

**The Day the Church Was Born**  
**A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church**  
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**February 4, 2018**  
**Mark 1:29-39 (Emphasis on 29-34)**

I'm not sure how or when it happened, but it happened. Somewhere along the way, somebody out there decided that the authors of Matthew and Luke and John should get to have all the fun. Maybe it happened over the course of time, and we never really even noticed. Or maybe there was a board meeting or a draft day, and each tradition was paired with the big events of the Church year. And perhaps the author of Mark showed up late to the meeting or missed it entirely.

Think about it. Luke's got a firm hold on Christmas Eve. Lock-tight. And if you are talking about how to love your neighbors, everyone jumps right to the Good Samaritan. Matthew's wise men called dibs on Epiphany, the Sermon on the Mount, and doing things to and for the *Least of These*. And John, well John racked up on draft day – he's got mansions in his Father's house, and the Word with a big W, funerals, Mary Magdalene at the tomb, Jesus making water into wine...he's even got signs at sporting events!!!

But not Mark. Poor Mark. Too often, we glance past the significance of the Also-Ran Gospel. It's short. Sometimes Jesus seems abrasive, and he's demanding. He asks a lot of us. And besides, Mark's not even included in Clarence Jordan's Cotton Patch Gospels!!! Mark never seems to take center stage.

Well not today! Today is a day for Mark. That's right, today, I want to make a bold claim: The Church (with a big C) and even Sardis (our church with a little c) has its origins in today's lection. This is the day the church was born!!!

Our scene opens in Capernaum, the hometown of Simon – we know him as Peter. Jesus has just healed a man with an unclean spirit in the synagogue. But people aren't sure how to process this healing – who is this strange man who offers these strange teachings? And what does his presence mean in this place? Even to his disciples, Jesus is a mystery.

Upon leaving the synagogue, Jesus and four of his disciples go to Simon Peter's house. His house is directly adjacent to the synagogue, and in the middle of Capernaum's town square – it is a gathering place. Upon arrival, Jesus is told about Simon Peter's mother-in-law. We're never told her name, but the text tells us she is sick with fever.

And I want to stop right here. I am going to offer my own redaction to this text. This woman not only needs a name, but she deserves one too. I think if she has a name, you'll be more inclined to listen to her story, and to picture her in your mind. Let's call her Mrs. Church. Mrs. Church is not just a woman with a fever. She is a woman with responsibility – she's in her mid-fifties, she's raised children, she runs a prominent household, she is a source of wisdom. Mrs. Church is a woman of value. Mrs. Church is a child of God. Mrs. Church's is a story worth hearing, and a story worth telling.

So let's start again. Upon arrival, Jesus is brought to Mrs. Church, and Mrs. Church has a fever.

Perhaps this fever is akin to our modern-day flu – whatever the case may be, Mrs. Church's sickness has left her drained, sapped, bed-ridden; She is utterly powerless to be present.

Think about this for a moment. Have you ever felt this way? Has there been a time in your life when a bad back, or a migraine, or grief, or fatigue, or depression, or some other ailment, permanent or temporary, has made you completely absent to the world? Mrs. Church's ailment is not simply a sickness, it is a power that haunts her, and owns her. Mrs. Church has no control over this illness. And even worse, this power keeps her isolated, not only from her community, but from performing the duties that give her an identity.

Sickness swallows up identity. A sick parent does not just lament his illness but, also, what that illness does – it robs him of his identity as caretaker to his child. A singer with laryngitis, does not just lament the pain of her sore throat, but also what that illness does – it robs her of her voice, the very vehicle that expresses her identity. And so it is with Mrs. Church – her fever prevents her from living into her role as caretaker of the household. Rather than meeting the needs of her community, Mrs. Church lies dormant in a bed. She is powerless to a power she cannot control. Something bigger than her prevents Mrs. Church from living into her purpose.

Enter Jesus. The text tells us he came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Let me offer a second redaction. I still think this interaction that Mark describes was concise, but it's a bit more intimate. I think Jesus said, "Hi, Mrs. Church. My name is Jesus. I'm so pleased to meet you." And I think he took her hand inside both of his. And he squeezed it, and he said, "Mrs. Church, I wanna let you know that everything is gonna be okay." And she smiled. And at that very moment, she understood that she was in the presence of one with authority – an authority greater than fever and demons and corrupt government. She was in the presence of God's authority. And with that help, Mrs. Church stood up. And her fever was lifted.

Mrs. Church was healed. That's a pretty compelling detail for the modern reader. We live in a world that values healthcare and healing, and who wouldn't want to hear about this new technique of touch? But in actuality, this detail is pretty unremarkable. Healing is not unique in this Gospel, nor in any of them. Mark will offer multiple examples of Jesus healing persons with diseases and other ailments.

What is unique and powerful about this story is what happens next: Then the fever left Mrs. Church, and she began to serve them. Mrs. Church did not go to rehab. She did not stop and collect her thoughts. She did not hesitate. Instead, she responded to the same command given to her son-in-law and the other disciples: "Follow Me." She served Jesus and his friends – she offered hospitality by being a good host. And she didn't stop there. She opened the door to her home, stepped over the threshold, and invited the whole city to come and join in the presence of Jesus. And in that very place, Jesus healed many who were sick and possessed. The text uses the verb *serve* (*diakoneo*) to describe Mrs. Church's actions. With an assist from Bob Albritton, I'll offer an additional description: she ministered or she "deaconed" to those in that place.

What's compelling about Mark's account is that Mrs. Church was a witness. She was a keen observer. One who noticed that she was in the presence of God, and regardless of how fleeting that moment was, it was a moment that would sustain her for a lifetime. And buoyed by such knowledge, she felt compelled to help others find that same realization. She understood that the power of witness is not just the willingness to embrace God-filled moments, but that it is also the eagerness to use such moments to inspire others. And in her actions, the Church was born.

The Church was born because witness became housed in community. The author of Luke will tell you otherwise. He'll tell you that the Church was born among flames, and great winds, when the Holy Spirit

came and touched the tongues of those believers in Jerusalem on Pentecost morning. And in a formal sense, he's probably right. But I have a hunch that the winds of Pentecost first gained momentum in Capernaum.

Long ago, in a little fishing village, a warm home house hosted a night of healing and community – the presence of God was there. And it was palpable. Afterwards, the people of the village went about their business. Some were delighted to feel well again. Some followed Jesus to the next village. Some still wondered what to make of it all. But not Mrs. Church. She let loose a deep exhale of satisfaction. I'm sure she grinned a little grin. For she had met a man with the authority of God, and that authority allowed her to live into her purpose: servant, witness, deacon, minister, child of God. She closed her door, and in the process created a small draft. The little breeze slowly made its way to Jerusalem – by that time it was a mighty wind, a spirit that filled a city. And through space and time, that little breeze has made its way to this place called Sardis.

Mark tells us that we have a thing called Church, because an unnamed woman, healed from fever, recognized the power of God's presence. But even more so, she recognized that God's presence is made manifest in community. And so she opened the door of her home.

Friends, God's presence is in this place, and it heals. Rather than hold us captive to the limitations of this world, it opens us to the possibilities of God's world. And in little moments, God is revealed:

On Wednesday nights, Magay's cobbler and Price's fried chicken make our stress vanish; Our choir's weekly anthem captures a moment of peace, and if you didn't get to hear Ruthye sing *Great is Thy Faithfulness* last week, then you've never heard it sung! Susan, John, and Kristin transformed hospital waiting rooms into parlors last weekend; Those cans in the Loaves and Fishes bins are a thousand little prayers; and have you ever seen the smile on our kids' faces when Pastor Jonathan uses his gift for humor? These moments, and so many others, free us to be children of God.

And they free us to be like that unnamed woman. They free us to stand up, to serve, and to open our doors, so that we can give to others what Christ has given to us.

May we be freed to follow the example of an unnamed woman!!!

Amen.