

### **New Testament Lesson—Mark 1:1-8**

*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight," "John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."*

### **New Testament Lesson—Mark 16:1-8**

*When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But 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." 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.*

As you'll recall, last Sunday we entered the world of the New Testament—beginning part two of this sermon series on "Bible Basics." And, as you might expect, we started with the first book in the New Testament: the Gospel of Matthew.

The early Church wanted Matthew to be first in the canon—first in the order of Jesus stories because they saw Matthew as a kind of "how-to guide"—a "manual" of sorts for how to *do* Church—a blueprint for how to *be* the Church together.

And so, yes, it's first for a reason. But, make no mistake: Matthew was *not* the first gospel to be written. Matthew's account of Jesus' life wasn't the first to be recorded. No, that special recognition goes to Mark.

The vast, vast, majority of Biblical scholars agree that Mark precedes the other three. In fact, most scholars would also say both Matthew and Luke could not have written their books without Mark. In other words, it's extremely likely that Matthew and Luke had a scroll of Mark's gospel with them and based their versions on Mark.

Mark is their starting point—their “cheat sheet” so to speak. Matthew and Luke are literally copying huge portions of Mark into their own stories. So you see: Matthew and Luke would not exist *but for* Mark’s pioneering vision. Mark is the foundation of the others.

For this reason, I absolutely love Mark’s gospel. It is the “OG” story of Jesus. It’s exciting, exhilarating and fast-paced. It’s the “brass tax” gospel—telling us what we need to know and only what we need to know. It’s the shortest by several chapters.

And when it’s over—over much too soon, Mark leaves you wanting more. As you can probably tell, it’s my favorite of the four. In my view, it’s also the most underrated. Sure, (in some ways) it may not be as “flashy” as the other three, but Mark brings the intrigue in more subtle ways.

Right out of the gate, Mark demands our attention. We’re drawn in. We want to know more about who Jesus is and why he matters. Chapter one (verse one) reads: *The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*. Right from the get-go, we (the audience) are faced with the gravity of Mark’s project.

We, the Church, are immediately spoon-fed Mark’s most important claim: Jesus of Nazareth is, in fact, the messiah—the Christ. And this same person is also the Son of God! And both of these claims, together, confront us with good news.

This is *good* news. You see: Mark’s words aren’t meant to be passively received or heard with indifference. This news is meant to be received with gladness, with relief, and with thanksgiving. It’s meant to fortify our spirits and strengthen our hopes.

Before you even realize it, Mark has you invested in this story. With just a few verses, not only has he connected the Son of God with a man from Nazareth everyone knows was killed by the Romans... (That’s extraordinary on its own). But this same man, according to Mark, is also the Jewish messiah! He’s the one we’ve all been waiting for!

Now that’s a lot to digest and not a lot of time to do it. The opening words of Mark’s gospel lay out some pretty bold claims don’t they—especially shocking because they’re about a teacher lots of people saw die—and not just die, but saw publicly humiliated.

And so a reasonable person would (of course) be left asking, “How?” How is this possible? Mark’s opening words beg the question, right?

How on earth can they be the same person? Seriously: How can *Jesus* be the one? How can *that* guy be the Messiah, much less the Son of God? Please! Tell me how a failed revolutionary can be the one who was promised?

How can a guy from such humble origins who, as far as we can tell, really ticked off his own people almost every day—how can he possibly be the one to liberate the Jews from Roman oppression? How can he be the strongman that will restore the nation to its glory days under King David?

I mean, that’s what the messiah is supposed to do! He’s supposed to lead us to victory! He sure as heaven ain’t supposed to be defeated before he even takes up arms—crucified like a common criminal! Lord, make it make sense! Lord, make it make sense...

That, my friends, is precisely what Mark is all about—making it make sense. Mark is absolutely fixated on Jesus’ suffering and death. You see, he knows it’s the biggest obstacle to overcome. In other words, it would sure be a lot easier to believe Jesus is the messiah if it weren’t for the whole (you know)... death on a cross thing...

Mark sets out to do something that, if you dwell on it long enough, sounds downright ridiculous on its face. Here’s what he wants to say. This is the core of Mark’s radical message:

Jesus' suffering and death isn't a *barrier* to him being the messiah. Jesus is the messiah *because* of his suffering and death.

Get that? Jesus' suffering and death isn't a *barrier* to him being the messiah. He's the messiah *because* of his suffering and death. I'll put it another way...

The crucifixion didn't somehow disqualify Jesus. In fact, the opposite is true. His willingness to die on the cross is what makes him the messiah! The crucifixion *confirms* Jesus is the Christ—*confirms* he is the One promised long ago!

Do you see how radically strange Mark's argument is—how counterintuitive it would've been then and still is today? Makes total sense, right? Said no one ever!

And yet, it did make sense for the early Church. And (you'll recall) it made sense to Matthew and Luke too—enough sense for them to use Mark as their starting point—to root everything they wrote in Mark's story.

I gave you the bookends of Mark this morning—the opening words of the gospel and its conclusion. Everything in between these bookends is there to convince us Jesus is the One not *despite* his death, but *because* of it. Everything in between is here to give us ears to hear a new definition of “messiah”—and hopefully, a heart receptive enough to believe it.

At this point, a reasonable person might remind the room that Jesus' story didn't end with his death. Maybe that's a good point to raise when trying to argue that Jesus is the messiah! Maybe the resurrection's an important factor here! And yes, it is!

After all, each of the four gospels gives us an Easter story. We read Mark's version of Easter today—a very understated and drama-free Easter morning (at least compared to Matthew, Luke, and John). Here, the risen Christ doesn't even appear to anyone. It's almost anticlimactic, isn't it? There's just a singular angel and three women looking for their friend.

The glaring lack of details in Mark's Easter story would suggest it's not the most important story for him. Let's be honest about this. Though resurrection is and was extraordinary—is and was utterly miraculous, Jesus' resurrection wasn't the first in Jewish history! Right? You *do* find others in the Old Testament. Rare, but not (like) super rare...?

And so for Mark, the mere fact that someone was raised from the dead wouldn't be enough to convince others they were the messiah. And God knows the mere fact that someone was so easily captured and killed would be *more* than enough to convince others that a person wasn't the messiah!

And so it's the Passion of Jesus that concerns Mark the most. We know this because almost forty percent of Mark's sixteen chapters is a Passion narrative! That's a ton of details to lay out about a guy's suffering and death! It's fitting that, over the course of Church history, Mark came to be represented by a sacrificial bull.

Now let's be a little more honest with ourselves this morning. We, Presbyterians (and Protestants in general)—we don't really like the Passion. We don't like to focus much on Jesus' terrible final days. Right? That's what the Catholics do! They're the ones with the bloody crucifixes—those crosses with Jesus still hanging on it. How morbid!

We Presbyterians choose to emphasize Easter and the risen Christ. Our crosses, of course, are empty. Yeah, Jesus suffered and died, and it was awful and really icky (sure), but how about that third day, huh? Easter's a coming!

Siblings in Christ: Mark's gospel—the first gospel—is our gut-check and our constant reminder that we can't just skip to the good stuff—can't jump to Easter Sunday. Mark reminds us of just how Good Friday is too. In fact, Jesus isn't the messiah without it.

I want to close this morning by showing you exactly why Mark is my favorite. In between those bookends we read earlier, Mark does something so fascinating—something that has sparked centuries of both curiosity and confusion...

In Mark: Whenever Jesus is correctly identified as the messiah—or whenever Jesus does something bold and amazing and impressive and awe-inspiring (you know, stuff like the messiah was perhaps expected to do)—Jesus tells the people: “Shh, it’s a secret. Don’t tell anyone about what you saw.”

Put another way: Whenever Jesus does anything that would have made him look like the strongman hero people were waiting for—someone that would’ve had Israel’s enemies shaking in their sandals, Jesus commands those who saw it to, “Be quiet and keep it to yourself.”

Friends, this is Mark in a nutshell: Jesus isn’t the messiah because he heals people and restores their dignity. He’s not the Christ because he sends demons back to Hades. He isn’t the One we hope for because he fed five thousand people or glowed dazzling white on a mountaintop. And he isn’t the Son of God because he’s the world’s greatest teacher and preacher...All those things are wonderful but they’re just icing on the cake.

No, Jesus of Nazareth is our messiah and the Christ and everything else because and only because he suffered and died—evicting sin from the world as he did so. He is our hope because he would rather feel forsaken by his Father than ever turn his back on us or God’s will.

He is our salvation because and only because he came to give his life as a ransom for many. Jesus is Lord because when he died, everything else that could ever separate us from God died along with him.

Now that’s a lot of good news. Mark told us it was from the get-go: *The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

And how about that? This is just the beginning!

Amen.