

## Believe the Good News: *Mark 1:1-15*

Norwalk Christian Church, April 3, 2016, Easter 1, Year C, Good News-Mark Series

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It's a little jarring, having spent last Sunday at the empty tomb, and then showing up this Sunday at the beginning of the Gospel. Jesus was just resurrected from the dead! And yet, here we are, starting the story over.

It is jarring, and yet we are exactly where we need to be this morning, right where the resurrection would have us go. On Easter, we read together the gospel of John's account of the Easter story. But had we visited Mark's version of the story, instead, the connection between last Sunday and this Sunday would've been clearer.

Mark ends his gospel abruptly. There is an empty tomb. Two men in white greet the women who show up on Easter Sunday. "He has been raised," they tell him. "He is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him." And then, the men in white have instructions for the women: "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."

In other words, if you want to see Jesus, empty tombs are not the place. Where is Jesus? He's gone ahead of you, into Galilee. Galilee, that place on the outskirts of society, where Mark began his story. If you want to see Jesus, you must go back to Galilee. Back to where the story begins.

And so we've come, back to Galilee, back to where Jesus' story began. If we want to encounter the story of Jesus, the Gospel of Mark is a great place to start. In fact, this is the start, the first Gospel ever written. This book contains the oldest accounts of Jesus' life and teachings that we have. This is, literarily, where the story of Jesus begins, and over the next few months we will experience together this gospel and this great story.

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Mark calls this story Good News. That's how it begins: "The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the son of God." The first verse functions almost like a title, but more than that, it's a declaration. Something new is happening. Imagine you're at a play, and the narrator enters and stands center stage, proclaiming at the top of his voice: "The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, son of God."

Or, if you were Mark's original audience, you might imagine a herald on a horse, an emissary sent from Rome to announce a declaration from the empire. In the book, *Say to this Mountain*, the authors tell us that, "Gospel was a term associated with Roman propaganda. News of a military victory on the far-flung frontiers of the [Roman Empire], or of the accession to power of a new emperor, was trumpeted as "glad tidings" [good news; gospel] throughout the empire."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Myers, Chad; Dennis, Marie; Nangle, Joseph; Moe-Lobeda, Cynthia; Taylor, Stuart (2014-07-28). "Say to This Mountain": Mark's Story of Discipleship (Kindle Locations 231-232). Orbis Books. Kindle Edition.

Good news! You are ruled by the empire. Good news! Rome has defeated another helpless nation. Good news! Your life is found, not in your own freedom, but by the peace the empire can provide you.

It sounds hokey, doesn't it? But let's not dismiss the tactics of empire so quickly. Turn on your TV, and we inundated with supposed "Good News".

Good news! This dieting fad will make you feel young again!

Good news! Buy this new car, or phone, or vacuuming robot, and your life will never be the same again!

Good news! Vote for this candidate, and all your dreams will come true!

Good news! Give into your fears; build walls between yourself and those not like you; demonize those who aren't like you--then you will feel safe!

The marketing arm of the empire is still strong, convincing us that Good News comes in the forms of greed, violence and fear.

But Jesus shows up on the scene with a counter-message. This is a story of Good News, Mark says, but it's not the Good News of the Empire. It's the Good News of Jesus Christ, the son of God.

And what is this good news about? In order to understand Jesus' message of Good News, Mark points us to the place where Jesus' ministry begins: the wilderness. There, Jesus shows up in wilderness to be baptized by John, and from the wilderness of his baptism, the Holy Spirit sends him into the wilderness of temptation.

After Jesus emerges from 40 days in the wilderness, you would expect him to go straight to the centers of power. The places where you can find the most people, resources and influence. But Jesus stays in the wilderness. He goes to Galilee, which in Jesus' day, was viewed as a nothing place, filled with nobodies. It's no place to begin a revolution, much less a story. Galilee is on the edge of the map and the margins of society.

And Galilee will be where Jesus' story begins.

From Galilee, Jesus will declare the good news of God.

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Now may be a good time to stop and take a breath. We've hit the ground running in this Gospel. If you want to take your time, if you want a leisure stroll through the life of Jesus, Mark is not your guide. I better warn you now: This is a fast-moving gospel. For those who get motion sickness, this may not be the gospel for you.

In a matter of verses, we have been introduced to Jesus and John the Baptist, to the Spirit and the Satan. There is no account of Jesus' birth or origins as we find in the other gospels. Mark hits the ground running. In 15 verses, Jesus has arrived on the scene, been baptized, tempted and sent out on his first preaching tour.

The gospel starts off quick, and doesn't slow down. In fact, the most repeated word in the Greek, the original language Mark was written in, is the word translated into English as "Immediately." Immediately, immediately... Jesus has no time to waste.

Even Jesus' first sermon is short and to the point. (We, preachers, should probably learn a lesson from Jesus.) There is no time to waste.

Mark tells us, "Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'"

That's Jesus' first sermon. It's one sentence, with two parts: the message and the response.

The message is this, "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near."

The response Jesus asks to this message, "Repent and believe the good news."

I don't know about you, but when I hear the word, "Repent," I start to break out in hives. I can see a preacher with the reflection of hellfire in his eyes, screaming to the crowd of sinners, "Repent! Repent!"

But Repent, as Jesus preaches it, is not about guilt and shame and sin. Repent is about orientation--where you are headed. The original word actually means, "to turn around; to change course" "Turn around," Jesus says. "You're headed in the wrong direction. If you want Good News, come this way. Re-orient your life to my new world."

From Galilee, the outskirts of society, in a nothing place to people the empire would label as nobodies, Jesus announces a new day.

"The time is fulfilled! Business as usual is over. Behold, a new age is dawning. A new world is upon us, and it's called 'the kingdom of God.' If you want to live in this world, you must repent. Stop heading in the direction away from the kingdom, and change course, turn around, and come with me to Galilee."

In Galilee, you will hear the Good News. Galilee is where Jesus' story begins. Galilee is where the Good News begins, and Galilee is where the church should begin our ministry.

Last week, I had a conversation with a woman living in Norwalk. She was telling me about her experience of church. "I will never go to a church again," she told me. "I still believe in God, but I can't go to church." What happened? When she was going through a messy divorce, she was a part of a church, and some people in that church turned its back on her. They judged her, instead of walking with her. They failed to acknowledge her pain, and when she didn't do the things they prescribed for her to do, they refused to help her. And so she swore she'd never go to a church again.

Then she told me another story, a story of a friend of hers who visited a church for the first time last week, on Easter Sunday. They arrived hoping to hear good news, but instead, they heard the pastor preach against people who were gay, and how they were bound for hell. Her friend was so disturbed by this that they got up in the middle of the sermon and left...probably for good.

In one conversation, I heard two stories of the church proclaiming bad news. I expressed to her how angry those stories made me feel, and then I told her about our church. About how we believe that God sides with love, not hate, and how we try to open the doors of the church wider, not close them.

And you know what she said? She said, "It's so good to hear there's a church like that. I didn't know such a church existed."

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People are hungry for good news. Mark begins the Gospel of Jesus in Galilee, because it's there, and only there, that we can truly find Jesus.

You want to be where Jesus is, go to the Galilees of our world, the forgotten, nothing places. Go, be with the people the religious establishment has pushed out and thrown aside. There, among the forgotten people of our world, those being oppressed and stepped on by the powers that be, there you will find Jesus.

But don't expect the world to follow suit. News of Jesus will spread quickly in this Gospel, and before long everyone will be flocking to see Jesus. That is, everyone but the religious and political powers of Jesus day. Before chapter one ends, they will begin plotting Jesus' death.

This road into Galilee is not an easy one. Many will stand in the way. But if you want to follow Jesus, this is the path. If you want to experience Good News, if you want to live in the Kingdom of God, this is it.

God is turning the world upside down. A new day has dawned. And Jesus has come to declare the good news: that the time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God has come near. May we repent and believe the good news.

Believe, that here, among the margins, is Jesus.

This is where the Gospel begins.

This is where discipleship begins.

And this is where the church of Jesus Christ should always be, right where Jesus was, in Galilee, among the people who need Jesus the most.

May we believe and may we follow Jesus wherever he will lead us. Amen.