ones," the chosen followers sent to do what Jesus himself has done to set captives free from demons and heal the sick, etc.) are those who Jesus chooses to learn from him and carry out his work into the world. Two important phrases in 3:14 are *to be with him* (a formation process of being in Jesus'

presence, watching and learning from him and all that goes with close relationships) and *to be sent out to proclaim the message* (do what they heard and saw Jesus do).

Jesus' approach is unique as a rabbi or teacher. *In the Judaism of Jesus' time it was the talmid's (student or disciple) prerogative to choose his own teacher and attach himself to that teacher. None of Jesus' disciples, however, attaches himself of his own volition to Jesus. Some try to do so but are discouraged in no uncertain terms (Mt 8:19f; Lk 9:57f, 61f). Those who do follow him are able to do so simply because they are called by him, because they respond to the command to "Follow me!" The choice is Jesus', not the disciples'.* (David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001, p. 37). Jesus initiates the call to follow. How is your following going?

Jesus initiates change on the mountain. Some the names of his disciples are changed which impacts identity. To Hebrew names are added Hellenized names to be accepted more easily in the Roman Empire. Simon is renamed by Jesus on the mountain with a Hellenized name of Peter (which means *rock*). James and John get a nick name together of *sons of thunder*. To this group seven new names are introduced. The apostle Paul whose Hebrew name was Saul said that he would do whatever it takes to see people come to faith in Jesus (1 Corinthians 9:19-23). Jesus is a Hellenized for the Hebrew name: Joshua, meaning *the one who saves*. Christ is not Jesus last name. Rather, it is a Greek name for the Hebrew title *Messiah*, the promised Savior.

While later Christian tradition adds stories of the travels, miracles and planting of the church in various regions and countries of the world, we have few stories in the New Testament about a number of the disciples. The

final apostle introduced in Mark is Judas Iscariot who is foreshadowed as the one who will betray Jesus into the hands of the Romans.

Jesus' Family and the Religious Leaders think Jesus is Out of his Mind (3:20-35)

Another scene change from the mountain near the Sea of Galilee to an unidentified house perhaps in Jesus' new base of operation in the village of Capernaum. The crowds pursued Jesus so that he and his disciples did not have time to eat. This does not say that your personal needs do not matter. Nor does it tell us that boundaries are not important. Quite to the contrary. The point of this comment is simply another instance where Mark tells of the urgent needs of people for healing, deliverance and to hear the liberating word of Christ. It creates momentum in the story and tells of the growth of the Jesus' movement. The Gospel's pace is picks up as the crowds swell in response to Jesus.

This section is a collection of stories and parables woven together in Markan style using a framing technique. The reading begins and ends with conflict stories with Jesus' family. The teachers of the law get in the conflict mix as well. In the middle of these conflict stories are a series of parables that deal with the question whether Jesus is the most powerful one (1:7 – this is what John the Baptizer said about Jesus went he baptized him.) who was sent from God. These parables are a call to faith in the one who unites, not divides.

The context finds Jesus in a house surrounded by a crowd (similar to 2:1ff) who are eager to listen to him (3:20, 32-34). Jesus and followers have so much demand from the crowds that they are tired and hungry. The family of Jesus was blind to who he was and what he was doing. A rumor was spread, which may have been

either in Jesus' day or later in the days of the early church, that Jesus was crazy – out of his mind (v. 21).

The teachers of the law came down from Jerusalem to Galilee which adds another level of conflict. They accuse him of being possessed by the ancient Syrian god – Beelzebul (lord of the house). Beelzebul developed over time into a designation for the devil. Jesus teaches that Satan cannot drive himself out nor can a kingdom or a household be strong and prevail if it attacks itself. Division weakens and destroys. Jesus possessed a God-given mission to claim and reclaim all people with the love of God demonstrated in his merciful and just actions and teachings. He called and gathered his followers around this unifying purpose and in time, sent them out to advance God's kingdom.

Regarding the unpardonable sin against the Holy Spirit, it is unforgivable only as long as one who believed continues in unbelief. God is a God of mercy and alone is judge of hearts and minds – not you or me. Ever since the heavens were tore open at the baptism of Jesus (1:10ff) and he was filled with the Spirit, Jesus acted and taught by the power of the Spirit. In fact, followers of Jesus were filled with the Spirit and its power at their baptisms (1:8). In other words, God is active on earth in the person of Jesus. Compassion was shown, lives were changed and the Jesus movement grew. God is active today in and through his followers as we teach and do God's work in the power of the Spirit.

There are parallels between the story of Jesus in 2:1-12 and in 3:20, 28-35. In both stories, Jesus is surrounded by crowds. In 2:1-12, the crowds were so large that they blocked the door preventing the friends of the paralyzed man access to the presence of Jesus through the door. Exercising determination and creativity, they opened the roof and let their friend down through the opening into the presence of Jesus. In chapter 3, Jesus mother and

family remain outside the house because of the large crowd. Using the influence of family, they send a message to Jesus that they want him to come out of the house to them. Both stories include a teaching about forgiveness.

Like others who are blind and deaf to Jesus purpose and teachings (4:11, 34), Jesus family and the teachers of the law are blind to him as well. They misunderstand his source of power by which he heals and sets the oppressed free. His family sees the chaos of the excited crowds and become concerned for his wellbeing. Jesus challenged the status quo and disturbed the comfortable. Most oftentimes, to initiate sustained change in a person's life is the result of hitting bottom or discovering a truth or way of life that is so desirable that you are willing to do whatever it takes to move in a new direction. Jesus came to change lives for good and for God.

Soul Sower

When I think about the crowds that were eager to listen to Jesus teach, it reminds me of Pastor Grimsrud, a visiting instructor at my college. On Friday nights, Pastor Grimsrud offered a Bible study on Romans in his home. I heard from a few other students how they looked forward to these Friday night studies.

Personally, it seemed rather lame to admit that you had nothing better going on than to start your weekend at a Bible study.

Curiosity got the best of me, I caved and went one Friday night. When I entered his house not only were all the chairs taken but there was no room to sit on the floor. Here were college students even lined up around the walls! There had to be at least sixty young adults sitting

at the feet of Pastor Grimsrud who was tucked away in the corner in an over-stuffed arm chair. After finding some wall space to stand, I settled in to see what all the buzz about Pastor Grimsrud was about.

Admittedly, I was jumping in to a study on Romans that had been going on for few months. On this particular night the study was on chapter 5:1-11. As a novice to Bible study I had already kept my coat at my feet just in case I got too bored and needed to leave early. Following thirty minutes of spirited singing and students lifting up prayers, the study began. Honestly, the sixty minute study flew by.

Pastor Grimsrud opened up these eleven verses to me so I could easily understand them. Having never read Romans, I discovered this section contained the implication of what Jesus did for all people in a nut shell (5:6-11). I had heard this stuff before in sermons through my parent's ears. For the first time, I was listening with my own mind and ears. As he taught, he connected each piece together like the methodical process of sewing a quilt. With needle and thread in hand, Pastor Grimsrud set out to stitch the love of God made known in the death of Christ for me. Adding one stitch at a time, he unlocked my heart with the peace of God that can be mine now because I have been *given access to God's grace* – God's unfailing favor toward me (5:1-2). He concluded his stitch work as he spoke softly about the love God wants to *pour into my heart through the Holy Spirit* (5:5). It ended quickly with a brief prayer.

I was hooked. I could not wait to come back and learn more. The other weeks I went were all equally good. However, for me there was something memorable and

magical in this first study. A simple invitation and an older pastor who opened up his own home on a Friday night sewed some life changing, truth deep into my soul. Thanks for opening up your home to a bunch of college students on the beginning of your weekends as well, Pastor Grimsrud. I thank God for you!

Discussion Questions

1. When you read about Jesus calling the twelve disciples to himself, do you see yourself being a modern day disciple? Why or why not?
2. Think of some examples of how the division of a family or organization hurt each other as they turned on one another. In what ways do you think that the witness of the church has been hurt by its division or denominations?
3. The mission of God as lived out by Jesus and his followers was straight forward: to claim and reclaim all people with the amazing love, forgiveness and new life found through faith in Jesus the Christ. In what way do you understand this to be our mission as well? Why or why not?
4. How are you participating in this mission of God? If not, what is holding you back? What is your plan to participate in God's mission this week? What does that look like?

Notes:

Week 2: READ: Mark 11:1-11

Show Time

It is time to flash forward in Mark to the reading for Palm Sunday. The last story in chapter 10 of Mark finds Jesus and his disciples on the way to Jerusalem, passing through the village of Jericho some 25 miles east of their destination. From there they journey to Bethphage, which ironically means *house of unripe figs* referring to a type of late-ripening figs that never appear to be ripe. Then it is on to neighboring Bethany, a small village $1\frac{5}{8}$

miles east of Jerusalem on the Eastern slope of the Mount of Olives (see Appendix 2).

The writer of Mark has the prophecies of Zechariah in mind as he begins to retell the story of Jesus entrance into Jerusalem. Mark captures the image of the end of the world when God will stand on the Mount of Olives on the outskirts of Jerusalem (Zechariah 14:4ff). There is also the oracle which announces that the Messiah will ride into Jerusalem *triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey* (Zechariah 9:9). These words were fulfilled in the triumphant entry of Jesus and his disciples into Jerusalem through the famed Golden Gate.

It is the Jewish festival of Passover. Jews have been streaming into the holy city of Jerusalem to celebrate the freedom won from the hand of Pharaoh. Psalm 118:25-26 was a Psalm sung during Passover: *Save us (Hosanna) we beseech you, O LORD! O LORD, we beseech you, give us success! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD...Bind the festal procession with branches* (118:27c). This Psalm was shouted as Jesus and others drew near to Jerusalem (Mark 11:9).

Eduard Schweizer, in *The Good News According to Mark* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977, p. 228) notes that at Passover time in Jerusalem there are no leafy branches. Secondly, Palm trees are not native to Jerusalem either. Some scholars suggest that Jesus entry into Jerusalem occurred in the fall of the year during the Feast of Tabernacles when booths are constructed with leafy branches for the people to temporarily live in during the celebration of this holiday. This would have answered

the question about the leaves on the fig tree in the next story (11:13). Perhaps a couple of stories about Jesus and his entry into Jerusalem have been sown together as the rest of the Passover story is in alignment with the spring of the year.

Despite these questions about the accuracy of leafy branches at Passover, the waving of palm branches on "Palm Sunday" is an ancient tradition in the church. It is festive in a way that throwing your coats on the ground does not quite live up to the fun of palms (see 2 Kings 9:13). Palm branches or not does not make or break the importance of this story. What is significant is that while the religious leaders were looking for a way to end Jesus life, *the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching* 11:18. The ordinary person was captivated by what they heard and saw in Jesus. At the same time, many of the religious leaders had a deaf ear and a blind eye to Jesus.

Soul Sower

It often takes a fresh voice or an outsider to capture our attention. An outsider could be someone new to your family, neighborhood or community. Or they could be a person from a different race, background, or tradition. Jesus was a Jewish rabbi or teacher but not part of the religious inner circle of Judaism like the Sadducees or Pharisees (see Appendix 3) with whom he often conflicted. The Good News that Jesus was sent to proclaim was fresh, challenging and transformative. This message disarmed the powerful and radically changed the lives of the often ignored, forgotten and the "sinner."

The truth of Jesus' message fed the hungry soul of the crowd.

My theological training for ministry at first threatened, then challenged and finally opened the door of my mind to Scripture. I was well prepared to lead worship, write sermons, offer pastoral care and preside at the sacraments. The first parish to offer me a call to ministry was in South Dakota. I was young and eager to move with Jody and my year-and-a-half old and new born daughters, Katie and Kelly.

While my mind was ready and excited to teach what I had been learning in my studies, my life of prayer was faint. With a prideful soul, this was not something I was willing to admit even to Jody. She saw it and mildly confronted me. I flatly denied it. "Of course I pray," I said firmly.

It all begins with God. God knew what I needed and used my interests to introduce me to Father Martin, a Russian Orthodox priest at that time who was also an American Indian teaching at Augustana University in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. One of my advisors in seminary had perked my interest in church history to study the Eastern Orthodox Church. Within the first couple of months in my first call, I looked for and found an Orthodox Church in Sioux Fall led by Father Martin. While my interest was history, Father Martin took it upon himself to give me a copy of the *Philokalia*, a collection

of spiritual writings which introduced me to the prayer of the heart and other Christian disciplines.

There was something about Father Martin that intrigued me. He was gentle and soft spoken. He slyly turned the table on me when I asked questions from my knowledge about the Eastern Church to questions about my readings from the *Philokalia*, the Jesus Prayer. He gave me a cloth prayer rope (rosary in the West) and showed me how to quiet my soul and with my breath silently pray the Jesus' prayer: "*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.*" *Pray through the rope once a day (100 knots on the rope) for a month and then come back and we'll talk*, he flatly told me. We did not talk about doctrine or history like I had planned. As a busy professor and priest, we met briefly, he asked what I had learned or observed in my prayers and sent me on my way to practice even more.

It was throughout our brief time together during my four years in South Dakota that God worked through Father Martin to reintroduce a life of prayer and to deepen my passion and relationship with God. This priest possessed a quiet but powerful Spirit that I hungered to have. His humility in the midst of a deep and profound faith was a real witness to me. At times he asked me spiritual questions about my life for which he seemed to already know the answer even before I spoke. He put me at ease in his presence and never was shocked by failures or sins. Father Martin helped me to fall in love with Jesus and forever marked my life of prayer. While our time together was only for a season, it has had a lasting impact. For that I am grateful.

Discussion Questions

1. If you have a memory of Palm Sunday, what made this day special to you?
2. Jesus came to Jerusalem for that fateful week as part of the purpose for which God sent him to live and teach among us. Jesus sent his disciples to do God's work in the same way Jesus send us out into our neighborhood in his name. Where have you seen God at work this week?
3. What do you notice as you read a few of the "go" commands in Mark: 1:38; 5:19; 10:21; 10:52; 14:13; 16:15? Discuss your observations.
4. *Hosanna* means Lord save us. What does this mean to you?

See Appendix 4 with reading for Monday – Good Friday of Holy Week

Notes:

Week 3: READ: Mark 16:1-8

Show Time

It is time for the finale in Mark's Gospel. The story begins where the burial story ends, with women. They prepared burial spices and arrived with no plan in mind how they will remove the large rock blocking the tomb. After sunrise on the first day of the week, the women discover the stone had been removed. They entered the tomb. What were they feeling at this point? Did they hesitate in proceeding? In biblical fashion, when a person encounters a messenger from God, they

respond in fear. As a result, these messengers begin with a greeting like: *Do not be afraid* (16:6). As hard as it is to imagine meeting an angel face-to-face, I know fear I'd be gripped by fear. What might shock me is if I did not mess yourself as well!

The body of Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified was gone. What had they done with his body? The person in the tomb now says the unthinkable: *He has been raised* (v. 6)! It is interesting to note how Mark uses the name of *Jesus of Nazareth* in his Gospel. It is only used three times. The first time happens when Jesus does ministry in the synagogue in Capernaum (1:21-28). Jesus meets a man with an unclean spirit. The unclean spirit cries out through the man: *What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth* (v. 24)? The second instance occurred in Jesus final healing before he enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday (10:46-52). Jesus is traveling through Jericho, about twenty-five miles outside Jerusalem. On the edge of town sits a man who was blind named Bartimaeus. When he heard Jesus of Nazareth was walking by, Bartimaeus shouted for mercy (v. 48). These two stories serve as bookends to Jesus ministry (1:21-28– 10:46-52) followed by a bookend to the events of Holy Week (10:46-52-16:6).

As if it was not unnerving enough to have watched Jesus come under attack by the religious leaders, see him arrested, publically tried, then observe his tragic agonizing death from a distance and now his body is missing from his grave? This is beyond belief. The emotions are raw. What did they do with my beloved Jesus? Am I at risk to suffer like Jesus? Who is this guy sitting here? Everything in my brain says, *Get out of here – run!*

The women were told: *Look, there is the place where they laid him* (v. 6). See for yourselves that the tomb is empty. Either someone stole his body as a nasty trick or he is risen from the dead. In Mark's most ancient ending to the Gospel, there is no visual witness to the risen Lord. This is one of the biggest leaps of faith in the Christian story. History can verify that people die. Historical tools cannot prove resurrection. This requires trust in the story of the Jesus victory over sin and death. Do you believe that this story is true? The Apostle Paul wrote: *...for we walk by faith, and not by sight* (2 Corinthians 5:7).

Mark was the first Gospel written, yet there is an older account of the resurrection of Jesus found in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. While the four Gospels agree that Mary Magdalene was one of the women who first came to discover the empty tomb, Paul gives an account of what he has heard about the days after Jesus rose from the dead: *...and that he (Jesus) appeared to Cephas (Peter), then to the twelve.*

Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time (see 1 Corinthians 15:3-8). The point is that Christ has died for our sin and the sin of the world and he is now alive and has prepared a place for us in the eternal presence of God. Yes Lord, *I believe; help my unbelief* (Mark 9:24)!

The women were given this charge: *Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee, there you will see him just as he told you* (16:7). Jesus predicted that all his disciples would desert him but they were instructed to return and regather in Galilee in the days ahead (14:28). Even though they walked out on Jesus at his moment of trial, he never turned his back on

them. Though Peter denied being a follower of Jesus on multiple instances, Jesus welcomed Peter back into his company of followers. Jesus demonstrated loyalty, persistence and faith in his followers even when they messed up. Likewise, Jesus pursues us and never gives up!

The women who had been with him at his death, burial and at the empty tomb fled in fear (16:8). The women said nothing to anyone about the empty tomb. Despite the charge to go and tell, they went and hid, keeping their lips sealed. This appears like a hopeless ending to the good news of Jesus Christ. If we put our trust in humans, as good as anyone of us may be, we will be disappointed at some point. Like Peter, we deny our Lord. Like the other ten disciples or the women followers at the empty tomb, we can be shy or fearful and keep our faith to ourselves. Ironically, Jesus never gives up on us or on his people the church.

The story still continued. Lives were changed. The church was established. God's mission to reach the world with this story of love, forgiveness and a second chance through Jesus Christ remains to be told. As followers of Jesus, this is our story to tell. The messenger of God at the empty tomb says to you and me: *Go and tell* what Jesus Christ has done for you!

Soul Sower

Kathy B has worked at Grace longer than I ever will. She worked alongside Pastor Smith, the Driver-Bishop's and now me. On my first take, I saw that Kathy had some rough edges. Her words could be rather sharp and her tone could sound angry at times. Some people have been put off by Kathy. At the same time, I discovered a

person who was fiercely loyal, always wanted what was best, and worked extremely hard and protected people she respected. I wanted to be one of those people. I am glad to say I am one of those people!

After ten years, I have seen Kathy, by the grace of God being changed. She has softened yet is still fiercely loyal and protective! It is rare to find a church secretary who will take the initiative to call up, text or email people she misses in worship. It is a rarer thing for a church worker to go on their own time and visit people in the hospital or care center. I have been blessed to watch Kathy grow in her confidence in God. With her heart she pursues the Lord and his ways. The growth I see in this woman is pretty amazing – especially because she works alongside me. Even if you are a kind Christian person, you must realize that is not always a picnic!

Life has not always been a box of chocolates (from the movie Forest Gump) for Kathy. There have been heartaches, deaths, illness and that thing we call “family dynamics.” In a church job, we walk alongside families and death often. This does not take the sting away when illness and death knocks on your own door. Through it all I see a woman of strong faith who courageously walks the walk of faith in the risen Lord Jesus.

The transformative power of the Gospel has work to do in each of our lives. The change God is accomplishing in us is a life-time process. I have seen some people who have made radical leaps of positive change but they are the exception to the rule. More commonly, we are changed gradually, one dial turn at a time. God has more work cut out to do in my life and therefore I

assume in Kathy's life as well. I thank God for what God has done and is doing in and through Kathy B.

Kathy is a soul sower. She brings her gifts to the table of this staff and helps us all to deliver our work on time. I see former staff members return to the office to continue conversation with Kathy. One of them lovingly call her "mother." Where ever we come from in life, we all innately connect with certain people with greater ease, interest and passion. Kathy is a soul sower in the lives of a number of people who God has put on her heart. It's a beautiful thing!

Discussion Questions

1. What captured your attention when you read Mark 16:1-8?
2. Women play an important role in the resurrection story. What does that mean to you?
3. As you read vv. 7-8 and know that Jesus sends us as well to go and tell about him to others, what are your fears? Is anything holding you back? If so, what? Why?
4. God works in spite of our failures and shortcomings. The women said nothing yet the church of Jesus Christ was born. Someone talked! Do not be shy in answering: How have you seen God use you as a witness?

Notes:

Week 4: READ: Mark 4:1-20

Show Time

Jesus taught people to see life through the lens as God intended life to be lived. It is a life lived by faith in God and attentive to others. Jesus taught by his words and actions. One of his most common ways of teaching was using a format called a parable. A parable is a short story used to teach a spiritual or ethical lesson. The gospels record forty-one parables of Jesus, eight of which are found in Mark's gospel.

One of the most important teachings of Jesus in Mark is the Parable of the Sower. It could more importantly be called, the Parable of the Four Soil Types. There is a strong connection between the call of Jesus' for his followers to fish for people (1:17) and to sow the Word of

God into the lives of others (4:14, 20). This call from Jesus is to you and to me as well!

The setting for this parable is at the Sea of Galilee. Such a large crowd gathered to listen to Jesus that he got into a boat so that they could hear him speak. The original parable (4:3-9) begins and ends with the call to pay attention, to listen. The farmer scatters the seed on the hilly field which has a walking path to access it. Because of the hilly terrain throughout Galilee, the farmer's fields had rocky ground. Some of the tired and poor soil was infested with thorny patches. The dream of every farmer is fertile, well-draining, good soil. In the end of the parable, the seed scattered on the path, the rocky and the thorny ground does not yield any fruit. However, the good soil gives three different yields: thirty, sixty and a hundredfold yield. Three soils with no yield and three productive yields from the good soil. Do you notice the pattern?

Jesus speaks a profound spiritual truth how God's Word takes root in the lives of people. He uses a story of agrarian life that would be well known to the people in his audience in Galilee. If Jesus were speaking to crowds of people at Wriggley Field in Chicago today, his story would shift to a more effective urban and suburban message. Jesus came to tell the good news of the kingdom (1:15). This meant effective story telling which connects with people. The growing crowds that gathered to hear Jesus' message tell you that his preaching and teaching was life changing.

What Jesus did not do was write or sell books, CD's or teach a message of prosperity – how God want to make you wealthy. He never built a church building nor wrote

a constitution for his organization. There were no Robert's Rules in Jesus organization and yet somehow he managed to get decisions made and trained a number of common lay people to carry his message forward. Jesus launched a movement to grow the kingdom of God on earth. Jesus built this movement around hard working people, many of whom were very poor. He taught his followers to care for others, especially for the sick, widows and the suffering. Jesus responded to the needs of ordinary people who God loves so much that he ran into problems with the establishment and the well organized and highly structured religious community. The problem actually did not originate with Jesus but came from the establishment who felt threatened by him. Jesus did not seek their permission or blessing but rather followed the guidance of the Spirit. Doors opened for Jesus to give compassion to the hurting and neglected. What was Jesus thinking?

The church resembles the church Jesus intended when it rolls up its sleeves and works to help others with acts of compassion. What does this look like? An act of compassion happens when we visit people in jail or prison (Matthew 25:36, are we visiting Jesus in jail?). When we cook meals, mow lawns, and blow snow for our ailing neighbor, we are serving Jesus and as well as serving like Jesus. When we work for what is right and just, listen closely to someone different than ourselves and genuinely seek to understand, whether we recognize it or not, we are in the presence of Jesus. When our black and Latino neighbors are hurting in our community and we stop judging and start praying for them, we are moving in the way of Jesus. For you see,

Jesus is all about love and making room for love to find a way to show itself.

Jesus speaks today, as he did originally and says: Listen! This is the same word that ends the parable: Listen! It is a bracket that tells you just how important the words within the brackets are to any who will pay attention and take action on them. Listening is more than reading or hearing words. Listening welcomes the story to touch our mind and heart. It takes hard work to take notice in our culture when we are bombarded with so many messages. Pay attention to what Jesus is saying to your heart.

The Path. So who is Jesus talking about when he speaks about the resistant path? These are the spiritual lives that have hardened to God and/or the church. For example, George left the faith and the church after his eight year old son died followed by his wife two years later, both battled cancer. George's family returned to the Christian faith and the church when his son was only a few months old and was being treated for brain cancer. This was a huge step for George who had been away from practicing faith since he was ten. George was kicked out of Catholic school for punching the nun who had punished him by locking him in the broom closet. After his wife died, George said: *So this is the kind of love God has for me? No way. I am through.*

Some people have been hurt by the church. Others, have not fit the mold of how the church thought they ought to live. Still others have felt judged by the Christian message as it has been proclaimed from pulpits, on television, or social media. Women have had a challenging road to find a place in a male dominant

church. People of color have been excluded from the white church historically. Gays and lesbians together with transgender individuals feel unwelcome in many churches. The point is, when people feel judged by others, they know they are not welcome. It takes multiple, genuine invitations for anyone, but especially those who have been hurt, to know that they are truly welcome.

The path has been created by the decisions of the Church, for example the divide that grew during the Reformation and the Renaissance. Science was denounced by the church when people like Galileo and Copernicus made new discoveries about our universe. It challenged the teaching of the Church. Rather than listening, it was easier for the Church to reject and denounce new thinking. It shocks me to read that more than 50% of Americans still think that evolution is not true. Jesus never intended that we ignore the mind that God gave us. If God is God then science will not disprove it. Science helps us better understand and improve the life God has given us to live. We must heal the divide between faith and science.

Only God can till the path, if the people whose hearts are hardened to faith are ever to come to believe. Our role is to show God's love and not condemn or judge. We are to pray and not lose heart. Love wins in the end.

Rocky Ground. The key to overcoming shallow soil is to move in worship from the bleachers as an audience to the floor as participants. When our attitude in worship moves from "entertain me" to "I am here to worship God," we become participants. The church was sent to make disciples actively participating in the work and ministry of

God. An hour of worship cannot sustain nor grow the life of a follower. Imagine a parent trying to raise a child for one hour a week? Or, what could a teacher teach if they only had a student in class for one hour weekly? Worship is our time to celebrate God in song and prayer, the sacrament and the preaching of the Word. It is a time to give our devotion and our lives back to God.

These Bible studies are a serious commitment to growing deeper in Christ with each other. They are designed to challenge our thinking, our faith and our actions. We hope to hear the message of love and the call to serve God as we serve and give witness to our neighbors. The rocks in our lives are all of the distractions that keep us from going deeper into the presence of God. It takes time for a farmer to remove the rocks from the field each spring to make for a better harvest. This is back-breaking hard labor. Ignore the rocks and know for certain that they will not go away. Seek to remove distractions so that you can hear the word with others, and you will see spurts of new growth in your life of faith.

Thistles. These are problems and challenges that erupt in our lives. There are circumstances and changes in our lives that can steal our joy and rob our faith because of questions unanswered and feelings that disturb us. What do I mean? It could be a job that is lost due to downsizing, a poor economy, a business that cuts cost by hiring younger workers. It could be a failed marriage, an unexpected illness, the death of child, or an accident that leaves a loved one paralyzed. The list goes on and on. Some think to themselves: *If God cared or if God existed, this would never happen.* Or, *God did not answer my prayer.* The next thought might be: *I am out*

of here, in relation to faith in God and participation in a church community.

The reality is the less you are connected in a church and/or live your faith, the more likely it is that thistles can crowd out and kill your faith. This is what happens in the farmer's field. The seeds the farmer plants are all equally able to sprout, grow, and produce a harvest. What is different for each planted seed is the quality of the soil. If the soil is good and healthy, it will grow with sufficient fertility, water and sunlight. It is harder for seeds to sprout and grow in rocky soil. Remove the rocks, fertilize, water and a good yield can be harvested. Thistles need to be rooted out. Let them grow and they will kill the plant.

The goal is good and productive soil that produces other believers because of our service and witness. The good soil exercises its faith muscles. Like Jesus said, good soil knows the value of listening and applying the Word of God. It produces of itself, 30, 60 and 100 fold followers of Jesus just like themselves, as they disciple others. This is a simple, powerful and challenging message to the church of Jesus Christ. *Let all who have ears to hear, listen!* (v. 9).

Soul Sower

My dad farmed his whole life in Minnesota. He worked the land his grandfather pioneered in the early 1860's. While dad enjoyed most every aspect of farming, he was especially fond of planting season. He loved opening up the ground after the snow had melted and preparing it for seeding. After planting was finished each spring, dad would pray, asking God's blessings on the growing season.

Like many farm kids in his generation, my dad and his siblings walked a couple of miles to country school each day. He had one particular teacher who he credited with sowing a love for God's Word in his life. She taught the class a prayer to use before reading Scripture and it went like this: *Divine Instructor, gracious Lord, be Thou forever near; teach us to love Thy sacred Word and view our Savior there. Amen.*

My mom and dad sowed a love for reading Scripture in my life at a very early age. There were very few evenings before going to bed that we did not first gather as a family for devotions. We always started with the prayer my dad had learned as a kid. I did not always enjoy devotional time because it meant coming in early from playing outside. At other times I was tired and just wanted to go to bed. While I do not recall any particular devotion we read, this prayer and a love for the Word took root in my life. Thanks, Mom and Dad!

Discussion Questions

1. What are your earliest memories, reaction and response to God's Word?
2. The funny thing about the response of the four soils to the Word is that we may have been any one of these different soils at other times in our life. Is there a time where you resisted the Word like the path; or responded quickly and when life got hard your interest in Scripture withered; or the busyness of life or other interests like wealth choked out your passion for the Word?
3. Let anyone with ears, listen or pay attention. How or when do you listen best? When you are listening best, what do you hear?

4. How do you sow the Word in other people? Or, what would it look like if you were sowing the Word in another person? Who are you going to share the love of Jesus with this week?

Notes:

Week 5: READ: Mark 4:26-34

Show Time

A parable is a teaching story that uses comparison to emphasize its point. In the parable of the seed that grew secretly (vv. 26-28), this story compares the kingdom of God with the harvest. The farmer who plants the seed has absolutely nothing more to do with the sprouting or the growth of the seed. The farmer plants the seed, spreads manure on the ground and prays for rain or in some cases irrigates the field. There is a lot of science and technology that goes into American farming today. Studies of the soil, history of harvest, and a spreadsheet on cost are all reviewed and decisions are made throughout the winter. While a farmer with means can irrigate a field to provide adequate moisture, no farmer can anticipate nor eliminate too much rain. Nor can a farmer effect the amount of heat in June, July or August,

nor the first sign of frost in the fall. There are still many factors that farmers cannot control because they cannot control the weather.

Seeds sprout when they swell in moisture and when the soil is warm. Farmers plant the seed but they do not cause seeds to sprout nor grow. They can try and predict when the conditions are right for sprouting but if a seed sprouts or not, it is beyond their control. It is like popcorn seeds popping. You can provide the right temperature and the right amount of oil but rarely have I ever seen every popcorn seed pop!

Jesus did not tell the parable to teach farmers about farming. Jesus is speaking in a metaphor about the planting of the seed of the Word of Jesus in the hearts of people. As we go about our business, off to work, to school, to the store, or working around our yard in our neighborhood, we are Jesus' hands, feet and voice in this world. Every person we encounter is impacted in some way by our attitude, what we say or do not say, and how we act. If we see ourselves full of the love of Jesus and his love for the world, it will all be good. Like the farmer who spreads the seed – like grass seed that is broadcast on the soil, we broadcast the love of Jesus. Sometimes it is a shallow seed cast out like a smile, kind word, holding a door open, or picking up your neighbors mail for them while they are away. Other times, it may go a little deeper into the soil like watching your neighbor's child while they run an errand, or visiting your neighbor in the hospital, or listening to them as they share a heartache in their lives.

There are those special moments when it is just right for sowing the love of Jesus in a conversation. These are

the times we share the hope we find in Christ who never gives up on us when our neighbor is discouraged. Or the times we risk to offer a prayer for a neighbor who is hurting, filled with worry or sick. We do not manufacture these special moments. Rather, the Lord opens the door. If we walk through opening in faith, we discover this sacred space shared with another human. If you have not had that experience before this could sound threatening. I assure you as Jesus assured his disciples that we need not worry about what to do or say. God will nudge and guide you. It is nothing short of a faith adventure. Every time I have this holy moment with another, I walk away amazed and blessed.

Whether it seems to be a shallow seed cast out in love or a deeper moment with another, this parable tells us that God alone gives the growth. The Apostle Paul wrote: *I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth*, (1 Corinthians 3:6). It is not our role to worry or feel responsible if there is any response of faith to the kind word we give, the help we share or even the witness and prayer we offer. We scatter the seed of the love of Jesus but God alone can activate the seed of faith. We are sent to do our part but the result is in the hands of God.

In another parable of Jesus, we learn things do not always appear the way they are or will be. This is a key to understanding the parable of the mustard seed (vv. 30-32). Do not judge the size of a tree by the size of its seed. Take for instance a pumpkin seed. They are basically the same size from one pumpkin to the next. As a kid, I got to flip through the pages of the Gurney seed catalog that came in the mail each January from Yankton, South Dakota. We all got to make a few

selections of seed we each wanted to plant. My favorite part of the garden was the pumpkin patch. There were pumpkins that would be white or orange, 20-30 pounds and then the most exciting of all, the pumpkins advertised to grow big, very big. One of my pumpkins grew to be over 100 pounds! I could not tell any difference by looking at the size of the seed which pumpkin was going to grow to be extra big. In fact, in the first six weeks after planting there was little difference in plant size among my pumpkins. But in time, it became clear which pumpkin plants came from which seed.

Jesus is teaching once again about the kingdom of God. There are two aspects to the kingdom of God: the perfect kingdom that will come at the end when Jesus returns. Teachings about being prepared for heaven has been a strong message in the past. As loved ones die, eternal life becomes very important to families. Jesus says that he has gone to prepare a place for us and will come again and take us to himself (John 14).

God cares about this world and life on earth as well. For God so loved the cosmos...(John 3:16). God loves and cares about everything in creation, not just people. God created a balanced system. If we mess up creation by polluting the water, land and air, we mess up life for every living thing. We not only make creation sick but we make ourselves sick as well. We are finally beginning to understand the importance of this balance for life and health.

Some of Jesus' parables are about the kingdom to come and being watchful and ready for when he returns. The parable of the mustard seed is about the kingdom Jesus

initiated on earth. The seed is small, just like the church that began with the first few followers of Jesus. This unarmed band of followers were pretty insignificant. Because of the truth of this movement as taught by Jesus and empowered by the Spirit, it grew and became a force for good and for God in this world.

In time this tree grew to have branches that provided a home for all the birds of the air. Each bird family adding their own color and song to worship God and serve others. The parable reflects the prophetic message of Ezekiel: *All the birds of the air made their nests in its boughs* (31:6) and possibly the apocalyptic message of Daniel 4:20-21. Do not underestimate the power of God to grow new branches in the tree that God loves called the church. Even if the tree appears old and dying, the pruning of the old branches can by the Spirit's work sprout new growth. If the church is focused on the mission that God has given the church to accomplish in any given community, God will give life. When the church is consumed by its own issues it begins to die. Ironically, it is only as the church gives itself up to serve others in mission, that life is restored. This is the way of Christ.

Soul Sower

I can no longer tell who invited me to attend a small meeting of the *World Mission Prayer League* (see www.wmpl.org) but I can say that this pan-Lutheran organization seeded my heart for mission. Based out of Minneapolis, Minnesota, this organization prays for, seeds mission workers to and supports the efforts to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ in fourteen specific countries (6 in Asia; 3 in North America; 3 in South America and 2 in

Africa). Prayer concerns for unreached people groups in the world as well as service opportunities are available on the WMPL Web site.¹

From the very first group meeting of WMPL, my heart was moved as we listened to a couple of letters that were read that told stories of what God was doing in Bolivia and among the Santal people in India. Our meeting time included Bible readings of the mission activity of the early church, correspondence from mission sites with specific prayer requests. The majority of the time was spent in prayer for mission. When the seeds of International and domestic mission were planted in my heart and mind, I found myself pursuing books about mission activity and the courageous and passionate people involved in that work.

As internship assignments were being considered in my third year of seminary, I worked with the Mission Board of the denomination to reopen Cairo, Egypt as a possible internship site. While Jody and I interviewed for the internship, due to unrest in Cairo at the time, they decided to send a single person rather than a married couple. We considered applying for a call by the Mission Board in my senior year for an opening in Israel but due to a difficult pregnancy, we decided to be placed for a call in the US. After four years in rural South Dakota, I interview and was called as a mission developer of a new site in Upstate New York. Prayer

¹ In addition to WMPL, the ELCA offers Prayer Ventures with monthly downloaded daily prayer requests. See: <https://www.elca.org/Resources/Prayer-Ventures> . On our synod (The Northern Illinois Synod) Web site are daily prayer concerns: <http://nisynod.org/prayers/> as well.

and spreading the message of God's love and grace through Jesus Christ have deep roots in my heart.

In 1999, I was called back to the Midwest to work at our Churchwide Offices of the ELCA as the Associate Director of Prayer Ministries, a newly developed position at the time. This was a rich time of creativity and discovery as it was my honor to learn from and see what God was doing across this church and with our partners in places like Germany, Madagascar, and Ethiopia. For several years I served as the Director of the Evangelism Strategy for the ELCA before becoming the Director for Evangelism. In 2006, a call was extended from Grace Church in Loves Park, Illinois which brought me full circle back to parish life. In every step of the way, the seed of prayer and work of mobilizing people to share the story of Jesus as we serve has colored my world. The work and the prayer continues.

Discussion Questions

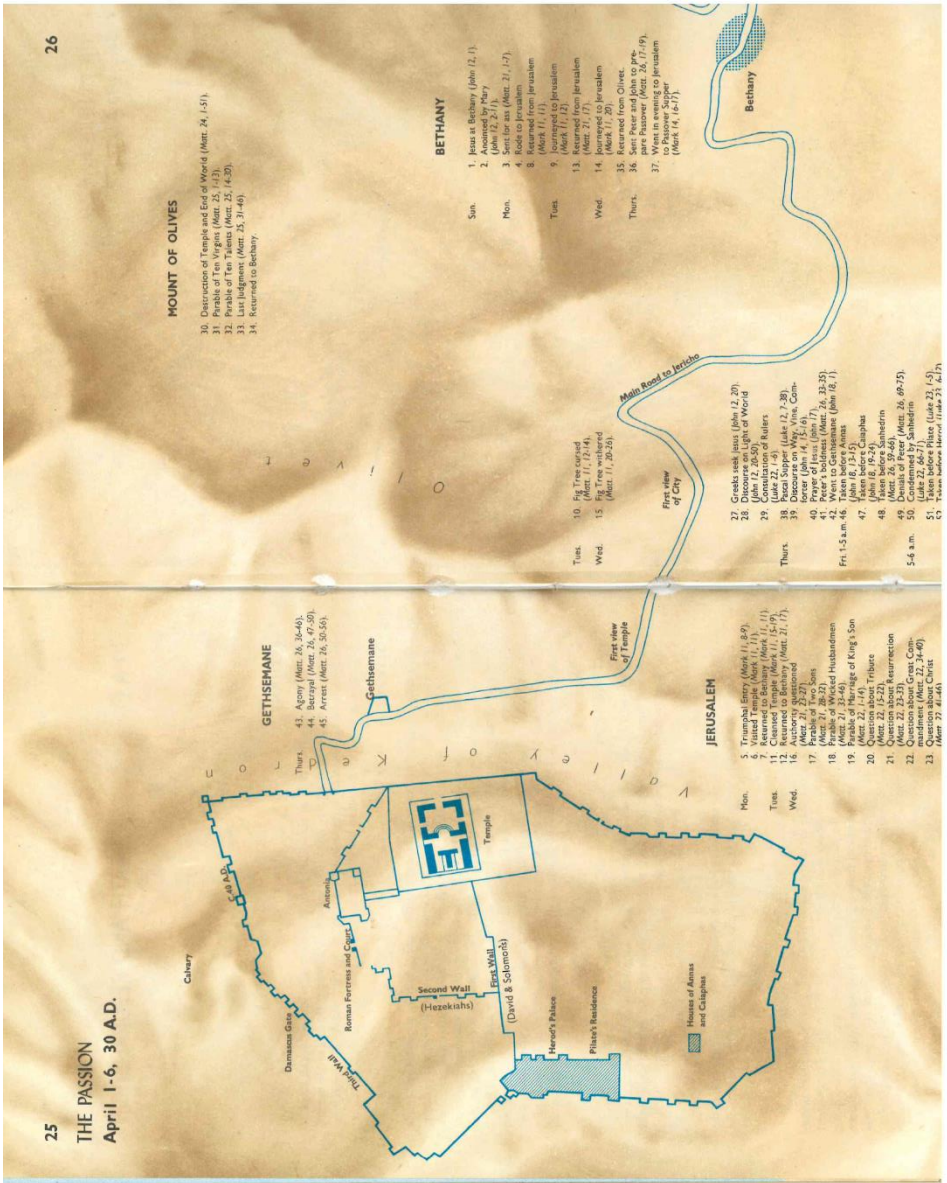
1. What is God's role in the parable of the seed growing secretly? What is our role?
2. What did you find most helpful in this parable?
3. What is our role in the growth of the kingdom of God on earth? What does that mean for you?
4. What questions still remain for you as you think about these two parables?

Notes:

Appendix 1



Mark Allan Powell, *Introducing the New Testament*,
Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009, p. 76.



John Stirling, An Atlas of the New Testament, London: George Philip and Son, LTD, 1966, P. 25-26.

Appendix 3

Box 1.3

Pharisees and Sadducees

Pharisees	Sadducees
generally middle class	mainly upper class
power base outside of Jerusalem	power base in Jerusalem
closely associated with synagogues	closely associated with the temple
primarily teachers and scholars	primarily priests
theologically committed to maintaining Israel's relationship with God through obedience to the law	theologically committed to maintaining Israel's relationship with God through the sacrificial system
accepted as scripture most of what Christians call the "Old Testament"	accepted only the Torah (Pentateuch) as scripture
believed in resurrection of humans to a life beyond death	did not believe in resurrection to a life beyond death
recognized existence of spiritual beings, including angels and demons	skeptical of beliefs regarding different spiritual beings
regarded as social moderates who objected to imposition of Roman authority but did not advocate armed revolt against the Roman powers	regarded as social conservatives who sought collaboration with Roman authorities in ways that would ensure their own place in the status quo
prominent Pharisees: Shammai (strict interpretations of law); Hillel (more lenient interpretations of law)	prominent Sadducees: Caiaphas and Annas, identified as high priests during the lifetime of Jesus
in the New Testament, they argue with Jesus over matters of law, but are only peripherally connected to the plot to have Jesus put to death	in the New Testament, they are the primary architects of the plot to have Jesus put to death
the primary forebears of modern Judaism	disappear from history after the disastrous Jewish war with Rome in 66–73 CE

Mark Allan Powell, *Introducing the New Testament*,
Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009, P.21

Appendix 4 Notes for Holy Week

- Monday of Holy Week READ: Mark 11:12-19
Whether or not the curing of the fig tree that was not in season was historical or simply symbolic of the unfruitfulness of Israel, it was set as a framework by Mark around the story of the cleansing of the temple by Jesus. The use of figs as a judgement of God spoken by the prophets had a precedent: Jeremiah 8:13; Micah 7:1; Hosea 9:10, 16. The back side of the story is found in 11:20-21. This is the only miracle that Jesus performs in Jerusalem and by cursing of all things!

In looking at the story of the temple cleansing (15-18), it is unlikely that Jesus disrupted everything in the temple, otherwise the sale of lambs for sacrifice would have been stopped (see Appendix 5). In fact, the temple court was so large that *a single merchant once offered 3,000 sheep for sale in the court of the temple* (Schweitzer, p. 231). While the warning of the destruction of the temple (the temple was destroyed in 70 CE by the Romans) which Jesus referred to as his body, was moved to Mark 14:48. It rightfully fits in this story. Zechariah 14:21c was a prophecy about the end of trade in the house of the LORD saying: *And there shall no longer be traders in the house of the LORD of hosts on that day.* The cleansing story also has prophetic roots in Jeremiah 7:11 and as a *house of prayer for all nations* in Isaiah 56:7.

With Jesus as the fulfillment of the sacrifice for sin, the role of the temple changes to a house of prayer. As Mark 13:10 says: no longer is the Good News of God only for the Jews but now for all nations. Jesus cleansing of the temple, together

with the anger expressed at the unfruitful fig tree as a symbol for Israel, Jesus opens the door for the gentiles to access the presence of God.

- Tuesday of Holy Week READ: Mark 11:20-13:37
The concluding verses about the cursing of the fig tree (11:20-21) was just dealt with above. Mark 11:22-25 is an additional teaching on prayer that is used earlier in the other gospels (Mark 11:22 – Matthew 17:20; Luke 17:6. Mark 11:24 – Matthew 7:7; Luke 11:9; and Mark 11:25 – Matthew 6:14-15). This indicates that different gospel writers organized the stories and teachings of Jesus to fit their own communities. The teaching about prayer is very similar from one gospel to the next. Its placement in the gospel is not what is significant but rather the teaching of Jesus about prayer.

Jesus responds with words of wisdom in 11:27-32 by turning the question of the religious community about the origin of his authority (v. 28) into a question he asks about the baptism of John (v. 30) which traps them. Unable to respond to Jesus' question, a potential conflict was avoided for the moment. The building tension of this final conflict with the religious authorities is palpable.

In 12:1-12, Jesus tells the parable of the wicked farmers, the only allegory in Matthew, Mark and Luke. The servants that are sent represent the prophets of the Old Testament and the son of the owner represents Jesus. The tenants are the Jews and "the others" in v. 9 are the gentiles. The quote in vv. 10-11 is from Psalm 118:22-23. Christ is

the cornerstone upon which the church will be built: see Romans 9:33; 1 Peter 2:6-8; Acts 4:11; and Ephesians 2:20.

Another trap by the religious leaders is sprung on Jesus in 12:13-17. It is not always what is said but rather its intent that matters v. 14. Kind words were spoken only as a set-up for Jesus. Jesus answers the question with his own questions. Using a coin as an illustration, Jesus wisely answers and outsmarts them.

In a similar fashion, the Sadducees lay down the next trap about the resurrection from the dead (in which the Sadducees did not believe). Quoting Moses in Deuteronomy 25:5, they try to catch Jesus in a question about marriage in heaven. Jesus responds by accusing them of not knowing neither the scriptures nor the power of God v. 24. God is God of the living and therefore people who have died like Abraham prove that they are alive in God vv. 26-7.

A final question was asked of Jesus by a scribe of the law in 12:28-34. The question was about which commandment is greatest. Jesus quotes the *shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4-5 in v. 29 and then replies with the Great Commandment to love God with our whole being and a second to love our neighbor. These commandments replace the temple and its system of sacrifice. This is to be our way of living. To this religious leader, Jesus tells him that he is close to God's kingdom v. 34.

In 12:35-37, Jesus teaches in the temple that the Messiah is more than simply a descendant of King

David as he quotes from Psalm 110. Again, the large crowd listens delightfully. The crowd could hear and understand what the deaf ears of the scribes missed. Next, Jesus upbraids the scribes for their pride and abuse of their office to rob the poor while offering long prayers as a smug act 12:38-40.

The poor widow who gave all of her coins in the treasury of the temple becomes an example of her trust in God to provide 12:41-44. It also is in keeping with the teaching of Jesus about leaving everything to follow him. While we do not have to literally give everything nor leave everything to follow, there can be only one God or priority in our life. With a surrendered heart and God at the center of our life, we are to follow Jesus and use our life as a witness to others and enjoy our resources as we share them generously to bless others.

The Little Apocalypse in chapter 13 tells of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE. This chapter has been abused by groups of Christians focused on the end times. There are some key words to pay attention to in this chapter: watch out for people who try and lead you astray in Jesus' name vv. 5-6. Actually, since as long as there has been history, wars, earthquakes and famine have existed. As followers of Jesus, like many over the last two millennia, we may suffer for our faith v. 9. The Good News of Jesus is to be shared with all people v. 10. God will speak through you by the power of the Holy Spirit – trust God v. 11.

Pray v. 18, do not be surprised by suffering v. 19, keep alert v. 23, 35, 37, the end will come and I will appear in the clouds v. 26, no one knows the day nor the hour when this will happen v. 32, and even though heaven and earth will pass away, my words will remain v. 31. Hold on to your faith, be ready and vigilant. God created everything in the beginning and God will rule in the end. Do not be afraid. Trust God.

- Wednesday of Holy Week READ: Mark 14:1-11
In what we have seen before in good Markan fashion, vv. 1-2 and 10-11 form a framework around the story of the anointing of Jesus in vv. 3-9. Just like in 11:18 as a response to the action of Jesus in overturning the money changers tables and driving out the sacrificial animals from the temple area, the chief priests and scribes were at work deviously plotting to have Jesus killed 14:1. *The chief priests here probably represent the priestly aristocracy, members of the noble families from which the high priest (Caiaphas that year, see 14:53ff) was selected...That the scribes (were) dependent on Temple revenues and subordinate to the priests who controlled the Temple is certain...the scribes are located mainly in Jerusalem and allied with the chief priests,* (Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007, p. 640). The insertion of the anointing story in the middle of the plot to kill Jesus suggest that all was happening according to a bigger plan, as demonstrated by this symbolic act (see John 12:1-11).

In a prophetic act to prepare Jesus for his impending death, a woman (Mary, the sister of

Martha and Lazarus according to the account in John's Gospel) boldly enters Simon the leper's house and anoints Jesus head with an expensive ointment of nard (equal in value to an average annual income) which was used to perfume the body of someone who has died. Meanwhile, other dinner guests put up a stink about the actions of this woman who wasted money in anointing Jesus. In a pious act, critics questioned why this nard was not sold and the money used for the poor. Jesus replied, *you will always have the poor with you but you will not always have me* v. 7. The whole world will recall her kind and loving action toward Jesus.

- Maundy Thursday READ: Mark 14:12-51
In a mysterious, almost legendary way, Jesus sends two disciples (Peter and John according to Luke 22:8) to follow a man who meets them in Jerusalem carrying a water jar who will lead them to a room prepared for them to celebrate Passover. Did Jesus prearrange this space and how exactly was the timing set for the two disciples to meet up in the city of Jerusalem with the man and the water jar? At the very least it is a curious story somewhat in line with the mysterious arrangement of the two disciples Jesus sent into the city to fetch a never-ridden colt that was tied up somewhere so Jesus could ride on it. Again, very sketch details of a prearranged meal.

There seems to be two traditions woven together in 14:12-16 and 14:17-25. The *disciples* are mentioned twice in vv. 12-16 (vv. 12, 16). They are referred to as *the twelve* in vv. 17-25 (vv. 10, 17, 19).

43). If Jesus sent two disciples to make preparation in Jerusalem, did they come back to become part of the twelve who went to the room later that day (v. 17)? If Mark 14:12-16 is accurate, the meal in 14:17 at evening time would make this a Passover meal. There is no mention of the eating of lamb in vv. 22-25. Additionally, it is possible but yet curious that Jesus would be arrested and tried on Passover by the high priest, the elders, and the scribes (14:53). Were they not observing the Passover? The Gospel of John perhaps correctly indicates that Jesus died on day of preparation for Passover, when the Passover lambs were killed (see John 18:28; 19:14).

In vv. 17-21, the tension in the story grows as Jesus reveals that he will soon be betrayed by one of this chosen group. *Is it I* becomes the question around the table in v. 19. With the breaking of bread Jesus says *Take, this is my body*. Jesus took a cup, gave thanks, and they all drank from it. It is interesting in Mark's account that after they all drank from the same cup he said: *This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many* v. 14.

In Passover fashion, they sang a hymn v. 26. On the Mount of Olives, Jesus confronts them with a prediction that they are all going to go their own way after this sacred and intimate meal they just shared. In true Peter fashion, he says he will remain true v. 29. The fact of the disciple's desertion fulfilled a prophecy from Zechariah (13:7). Mark confirms the truth that they all fled, 14:50. Jesus possesses foreknowledge of Peter's behavior where he will be confronted three times

about his being a follower of Jesus and each time deny it (14:30-31 and fulfilled in 14:66-72).

While Jesus said that Peter would deny him three times, he also confronts Peter, James and John, Jesus' inner circle of the twelve, three times for not praying as he asked but rather sleeping in the (Garden: John 18:1) place or field called Gethsemane (14:32-42, the name meaning *oil vat*), somewhere on the Mount of Olives though it is impossible to locate as the olive groves were destroyed by the soldiers of General Titus in 70 CE when the Romans conquered and destroyed Jerusalem. Tradition is well founded in placing Gethsemane across the Kidron Valley, directly east of the Golden Gate, at the base of the Mount of Olives.

Jesus prayer in Gethsemane was driven by his distress and agitated heart as the weight of the hour bore down on him. Mark captures the only use in the Gospels of Jesus praying to God using the Aramaic name *Abba* for Father God. Matthew and Luke also record Jesus plea to have the cup of death removed from him, *yet, not what I want, but what you want* (v. 36). God is God, not us. Jesus desperation and heavy heart drove him to an urgent plea to spare his life. While Mark describes this scene with the Godly number of three separate times of praying this petition, it makes sense that at the end of the third time of wrestling in prayer that Jesus concluded his prayer with *not my will but yours*. These words feel like they come with both concession and acceptance for what may happen in the end.

Finally, Judas (who was announced as betraying Jesus back in 3:19) comes with a crowd from the chief priest, scribes and elders (leaders of the religious community mentioned throughout Mark: 8:31; 11:27; 14:53; 15:1). It's unclear who authorized Jesus' arrest as there is no mention of the Romans from whom an arrest would be required as the governing authority. The crowd likely was led, though not stated, by the temple police. The kiss of Judas is odd because Jesus had been publically teaching in the temple. Stranger yet, with all of the plotting to kill Jesus by the religious leaders that they would not have identified Jesus to the temple police.

- Good Friday READ: Mark 15:1-47
Jesus had been condemned to death by the Sanhedrin (14:64) when he had positively answered their quarry whether or not he was the Messiah of God (14:61-62). Jesus is brought bound (Mark 3:27) to Pilate who is so well known to the audience of Mark that he needed no introduction. Pilate was the Procurator (Roman ruler) over Judea which included Jerusalem, ruling from 26-36 CE. Questioned by Pilate regarding Jesus' kingship or rule, Jesus offered little reply in 15:1-5.

A tradition had been established by the ruling authorities to release a prisoner during the Passover festivities as a gesture to the Jews by Romans. When the Jewish crowds clamored for Pilate to release a prisoner, Pilate, because Jesus had not broken any Roman laws, asked if they wanted him to release the *King of the Jews* (15:9)? Later, these words appear inscribed as the charge brought against Jesus (15:26). Pilate testifies that

he found Jesus innocent as he realized that the charges were all stemming out of jealousy (v. 10). Instead, they chose a criminal and called for Jesus to be crucified (15:6-15).

What is most notable as you read the trial of Jesus by the Jewish rulers (14:53-65), Pilate (15:1-5), Jesus presentation to the crowd (15:6-15) and beaten and mocked by the Roman guard (15:16-20) is Jesus reaction. Jesus remained silent as the Jewish rulers badgered him with questions (14:60-61). To Pilate his only reply was "that is what you say" (15:2-3). There is no mention of Jesus reaction to the crowds jeering and shouts calling for his death, agitated and worked up by the temple authorities. There is no mention of Jesus' reaction to being flogged (15:15) or mocking by the soldiers (15:16-20). Jesus response is deafeningly silent.

The Roman authorities forced a man in the crowd from Cyrene in North Africa named Simon to *take up* Jesus' cross. The same Greek word connects this verse with 8:34 where Jesus said: *If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.* Literally, Simon and his sons were disciples of Jesus because he *took up* the cross of Jesus and carried it as he *followed* Jesus to the place of crucifixion.

It is only in Mark that Alexander and Rufus are mentioned with Simon which suggests that they

were better known to Mark's audience than their father. Could this Rufus be Simon's son mentioned in Romans 16:13? The journey to death ends at Golgotha (Aramaic for *skull*). The Latin name for this place is Calvary. The exact location of this site is unknown except that it must have been outside the walls of Jerusalem.

In the same way that Jesus kept silent before his accusers (reminiscent of Isaiah 53:7), his lips were sealed to any drink (15:23, see Psalm 69:21). The dividing of his clothes by throwing dice is a quick comment by Mark (15:24 as fulfillment of Psalm 22:18).

The stories of the execution of Jesus do not agree in some of the details. This is especially true when you compare Mark and John. They were written at different times and for different congregations. These are not eye witness accounts but the recording of oral stories preached and taught for many years before they were written down. For example, Jesus is handed over to be crucified at about noon (John 19:14) but Mark says Jesus was crucified at 9:00 a.m. until 3:00 p.m. (15:25, 33). One final example is that Jesus carries his own cross in John (19:17). The details are not as important as the proclaimed story of Jesus death as a gift of love for the world (John 3:16-17).

Of the famed seven last words of Jesus spoken from the cross, Mark only records: *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me* (15:34; Matthew 27:46). Meanwhile, three of the words are recorded in Luke (23:34, 43, 46) and three words in John (19:26-27, 28,

30). It is important to note in Mark that the first person to testify that Jesus is God's Son is a gentile, a military employee of the Roman Empire (15:39). This is the answer to the question posed by Pilate: *Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One* (14:61)? Not only did Jesus reply in the affirmative, but he said he was God: *I am Yahweh* (Exodus 3:14).

The witness of the centurion as a sign that the message of Jesus invites all people to follow him is built upon the quoting of Isaiah 56:7 by Jesus that the temple of God is a house of prayer for all people (Mark 11:17); and, Jesus warning to his followers about their suffering for faith, BUT *the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations* (Mark 13:10). Finally, this inclusive invitation is recorded in the longer ending to Mark: *Go into the whole world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation* (16:15). The message of the cross is for all people.

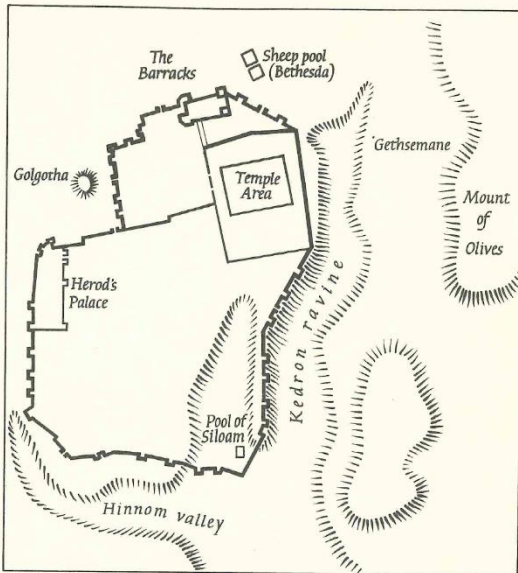
The importance of women in the life and ministry of Jesus comes to the surface in these last few verses of chapter 15 and the first eight verses of chapter 16. First of all, note that Jesus had many women who were his followers (15:41b). They were Galileans and had followed him up to Jerusalem. They were generous and provided for Jesus out of their financial means. A few of the women enter the story for the first time: Mary Magdalene (or Mary from the village of Magdala) who was there for his death, burial and at the empty tomb on Easter (15:40, 47; 16:1). *Magdala, the native town of the first Mary, also called Tarichea, was a fishing center on the Sea of*

Galilee, about two miles north of Tiberias and three miles south of Capernaum (Adela Yarbo Collins, *Mark*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007, p. 774). It is unclear who the second Mary is but it is not the mother of Jesus otherwise that would be clearly noted. Salome, according to tradition based on Matthew 27:56 and 20:20-21 was the wife of Zebedee and the mother of Jesus disciples: James and John.

In verses 42-47, the witness is given that Jesus is indeed dead. Pilate asked for assurance of that fact. A Jewish religious leader, Joseph of Arimathea, was a secret follower of Jesus and took Jesus from the cross, wrapped his body in a cloth that he bought, laid Jesus body in a tomb he had access to and secured with a large rock. There were women witness to the location so that they could return after Sabbath and properly anoint the body of Jesus for burial.

So where were the eleven disciples throughout the crucifixion, death and burial? There is no record in Mark of their presence at all on Good Friday. They are absent from his death on the cross, burial and even the original empty tomb experience in Mark 16:1-8. The last disciple mentioned is the three-fold denial by Peter of being a follower of Jesus in the courtyard of the high priest where Jesus was being questioned (14:54, 66-72). How about the other disciples? As Jesus predicted, they deserted him – one of them even running away naked (14:50-51). At Jesus time of greatest need, the disciples folded like an umbrella in a windstorm.

Appendix 5



Clifford Jones, *New Testament Illustrations*, London:
Cambridge University Press, 1966, p. 165.