

Power Over Sickness
Healing of the Leper
Mark 1:29-45

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Here is a secret about the gospel you may not know:
The gospel is incomplete.

Take a look at St. Mark, chapter 1, verse 1, on page 35 in the pew Bible. (If you're on page 35 and still in Genesis, remember that page numbers start over again with the New Testament.)

Mark 1:1 says, "*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*"

The *beginning*. That's significant.

Mark's gospel begins very abruptly. We don't ease into it with a story of Jesus' birth, like Matthew and Luke have; or a grand theological introduction, like John has. No, Mark jumps right in with Jesus' ministry. That's characteristic of him – things move pretty fast.

And if you think the *beginning* is abrupt, take a look at the *ending*. (Keep a finger or bookmark in chapter 1; we'll come right back to it.) Skip ahead to page 55.

Mark 16:8. Most scholars agree this is probably the original ending of the book of Mark.

Read it with me:

"So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

The End.

A few ancient manuscripts add either the shorter ending, on page 56, of the longer ending, verses 9-20.

Look in the footnotes and you'll see there are other variant endings.

But can you understand why? Apparently the original manuscript seemed too abrupt, with the Greek words *ephobounto gar*, "for they were afraid." Is that any way to end a story of "Good News" – filled with fear?

Apparently later editors came along and said, "This'll never do. We need a better ending to this story."

But we think the Gospel of Mark ended with verse 8, and that *Mark intended it that way*.

Because look once again at Mark 1:1. Mark doesn't say this is the *whole* story; he says this is *the beginning* of the good news of Jesus. He ends it like he does because he intends for *you*, the reader, to *complete* the story. That's why I said the gospel is incomplete. It needs you to finish it with your response. Do you want to end with fear – or with joy? Read this book; decide who Jesus Christ really is; then *conclude the story by how you live out your life*.

See, the gospel really isn't complete if it's just *someone else's* story. You need to make it *your* story.

Pastor Harms and I are both excited about walking with you through the whole book of Mark, chapter by chapter, in sequence, from now through Easter. We'll all gain a new appreciation for how this gospel is put together. Your life is going to be significantly changed by the encounter. We're going to become not only Biblically *literate*, but more Biblically *fluent*.

If you haven't already done so, commit to reading the book of Mark this winter. Average reading time is only 45 minutes. You could do it easily in an afternoon, or get to your pew 5 minutes earlier and read a chapter a week. Make the pledge, and post a little sticky foot on the banner in the Narthex that says, "Journey with Jesus."

Jesus is a man on the move, indeed; let's walk with him.

Turn to page 36, for today's installment of the journey: chapter 1, verse 29 to 45.

Right away, notice an interesting feature of Mark. The start of v. 29 is, in the New Revised Standard Version, "*As soon as they left.*" The Greek word is *euthus*, which means "*immediately.*" Mark uses this word *10 times* in this first chapter alone! It gives his book a breathless, almost frantic pace to it; and we're racing to try to keep up with Jesus.

He's A Man In Motion. He is *on the Way*, and calls us to join him on the Way. Early followers didn't call themselves "Christians"; they called themselves People of *The Way*.

On the way, Jesus stops off at Simon's place. Simon's mother-in-law is sick in bed. Jesus goes to her, takes her hand, lifts her up, and she is suddenly well.

Immediately, what does she do? (v. 31) She starts to serve them.

You ladies are probably smiling. Oh, sure – the man fixes the woman so she can fix him his supper!

Well, Mark's message is that once you get well, you're going to want to serve.

In that culture, it was considered an *honor* to play the gracious host for a visitor.

Hey, in *our* culture, if the President is coming to your house for dinner, wouldn't you *want* to be there for that? You'd consider it an *honor* to serve him, wouldn't you?

And if *Jesus* said, "Friend, I'm coming to your house today," wouldn't you want to serve him?

In the Holte household, we say this grace before every meal: "Come, Lord Jesus – be our guest!"

(♪ "Be our guest; be our guest; be our guest!")

Jesus wants to be a guest at your table, and wants to heal you so that you may serve.

The word gets out that Jesus is a great healer. By nightfall, (v. 33), "*the whole city was gathered around the door.*" He's curing them, healing all kinds of disease, casting out demons, and, (v. 34), "*he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him*" – they had to be silent, because they recognized Jesus as Lord. Now, why wouldn't Jesus want people to know? It's called "the messianic secret," and we'll see it again when Jesus heals a leper.

Jesus flees the crowds; goes off to a deserted place to pray, (v. 35); where his disciples find him and say, "Everyone is searching for you!"

They want him to come back, keep doing what he's been doing so successfully. The disciples want him to *stay*. Jesus wants to *move*:

"*Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.*"

Isn't that often the way it is with us as disciples too? We want to linger longer. "Hey, Lord, stay a while; abide with me." But Jesus says to us, "Let's move on! There are others who haven't yet heard the gospel. I am the Way – and you are the People of the Way. So don't be *in* the way; be *on* The Way!"

On the way, a leper accosts Jesus, (v. 40), "*If you choose, you can make me clean.*" What great faith!

You can say the same thing to Jesus, and you can hear the same response: (v. 41), "*I do choose. Be made clean!*" Jesus *intends* to cleanse you – of whatever you suffer from. He chooses to make you well.

Of course, (v. 42), what's the very next word? "*Immediately,*" it happens.

It says Jesus is "*moved with pity.*" The footnote says, "Other ancient authorities read *anger.*"

Maybe Jesus is angry that people suffer, or that society ostracizes people with such a disease. The Greek has the sense of "Jesus has a strong *gut reaction*" – it's very visceral. Jesus is that kind of person – not some aloof sage spouting tidbits of wisdom from on high, but a man who *connects* with people. He's a "hands-on" kind of guy.

He *does* stretch out his hand to the leper: he *touches* the untouchable.

Then he sends him off with, "*Go, show yourself to the priest.*" (v. 44) The Law of Moses said a priest had to certify that a person with leprosy was healed, and able to return to society. So, he's no longer an outcast.

When Jesus heals people, he not only restores their *bodies*; he restores their *relationships*.

Simon's mother-in-law was able to return to her family and her guests; this leper is able to return to his community.

But next comes an odd command: (v. 44), "*See that you say nothing to anyone.*"

This is a verse that all too many Lutherans take to heart:

"Okay, Jesus told me not to tell anyone about him, so – mum's the word!" It's how we tend to do evangelism, trying to follow this command of Jesus, to "say nothing to anyone." Hey, if he really meant us to keep silent, we'd A+ students of scripture!

But that's not really it. Jesus didn't want people getting the wrong idea of what *kind* of messiah he was. He was not doing cures in order to gather a crowd of followers he could lead into battle to overthrow the hated Romans. A lot of folks expected that, but he was a different kind of king.

By curing people, he demonstrates power over not only the physical world, but the spiritual as well.

For in *those* days, if a person was sick, people thought they had offended God somehow, that this disease was punishment for something they'd done wrong.

Hey, in *our* day, if somebody gets a disease, what's the first thing we think? "Why *me*? Why is this happening to me? What have I done wrong?"

Well, the answer is, it's not necessarily your fault. The whole world is broken. That's the consequence of The Fall, that all of nature is broken.

But Jesus the Healer demonstrates he has power over sin, death, and the devil. He even commands demons.

Remember when he wouldn't let the demons speak, because they *knew* him? In the whole book of Mark, the demons are the only ones who recognize Jesus' true identity.

No human being, except for one, sees Jesus for who he really is. And that one exception doesn't happen until he dies.

(It's not Simon Peter, who at one point exclaims, "You are the messiah!" – because right away, Jesus says, "Get behind me, Satan!" So even Peter has the wrong idea of what kind of messiah he is.)

No, the one human being – aside from the demons – who identifies Jesus' true nature is not even a disciple; he's an outsider:

It's the Roman centurion, at the foot of the cross, who exclaims, after Jesus dies, "*Truly, this man was the Son of God!*"

Mark makes the point that we can't really *know* Jesus until his whole life has been lived. It is only *after* the crucifixion that we understand what kind of Savior this is: this is one who *suffers and dies* for our sake.

He is not a political messiah who will lead armies against foreign invaders to restore the fortunes of Israel. He is the messiah who conquers the last enemy, death. To do so, he himself has to suffer and die – thereby restoring *our* fortunes, and winning our salvation.

That is why we preach Christ crucified, and risen.

The disciples thought they knew who Jesus was, but they really didn't – not until his journey was complete. So go with him, all the way to Golgotha. *Then* you'll know.

Oh, just one more thing. (As a preacher, sometimes I feel like Peter Falk as Lieutenant Columbo. You're being interrogated; you know you're guilty as sin, so you're relieved when it seems the preacher is finished; you can finally get rid of this annoying guy who asks these irritating questions, when he turns back at the very end, and says, nonchalantly, "Oh, yeah, just one more thing...")

If you look at the last verse of chapter one (v. 45), you'll see the leper can't help himself – he's just got to spread the word about what Jesus has done for him.

(Well, wouldn't *you*, if Jesus radically changed your life?)

The word is out on the street, "*so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly.*" He was a huge celebrity, like a rock star, a movie star. He was famous!

So let me ask you just one last question: Is Jesus famous with you?

In your world, is Jesus famous with *you*?

If so, you're going to be a huge fan! Stand up and say, "I will go, Lord, if you lead me. Here I am!"

Hymn # 574: "Here I Am, Lord"