

A Word About the Word:

Here's one word to remember about Mark's gospel: "there." At the empty tomb, the angel says Jesus is not here, but he's *there*. He's gone ahead of you to Galilee, and *there* is where you will see him.

In every age, we ask, "Where is God?" And across two millennia, Mark's gospel responds, "God is *there!*" *There*, where people gather in the Spirit of Jesus. *There*, where people recognize the power and presence of God. *There*, where justice, and mercy, and kindness, and love abide. *There*, where people dare to claim God's boldness and God's healing. But more than anything, Mark's Gospel tells us that *there* is also right here.

When you read this gospel, I hope you'll see it as an invitation to claim God's possibilities in the present.

Gospel Background:

It's New York City in 1984. A supernatural, unexplainable crisis with dire consequences requires immediate response. Five men stand in the mayor's office seeking to provoke him to action. "Human sacrifice. Cats and Dogs living together. Mass hysteria!" says, Dr. Peter Venkman.

Sure, *Ghostbusters* is a movie, and yes, Bill Murray's Dr. Peter Venkman is a fictional character. But the movie paints a wonderful and frantic picture of a world turned up-side down.

No ghosts were needed in the sixth, seventh, and eighth decades of the First Century CE. Palestine experienced every volatility. The rule of Nero ushered in generations of Christian persecution in 63 CE. The Jewish

Rebellion (66-73 CE) resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple. In 79 CE, the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius cloaked the region in a black, smoky haze.

40 years removed from the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, Mark's community wondered, "Where is the presence and power of God in a chaotic world?" And Mark's author sought to give a concise and timely answer.

Mark's pace and brevity can often be confused for harshness and distance. But the author didn't have the luxury of telling a leisurely account. This is a story that tells us more about the *why* of Jesus than the *who* of Jesus. In a similar manner to the Apostle Paul, Mark's author believes that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus fundamentally change (present tense intended, because it's still happening!) how we see and relate to God in the world. Jesus is illustrative of God's authority and transcendence. It's a story that needs to be told, and fast!

Matthew and Luke's gospels invite us to hear more about how disciples should live. We learn about his teachings; we hear more personal details; we know his birth and origin stories. Douglas A. Hare asserts that Mark's gospel invites us into a form of worship. Not so much as a liturgy that we follow, but rather a story that provokes feeling.

Remember, this is a short gospel. It's intended to be heard aloud in one sitting. Remember also, that most of us are familiar with the Jesus story – we live in a post-Easter world. Our familiarity with the story inhibits our ability to experience the profound joy, surprise, and transformation of Easter. Mark's Gospel invites us to experience Jesus, empowered by God, to heal and comfort whole communities. But Mark also allows us to experience Jesus' humanity – in Jerusalem, Jesus is increasingly

marginalized, and ultimately rejected and crucified. Even his closest followers don't recognize his presence and power, and abandon him when he is most vulnerable. But hope abides! Characters who reside in the margins transform our world.

God is invested in our world. God understands the human experience and is in solidarity with humanity. God has the power to transcend atrocities, and hate, and even death, and God does! Women, who see the Jesus story firsthand, are dismissed, and unbelieved, but knees knocking, and hearts pounding, and world all topsy-turvy, they keep telling their stories with stubborn persistence.

And here we stand, in 2022, also in a chaotic world. How might the Gospel according to Mark re-introduce us to the unfolding story of Easter? And even better, how might we decide to play our own part in the unfolding drama?

Homily:

15 verses into Mark's Gospel, Jesus bursts onto the scene and declares, "The Kingdom of God has come near!" What does Jesus mean by that? He's saying five things are now a reality: manna, universal kinship, belonging, transcendent possibility, and authority.

1. Manna – there's enough. We're gonna be a community of shared resources.
2. Universal kinship – our sisters, brothers, kindred, other – our family – is humanity
3. Belonging – Yes, you belong in this community, but you also belong in your own skin, just as God made you. Everyone has value, beauty, and giftedness.

4. Transcendent Possibility – God works in ways that transcend the limits of systems. God is more than global; God is cosmic and divine!
5. Authority – Jesus is claiming a divine authority, even an eschatological one (that’s a fancy word for the future beyond our human reckoning). God operates in a sphere that extends beyond time and distance.

God’s realm has broken into this one, and we’re going to live in that reality, not the artificial reality of abusive and false systems.

“Repent,” Jesus says, “Turn toward this reality. Believe in this good news, because I promise you, it’s true!”

But Jesus doesn’t stop there. He paints the picture of God’s world, and then he actively pursues and invites his neighbors to become part of this reality. He calls disciples. He barnstorms throughout rural hamlets in the Galilee. He heals. He preaches. He fosters community. He tells people that they matter. His is, in every sense, the presence of God in the world.

His fame spreads. Hallelujah! He’s at the top of the charts. His polling numbers are record-breaking. He’s a phenom. Who doesn’t want what this guy is selling?

We find Jesus this morning at his apex.

He comes home to Capernaum to rest. It’s impossible. Word spreads of his presence, and the whole village flocks to him. There are SO many people gathered in the home that they are overflowing into the street.

Outside the home, a group of four friends is devising a plan. They've heard Jesus, and they believe Jesus, and they have decided to act with urgency. Their friend is paralyzed. And in Jesus, they see an opportunity to help provide their friend with connectedness and healing.

They act with authority. They act with purpose. They act with creativity. Their friend's ailment has created a barrier to wholeness. His immobility is not just physical, it's also emotional and social. Disabilities carried significant stigma in First-Century Palestine – surely, this man has done something to deserve his fate. And so he is shut off and shut out from community. The crowd is a microcosm of his fate. The very thing this man needs is behind a door without access.

Never underestimate the power of determined friends. Jesus refuses to be bound by convention, and so do this man's friends. If we can't get through the front door, we'll cut a hole in the roof. And so they do, and they lower this man down to Jesus on a mat. Seeing their actions, Jesus proclaims, "Friend, your sins are forgiven."

Don't get hung up on that s-word. What Jesus is saying is, "I see you! And God's world is for you. Come on in and join the party. Come on in, and know that the good news is for you, too!"

Jesus is done waiting for the systems of this world to do what God has already proclaimed we should be doing. He's already been commissioned and credentialed. And the four friends follow that same example.

But here's where text really gets interesting. The scribes start shaking their heads. Surely, Jesus isn't so audacious as to believe he can do

what only God can do? Who is this man to believe he can forgive sins?
It's blasphemy!

It only took one chapter, but the critics have emerged. Stay in your
lane, man!

Remember, the scribes are administrators. They aren't insincere. But
their decision-making is only grounded in the present. Their authority
rests solely in the rendering of traditions. But in too many instances,
they prioritize tradition over the very source the tradition is intended to
honor. Yes, please, let's make God manifest in our lives as long as that
manifestation sustains the institution.

Jesus isn't bound to the authority of tradition. Jesus is bound to the
authority of God. The scribes wouldn't dare consider non-conventional
methods to bring this man back into community, because to do so
would threaten their privilege and status in the religious order. But
Jesus does dare to. He knows that God's authority has a much longer
shelf life than Caesar's. So Jesus, in a two-fold act, welcomes the man
back into society/community (that's the forgiveness part), and restores
his ability to walk. The man has physical, emotional, and social access to
his community.

We don't receive specific details on how Jesus exactly healed this man,
nor do we hear about this man's reception in the world after this
encounter. But I don't think Mark's author was interested in writing a
story about details. I believe Mark's author was interested in illustrating
how God's power transcends our imagination, or at least the limited
imagination the systems of this world cultivate for us.

Mark
Bob Stillerman
Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost, 10/23/2022
Mark 2:1-12



a spiritually
progressive
community
of faith

You want to know what it means for God's world to burst into the present? It means we needn't be beholden any longer to agents of assumed or manufactured authority. We don't need to wait for the pencil-pushers and middle managers to deem us worthy or grant us healing. Jesus is going to act on an authority much, much, bigger, and much, much more enduring. And we can follow him in such a pursuit.

Since when did we need doors to access God's presence? Since when did we need to doors to access God's healing? Since when did we need permission to be God's people? Maybe we should commission a re-roofing committee at Sardis. I'm not sure how good I am at patchwork, but I'd love to help make some holes.

Amen.