



The Gospel of Mark

February 18 - April 5, 2015

Mountain Brook Baptist Church

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The season of Lent is a time of preparation for the celebration of our Easter hope. During the forty-day period the Lenten season entails, we take a look inward to see those areas in our lives for which we need grace and restoration. Our awareness of our need for God's salvation through Jesus Christ always makes this holy season more special.

I can't think of a better book to guide us on our Lenten journey than the Gospel of Mark. Mark's gospel is an "action" Gospel. There are no slow moments, as Jesus moves with resolve toward Golgotha, where Jesus yields his life in obedience to God's redemptive purposes (Mk. 14:36) and as a model for how we should pursue our own discipleship (Mk. 8:34). Even the apparent "lost ending" of the Gospel (Mk. 16:1-8) is an invitation for us to consider how we might carry forth the radical implications of resurrection in our otherwise helpless and hopeless everyday world.

Let me make a suggestion for your reading that came to me in an introductory New Testament class years ago. When reading Mark's gospel, always pay close attention to the manner in which a story leads into another story, while at the same time giving interpretation to the story that preceded it. Scholars call this pattern the "Markan Sandwich," and it really does aid us in understanding Mark's retelling of the Jesus story.

And what a story it is! The Gospel begins with the proclamation that Jesus is the Son of God, and though for the longest time no one seems to understand the ramifications of that confession, by the end of the gospel, even a Roman centurion gets it (Mk. 15:39).

I pray that when Holy Week comes, you'll get it too. And I pray that at the same time it will get you so that as you move on past the Easter season, you will be even more convinced that the risen Jesus goes before you and stands ready to greet you with the power each of us needs to receive the salvation that all of us so desperately desire.

Dr. Doug Dortch
Senior Minister
Mountain Brook Baptist Church



Mark 1:1-20

February 18 - 21, 2015

Dr. Joe Lewis

We spent twenty-four mostly happy years there. Memories attached themselves to everything like fine house dust. Attics and nooks got crammed with things we knew we'd never retrieve but couldn't bear to throw away. Life got cluttered even as the sharp edges wore off, so things felt good to the touch--like the horse in *The Velveteen Rabbit* who became "real" only when his "hair was loved off."

Then we moved. Nothing was decided. New memories grew, but they felt more like the rough stubble of a beard than the soft hair remaining over the ears. I didn't even know the names of my new weeds. That's the way it was for us the last time we moved. It was exhilarating--and traumatic. Like surgery, moving creates the possibility of new life-- if the patient survives.

I wonder what it was like for Andrew and Peter, James and John that day when Jesus called them to leave it all and fish for men! All their lives they had lived at the top end of the Sea of Galilee. All they ever knew was fishing. Like everyone else cobbling together a viable life in a world dominated by Rome, their anger grew every time they had to surrender fish to a tax collector on the beach at Capernaum to support an emperor a world away. And then Jesus, fresh from an encounter with a baptizing man named John, demanded a decision from them--the kingdom of God was at hand and they had a role to play in telling the world about it. Surely nothing was ever the same for them again. New memories were in the making; nets were left for others to use. Announcing God's kingdom in the hearing of Rome's soldiers was exhilarating--and traumatic. They knew from the beginning that there might be a cross at the end. But the good news Jesus preached caused their hearts to burn within them just as those two on the road to Emmaus when they realized who it was with whom they walked. I wonder what it was like. I think I know.

WEEKLY SCHEDULE

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 18 - MARK 1:1-8

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 19 - MARK 1:9-11

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 20 - MARK 1:12-15

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 21 - MARK 1:16-20

What is Lent?

Ash Wednesday marks the start of the 40-day period of the Christian Year season of Lent. This 40-day season is an allusion to the time when Jesus entered the desert to fast and pray just before the start of His public ministry. While not specifically instituted in the Bible text, the 40-day period of repentance for Christians is also analogous to the 40 days during which Moses repented and fasted in response to Israel's construction of the golden calf in the wilderness. - Dr. Kely Hatley



Mark 1:21-3:12

February 22 - 28, 2015

Hayden Walker

In this first full week of Lent, we will be reading Mark 1:21-3:12. In these stories, we see that the fame of Jesus was spreading like wildfire throughout the whole region of Galilee. Jesus was busy preaching, healing and proclaiming the Kingdom of God. His growing renown was not met with apathy: people either flocked to Jesus with amazement and commitment or with disdain and animosity.

The accounts in these chapters are captivating. A paralyzed man is carried to Jesus by his brave and believing friends as recorded in 2:1-12. We must ask: what is it in us that needs the healing touch of Jesus? Who is it in our lives that we need to carry to Jesus, when they can't take themselves?

The story of Jesus calling Levi to follow him is recorded in 2:13-17. Jesus called out "Follow me!" and received an immediate and committed response. The sinners and tax collectors knew they needed the forgiveness and presence of Jesus, while the Pharisees looked on in judgment. They trusted in their own righteousness. We must ask: how do we answer when Jesus says "follow me?" What if it means leaving behind something that is comfortable? What if it means no longer trusting in our righteousness or our own good works? Would you take the time to see yourself in these stories this week? Ask God to show you more about who he is and how you should respond to his calling. May we flock to him with the amazement and commitment that some of the people in these stories displayed.

WEEKLY SCHEDULE

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 22 - MARK 1:21-34

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 23 - MARK 1:35-45

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 24 - MARK 2:1-12

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 25 - MARK 2:13-17

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 26 - MARK 2:18-22

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 27 - MARK 2:23-28

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 28 - MARK 3:1-12

Take Your Time

Over the course of the season of Lent, you will be reading the Gospel of Mark at a pretty slow pace. Hopefully, this will give you the opportunity to reflect on each and every passage. Read and re-read the passages for the week and ask God to speak to you as you carefully read the Bible.



Mark 3:13-5:43

March 1 - 7, 2015

Wayne Splawn

I really enjoy watching sports. One of the things I find most interesting about sports is the way the people in the crowd interact with the athletes. For example, in golf, the crowd is expected to remain completely silent until the golfer has struck the ball. Even the faintest sound, such as the click of a camera shutter is prohibited because it may break the competitor's concentration. However, the crowd acts much differently at a basketball game. When a player goes to the free throw line, the people behind the goal make as much noise as possible, hold up signs, wear silly costumes and do anything they can to distract the shooter. Their goal is to break the shooter's concentration and cause him or her to miss the shot.

Life often feels more like a basketball game than a round of golf. There are many voices competing for our attention and we often have a hard time concentrating on what matters most. In Mark 4, Jesus teaches a parable about a sower who sows seed on four different types of soil. As I have read this parable over the years, the seeds that fall among the thorns have been most convicting for me. These seeds, says Jesus, represent the Word of God that is choked out by the ". . . cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things . . ." (Mark 4:19, ESV). These distractions choke out the word and cause it to be unfruitful. During this season of Lent, I would encourage you to make every effort to pay close attention to what God is saying to you through His Word (Mark 4:24). Find a quiet place where you can get away from the numerous distractions of life and listen intently to the Lord. Ask God to help you hear and obey His Word so that it might produce fruit for the Kingdom of God in your life.

WEEKLY SCHEDULE

SUNDAY, MARCH 1 - MARK 3:13-35

MONDAY, MARCH 2 - MARK 4:1-20

TUESDAY, MARCH 3 - MARK 4:21-25

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 4 - MARK 4:26-34

THURSDAY, MARCH 5 - MARK 4:35-41

FRIDAY, MARCH 6 - MARK 5:1-20

SATURDAY, MARCH 7 - MARK 5:21-43



Mark 6:1-7:30

March 8 - 14, 2015

Mary Splawn

One of the big questions in chapters 6 and 7 of Mark's Gospel is "Who is Jesus?" Chapter 6 begins with Jesus' hometown folks wondering about Jesus' identity. They say, "Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son?" Interestingly, they recognize Jesus as a wise miracle worker, but ultimately they are offended by him.

Many other people question who Jesus is. Some think Jesus is a prophet, others think he's Elijah, and King Herod even believes that he is John the Baptist reincarnate. While Jesus is recognized as someone significant, the people do not realize that he is the prophesied Messiah.

Even Jesus' disciples wrestle with this question "Who is Jesus?" They go out and minister in Jesus' name, they are present when Jesus feeds 5,000 people with just 5 loaves and 2 fishes, and they see him walk on water and take control of the winds. Still, they don't yet fully understand that their teacher is also Lord of all creation.

Interestingly, a non-Jewish woman, who by the world's standards would be the least likely candidate for recognizing who Jesus is, seems to get the closest to articulating Jesus' true identity. As she begs Jesus to heal her demon possessed daughter, the Greek woman calls Jesus "Lord" (see 7:28). Perhaps this is a mere sign of respect, like we would say "sir" today. But, maybe, just maybe, the woman understands that Jesus is Master, and this is her proclamation to follow him!

As you read through Mark this week and as you ponder the reactions of the people in these verses to Jesus, also take time to ask yourself "Who am I ... in response to who Jesus is?" In other words, how does Jesus being Lord of all creation impact your daily life?

This will require more than just a simple reading of the text. Make a conscious effort to focus on reading for transformation and not just information. As you prepare to read each day, ask God to speak to you through his Word and to give you a receptive heart (see 6:52). As you read, be sensitive to what God might be saying to you. Here are 3 categories beginning with "s" that you might examine daily. What is God saying to you about your situations, your sin, and your service of Christ? I pray that God's word will come alive and that you will be transformed as you ask God to change you to be more like Christ our Lord.

WEEKLY SCHEDULE

SUNDAY, MARCH 8 - MARK 6:1-13

MONDAY, MARCH 9 - MARK 6:14-29

TUESDAY, MARCH 10 - MARK 6:30-44

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 11 - MARK 6:45-56

THURSDAY, MARCH 12 - MARK 7:1-13

FRIDAY, MARCH 13 - MARK 7:14-23

SATURDAY, MARCH 14 - MARK 7:24-30



Mark 7:31-9:29

March 15 - 21, 2015

Wayne Splawn

If you have ever been to an optometrist for an eye exam, then you have probably had your eyes dilated. The dilating drops make your eyes sensitive to light and cause your vision to be blurry. However, over time, the effects of the dilating eye drops wear off and your sight slowly returns to normal.

This is a good picture of how the disciples slowly come to understand Jesus' identity in the Gospel of Mark. In Mark 8:29, Jesus asks the disciples to identify him. Peter speaks up on behalf of the disciples and correctly states that Jesus is the Christ. However, we soon see that Peter's understanding of Jesus is not perfect. In Mark 8:31-32, Jesus tells the disciples that he must be rejected, killed and raised on the third day. Peter is completely caught off guard by Jesus' prediction of his coming death. Peter thinks that the Christ will defeat the Romans and restore the Jewish people to power. He knows that Jesus can not accomplish this task if he is killed by the Romans. So, Peter pulls Jesus aside and rebukes him for predicting his death. Jesus responds with a rebuke of his own. Mark writes, "But turning and seeing his disciples, [Jesus] rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man'" (Mark 8:33, ESV). Jesus is radically reshaping the disciples' understanding of what it means that he is the Christ. Jesus is not a political leader who will overcome the Romans through power and force. Instead, he is the one who will defeat his people's greatest enemies, sin and death, by laying down his life on the cross. The disciples can not correctly see Jesus for who he is apart from understanding his death and resurrection.

Our vision of Jesus will have significant implications for our understanding of what it means to be his disciples. If we are to be followers of Jesus, then we must take up our cross and follow him (Mark 8:34-38) and we must measure greatness by the standard of service (Mark 9:33-36). As you read the Gospel of Mark this week, ask God to help you gain a clearer vision of who Jesus is and how your life should reflect the sacrificial love Jesus displayed for us on the cross.

WEEKLY SCHEDULE

SUNDAY, MARCH 15 - MARK 7:31-37

MONDAY, MARCH 16 - MARK 8:1-13

TUESDAY, MARCH 17 - MARK 8:14-21

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 18 - MARK 8:22-30

THURSDAY, MARCH 19 - MARK 8:31-38

FRIDAY, MARCH 20 - MARK 9:1-13

SATURDAY, MARCH 21 - MARK 9:14-29



Mark 9:30-10:52

March 22 - 28, 2015

Dr. Alvin Pelton

When a person attempts to explain a brand new concept, there are many types of illustrations and examples which can help learners grasp the concept and apply it to their lives. In this week's series of readings, Jesus attempts to help his disciples understand that God's plan is for the Son of God to really die, to really be buried and to really come back victorious from the grave. It is so simple for believers to recite the Apostles Creed each Sunday, yet there will be some individuals who still doubt that all this could really have happened the way it is described. What metaphor, illustration, miraculous event, or words can be used to help us see any differently than those young first century men as they spiritually grew into the men we now call Apostles?

Follow the progression as Jesus talks to His disciples about becoming like little children and servants. Think about how Jesus demonstrates the absolute power of God as people are healed and others set free of demons, while trouble makers are promptly dismissed. Jesus uses the example of children several times to illustrate how his followers must respond to the call of God. Jesus seems to be moving His disciples into an ever growing understanding of what it will take to follow the will of His Heavenly Father. Let us join with the disciples in seeking to grasp the wonder of the resurrection and the certainty of everlasting life.

WEEKLY SCHEDULE

SUNDAY, MARCH 22 - MARK 9:30-37

MONDAY, MARCH 23 - MARK 9:38-50

TUESDAY, MARCH 24 - MARK 10:1-16

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 25 - MARK 10:17-22

THURSDAY, MARCH 26 - MARK 10:23-31

FRIDAY, MARCH 27 - MARK 10:32-45

SATURDAY, MARCH 28 - MARK 10:46-52

Faith of a Child

Understanding children in the New Testament world takes a bit of re-framing of our mindset of what childhood meant. In New Testament times children quickly transitioned from childhood to adulthood. There were no teenage years of self-discovery. They were expected to work hard to help the family. Children in that time, just like children today, need a blessing placed on their lives. Think also about the last time you became as a little child and sat or stood in astonished amazement in the presence of Jesus. This week, ask Jesus to let you see Him with the eyes of a little child.



Mark 11:1-33

March 29, 2015

Dr. Doug Dortch

In the Gospel of Mark, no one seems to understand who Jesus really is until he goes to the cross, which is a glaring oversight considering how Jesus performed numerous miracles that should have clued folk into his real significance. There are, however, intermittent occasions when the curtain gets pulled back and people seem to get a peek at who this itinerant rabbi from Galilee named Jesus really is. One such occasion is his Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem (vv.1-11), when the way was lined with people crying out, "Hosanna!" even as the Psalmist had prophesied (Ps. 118:25-26). Of course, the same people crying out "Hosanna!" would be crying out something entirely different by the following Friday.

Our praise is often fickle and self-serving, which is Mark's point with the story that follows (vv. 12-19) concerning the clearing of the Jerusalem Temple. The story begins with Jesus cursing a fig tree for not producing fruit, even though it was not the season for fig trees to produce. More than likely, Jesus chose to curse the tree not because it failed to provide for him during a bout of hunger; it was more that because the fig tree was a stock symbol for Israel (Jer. 8:13; Hos. 9:10; Joel 1:7; Mic. 7:1), and Jesus was preparing himself for an encounter with a corrupt and decrepit religious system that wouldn't know the truth if it came riding into town as the prophet Zechariah had predicted (Zech. 9:9). It was "business as usual" in the Temple, and Jesus had to make a scene in order to command everyone's attention. Ancient places of worship often functioned as makeshift banks, and while a temple might seem to be a good place for people to conduct such business matters, when those types of deals take the place of a holy place's primary purpose, the wrong gods get elevated, and salvation becomes just another transaction and not the special gift of God that Jesus taught it to be.

The next morning Jesus and his disciples passed by the fig tree that he had cursed the previous day, and sure enough, it was withered to its roots (vv.20-25). His disciples seemed surprised that the tree had withered so quickly, but not Jesus. He used the withered tree as an example of what can happen when people trust their emotions as well as their actions to God. Faith and prayer are a powerful combination, and truly remarkable things happen when people value prayer above everything else and couple it with the conviction that God hears our prayers and responds to our deepest needs, among which is forgiveness for our fickle and self-serving ways.

This chapter, therefore, centers on recognizing who Jesus is and yielding ourselves to his authority. When we do so, our faith flourishes and our lives become so much more productive in terms of experiencing God's blessings and being sustained by His grace. (Continued on the next page.)



Mark 11:1-33

March 29, 2015

Dr. Doug Dortch

As we begin this Holy Week, look carefully at your confession. Is it strong and steadfast? Does your prayer life reflect your confidence in God? Is His grace at work in your life so that it brings out the best in you and through you to others? Or is it the same old, same old? This week is not about "business as usual." God is up to something truly transformative. So, let your praises ring out, your prayers be lifted up, and your faith be acted out. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, and blessed will be those who are aware enough to receive him.

WEEKLY SCHEDULE

SUNDAY, MARCH 29 - MARK 11:1-33

MONDAY, MARCH 30 - MARK 12:1-44

TUESDAY, MARCH 31 - MARK 13:1-37

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 1 - MARK 14:1-11

THURSDAY, APRIL 2 - MARK 14:12-72

FRIDAY, APRIL 3 - MARK 15:1-41

SATURDAY, APRIL 4 - MARK 15:42-47

SUNDAY, APRIL 5 - MARK 16:1-8

Readings for Holy Week

You will notice that we have provided you with additional devotions for Holy Week. We hope that these will be beneficial to you as you prepare to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus on Easter Sunday!



Mark 12:1-44

March 30, 2015

Dr. Doug Dortch

Jesus' refusal to answer the religious leaders on the matter of his spiritual authority wasn't a dodge on his part. Because Jesus was so given to parables as a way of challenging perceptions, he shared his last one to "back door" his opponents into acknowledging their realization that he spoke God's truth and their jealousy of that fact (vv.1-12). Jesus' parable of the Wicked Tenants confronted the religious leaders with the recognition that Jesus was the last in a long line of prophets, all of whom found rejection from the people who should have embraced them the most. And the hardest of all truths for them to take was that their opposition to Jesus wasn't just a rejection of him; it was actually a rejection of God's purpose. Jesus' opponents knew they had to get rid of him. But because they feared the crowds, who resonated with his uplifting acts and deeds, the religious leaders thought it best to trap Jesus in his own words.

The first trap was one that had to do with the paying of taxes (vv.13-17). If there was anyone the religious leaders hated more than Jesus, it was the Roman Caesar, who levied burdensome taxes upon the nation and did not recognize their authority in any meaningful way. So they sent to Jesus a group of Pharisees and Herodians who couldn't have been more opposed to one another, except in their dislike for Jesus. Their question to Jesus had to do with the legitimacy of paying the Roman tax. If Jesus had answered, "Pay the tax," they would have exposed him before the people as being on the side of Rome, their common enemy. But if he had answered, "Don't pay the tax," they would have charged him with sedition against the emperor. Jesus could see through their ruse and asked for the coin they used to pay the tax, which they easily produced. The coin bore the image of Caesar and therefore belonged to him. But humans bear the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27), and God is therefore deserving of our highest and deepest loyalty.

What the Pharisees and Herodians could not do, the Sadducees attempted next (vv.18-27). The Sadducees were the fundamentalists of first century Judaism, and they did not believe in the concept of resurrection because of how they did not read it in the Law of Moses, which was the part of the Old Testament they held most dear. Their question to Jesus was hypothetical and far-fetched, though it did draw upon the concept of Levirate marriage (Deut. 25:5-6), whereby a deceased man might have descendants through his brother. "If a widow goes through seven brothers and leaves no children, whose wife will she be in the resurrection?" (v.23) Jesus' answer exposed their duplicity on the subject of both resurrection and scriptural authority. The subject of resurrection isn't about social rules; it's about being connected to a God who knows nothing but life and will not allow anything, not even death, to frustrate His life-giving purposes. (Continued on the next page.)



Mark 12:1-44

March 30, 2015

Dr. Doug Dortch

Next to approach Jesus was a scribe, a scholar in the Law of Moses, who though impressed with Jesus' savvy, was not yet willing to accept him as God's Son (vv.28-34). His question was also one that on the surface appeared insoluble. "Which commandment is the first of all?" Any of the ten Jesus might have chosen would have left him open to the charge that he was elevating one of the commandments at the expense of the rest. Jesus' response encompassed both the vertical and horizontal dimensions of the Law – "Love God, love neighbor" – and became a foreshadowing of how he would soon give tangible expression to the Law's fulfillment through his death on the cross. While the scribe was impressed with Jesus' response to his question, his respect for Jesus' wisdom was laudable, but not sufficient to allow him entrance into God's Kingdom. "You are not far from the kingdom of God," Jesus told him (v.34), but clearly the scribe was not yet to a place where he was willing to deny himself, take up his cross, and follow after Jesus" (Mk. 8:34).

Mark's story shifts back to the temple courts, where Jesus is teaching the crowd about the Messiah and how the Messiah would not be just a "son of David" but one greater than David (vv. 35-40). As Jesus taught, he warned his audience against the self-promotion of the teachers of the Law and their desire to prey upon unsuspecting souls, particularly widows, who might look to their leaders for protection but only end up even more penniless in the end.

That teaching led Jesus to notice one such widow, who had come to the Temple to make her freewill offering (vv.41-44). Compared to the gifts of the rich, her two small copper coins seemed to be a drop in the bucket, in the literal sense of the word. However, in the economy of the Kingdom of God, her gift represented immeasurably more, as she had given to God all that she had to live on.

What is that you have given to God? Have you given to Him His share of what He has allowed you to produce with your life? Have you rendered to Him all that belongs to God? Have you been willing to sacrifice your all to Him because you believe Him to be the Lord of the living? Have you shown your love for God by taking seriously your responsibility to work for the best in the life of your neighbor? These, too, are Easter questions, because they call us to think seriously as to how our answer to them represents our belief that Jesus is the Messiah and how we find delight in recounting his victory over all enemies, including death itself, and how that victory is offered to us as we place our trust in him.



Mark 13:1-37

March 31, 2015

Dr. Doug Dortch

Students of the New Testament speak of Mark 13 as “the little Apocalypse.” The word apocalypse refers to the revelation of God’s faithfulness in the face of calamitous times. When we think that everything appears to be falling apart, we can know that God is firmly in control and is simply tearing down an old way of life in order to build up something newer and better.

Was there anything in Jerusalem more breathtaking than the Temple that had been enhanced by Herod the Great, with its “large stones” and “large buildings?” (vv.1-8) Evidently, Jesus wasn’t impressed. His prediction regarding the destruction of the Temple was solidly in line with similar prophecies from the past (Jer. 26:6, 18; Mic. 3:12). It wasn’t that Jesus was anti-Temple; it was more that Jesus was concerned that putting faith in anything or anyone other than God would take a person down a wrong path. And the more calamitous the time, the more important it would be to trust one’s situation to God.

Jesus never indicated that the way of faith would be easy. He had always said that a cross would be involved (Mk. 8:34). The future of God’s people will always be a difficult one because of how it will put them in situations where they will be scapegoats over God’s obliteration of the status quo (vv.9-13). But God will sustain them through the distressful time and will give His grace to enable them to endure to the end (v.13).

The people in Jesus’ day would have known of such times, especially during the years just prior to Jesus’ birth when God’s people were subjected by their Seleucid rulers to hideous and blasphemous persecutions that would have been worse if God in His providence had not cut them short (vv.14-23). In such times we are prone to turn to shortcuts and any avenue of escape, even if it means following persons we may know in our hearts are not worth following but who at the same time seem to be our only means of aid (vv.21-22). This is not a good plan, according to Jesus. Such are times to be even more patient and more alert, and more trusting of the direction Jesus has given us, a direction which will ultimately see us through.

How does the old saying go? “The darkness of the night will not last forever.” There is indeed a sunrise sure to come. Jesus assured his disciples that such a sunrise would come upon them when at the hour of their greatest need, the Son of Man would come as the prophet Daniel had predicted (Dan. 7:13-14) in “great power and glory” to “gather his elect...from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven” (vv.24-27). (Continued on the next page.)



Mark 13:1-37

March 31, 2015

Dr. Doug Dortch

How would the disciples know when such distress would come about? There would be “signs” (vv.28-31), such as a rise in the types of persecution and opposition Jesus mentioned earlier. But those times could also become ones of great promise, as disciples face them by trusting in the presence of Jesus (v.29) and finding confidence in the assurance that his words would never pass away (v.31). In the meantime, Jesus counsel was for his followers to keep alert and to keep awake so that when the Son of Man returned, they would be ready to receive him (vv.32-37).

There are times when each of us feels like life is coming apart at the seams and we aren't sure if we're going to be able to make it. It should come as great comfort that none of this comes as a surprise to Jesus, who taught us to anticipate such eventualities. And it should come as even greater comfort that he promised God's provisions to see us through such times, again and again if necessary, until he returns to receive us as our Risen and Reigning Lord.



April 1: Mark 14:1-11

April 2: Mark 14:12-72

Dr. Doug Dortch

Mark sets the stage for the proceedings that led to Jesus' death by describing its connection to Passover, the Jewish celebration of God's deliverance from their Egyptian bondage (Exod. 12:1-36; Deut. 16:1-8). These proceedings are framed by anointing stories, one where a woman anoints him while he is still living (14:3-9) and another where three women go to anoint him when they think he is dead, only to discover that he is very much alive (16:1-8).

The first anointing story involved an unnamed woman who poured lavish amounts of very expensive oil upon Jesus' head, almost as if she knew that she was preparing his body for death. Some might suggest that her action was intended as an anointing fit for a king (1 Sam. 10:1; 2 Kgs. 9:6). Regardless of her motivation, some in the room were not happy that she had gone to such wasteful expense when they thought the ointment could have been sold and the money given to the poor. Jesus countered their reaction with the response that while serving the poor is certainly important; it is equally so that people express their love for others while they still have opportunity, even as this anonymous woman has done so extravagantly for him (v.7).

Judas did not follow her lead, and so he set out immediately to bargain with the chief priests for a way to hand Jesus over to them, most likely because he didn't agree with Jesus' thinking and in his mind everything was on the verge of getting out of hand (vv.10-11).

A short while later, Jesus and the disciples set out to make preparations for the Passover. Jesus sent them into the city to secure a guest room (the word means "inn," much as in the Bethlehem story in Luke's Gospel), giving them specific instructions, which came to pass exactly as he had told them (vv.12-16).

As they gathered around the table, Jesus disclosed to them how one of them would soon betray him, a thought that none of them except Judas could abide (vv.17-21). The meal continued with the institution of the Lord's Supper, a memorial meal that was to symbolize what Jesus was about to do on the cross to bring in the Kingdom of God (vv.22-25). From the "guest room" the disciples went out to the Mount of Olives, where Jesus told them that they would scatter and that Peter would deny him (vv.26-31). If you think that any of these words came easy to the disciples, imagine how hard it must have been for Jesus. We see just how heavily the burden weighed upon him as he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane for God to come up with another way to fulfill His Kingdom purposes, only to come to terms with the way God had chosen and the wisdom of what He willed. (Continued on the next page.)



April 1: Mark 14:1-11

April 2: Mark 14:12-72

Dr. Doug Dortch

You see Jesus' spirit having moved from resignation to resolve as he awakened his sleeping disciples with these words: "Enough! The hour has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand!" (vv.32-42)

The party led by Judas arrived as Jesus had said (vv.43-52). A kiss, which was the sign for respect and intimacy, became the means by which Jesus was identified as the one to be arrested and taken to be tried. A brief skirmish ensued between the arresting party and Jesus' disciples, but Jesus' disciples eventually deserted him and ran away, in spite of the fact that they had promised never to do so (v.31).

The chapter ends with Jesus in the house of the high priest Caiaphas, where Jesus' opponents question him in order to discover a reason to put him to death (vv.53-65). Today, we would call the proceedings against Jesus a "kangaroo court." False witness after false witness came forward with charges against Jesus, but all of them were in conflict with one another. Finally, some men were found who remembered Jesus saying that he would tear down the Temple, though even their stories contradicted one another as well. The high priest finally took matters into his own hands. "Are you the Messiah?" (v.61) And when Jesus answered that he was and quoted a Messianic Psalm (Ps. 110:1), the high priest found him guilty of blasphemy and condemned him to death.

Meanwhile, Peter had followed the arrest party all the way to the courtyard of the high priest, where Jesus was being questioned by his opponents (vv.66-71). Others there recognized Peter and pointed out his association with Jesus, but Peter repeatedly denied it, just as Jesus had predicted, and when the rooster crowed three times, Peter remembered and cried.

The chapter begins with an unnamed woman's tribute. It ends with one of his closest disciple's denial. In the middle is betrayal. Most of our testimony to Jesus vacillates somewhere in between. But this week is a good one to be more consistent in offering a positive witness to Jesus regardless of whatever ridicule or rejection may come our way as a result. As Mark's Gospel will assure us, he bore a much heavier burden for us, which in the end will result not only in his glory, but also in our own.



April 3: Mark 15:1-41

April 4: Mark 15:42-47

Dr. Doug Dortch

As students of the New Testament have long noted, Mark's Gospel is "a passion narrative with an extended introduction." In other words, the cross is central and everything leading up to it points in its direction.

The entire 15th chapter of Mark deals with Jesus' crucifixion. The religious authorities took Jesus early on Friday morning to the Roman procurator Pilate because they had no authority in the eyes of Rome to execute Jesus themselves (vv.1-15). Pilate's interrogation of Jesus was as ludicrous as that of Caiaphas, the high priest, perhaps even more so since Jesus offered no verbal defense against the charges leveled against him. More than likely, Pilate thought Jesus to be another misguided Messiah, which was why he offered his Jewish subjects a choice between Jesus, a seemingly harmless rabbi whom his opponents envied (v.10), or Barabbas, a true threat against Rome who had been arrested during a recent insurrection (v.7). The verdict was for Barabbas to be released and Jesus to be crucified. In the span of one short week, the same crowd that on Sunday had been crying out "Hosanna!" was now crying out "Crucify him!"

Crucifixion was Rome's favorite form of capital punishment, intended to teach would-be rebels a lesson. It involved scourging and mockery, which only added to the humiliation of the victim being nailed to a post or a tree (vv.16-20). It was Rome's way of saying, "We'll show you who's boss and what happens to people who get in our way." But though Jesus didn't exactly put himself in Rome's way, he was beaten and mocked anyway in order to send a message than anyone who either claimed or was touted to be a king would be put down like the rebel Rome saw him to be.

The only respite to the agony of the story came through a man named Simon, who was pressed into service to carry the cross of Jesus (vv.21-24). The beating Jesus received had depleted him of his strength, and Simon was forced to step in to carry Jesus' cross the rest of the way. Many might read this part of the story as an insignificant aside, but two implications would suggest otherwise. One, Jesus had said earlier that anyone who wished to be his disciple would be required to deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow after him (8:34). In many respects, this act of discipleship is precisely what this Simon was doing. And two, Mark goes to the trouble of mentioning the sons of Simon, Alexander and Rufus, who are also mentioned in Paul's letter to the Romans, which was written to the same community as the one to which Mark's Gospel was directed (Rom. 16:13). Why else would Mark and Paul have mentioned these two men if their father had not become a follower of Jesus after having carried his cross? (Continued on the next page.)



April 3: Mark 15:1-41

April 4: Mark 15:42-47

Dr. Doug Dortch

Mark is very specific as to the time when the crucifixion began, nine o'clock in the morning (vv. 25-32). Because crucifixion was a public form of punishment and one normally done in groups, Jesus was crucified between two common criminals, their crosses on either side of his. The mocking continued, from the crowd that had gathered to the priests who were present to the criminals who was being crucified beside him (though Luke tells us one of the criminals came to his senses – Lk. 23:39-43). The whole scene smacks of humiliation and shame, none of which Jesus deserved but which Jesus willingly endured in order to fulfill prophecy and atone for our sins (Isa. 50:4-9; 52:13-15; 53:1-12).

As darkness descended upon the place, Jesus felt all alone (vv.33-41). Even his cry from the cross, a quotation of Psalm 22, was misinterpreted by the bystanders as a cry for Elijah's help, when in reality it was a last gasp confession of Jesus' trust for God to be present and to honor his witness by accomplishing God's redemptive purposes. As Jesus breathed his last, a Roman centurion offered his assessment of what had taken place by branding Jesus "the Son of God," which is how Mark's Gospel began (1:1).

The fact that Jesus' crucifixion took place on the day before the Sabbath meant that he needed to be buried quickly so that no one would be forced to violate Sabbath laws by doing work on that holy day (vv.42-47). An esteemed member of the priestly counsel, Joseph of Arimathea, boldly stepped forward to claim Jesus' body and provide him a proper burial. If Jesus had been crucified on a Saturday, as a religious leader Joseph wouldn't have been available to bury the body. Jesus would have been buried by the Romans, who more than likely would have buried him in an unmarked grave, which would have made confirmation of his resurrection unlikely. Joseph's boldness reminds us that not all of the religious authorities opposed Jesus. Some resonated with his message, and though few of them stepped up publicly to support Jesus, in his hour of greatest need, this one did.

One of the great gospel spirituals is "Were You There?" "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" Mark's Gospel invites us to go there and to behold the agony of Jesus' death in order that we might come to the ecstasy of knowing that he suffered for us and our salvation. As the song says, reading this story causes us "to tremble." But if like Simon we dare to take up the cross Jesus bids us to shoulder, then the same power that sustained him will sustain us as we endure whatever humiliation and shame might come to us for our faith in Jesus in order to experience in due time the joy of God's salvation.



Mark 16:1-8

April 5, 2015

Dr. Doug Dortch

Years ago, during my seminary days in Louisville, Kentucky, I remember the local newspaper conducting a writing contest every year. The feature editor would offer the beginning of a short story and then invite readers to take the story from that point to its conclusion. I always found the contest fascinating because of the myriad endings contestants came up with, though some were obviously better than others.

Mark's account of the Resurrection of Jesus has that same quality. It's as if Mark has offered us the basic details of the story, which by the way are consistent with the accounts in the other Gospels, and then invites us to carry the story forward. For example, on the first day of the week, the women go to the tomb to anoint what they assumed would be the dead body of Jesus (vv.1-8). No one had ever heard of a resurrection before, so the women weren't anticipating that Jesus would have been raised from the dead. Their only concern was the heavy stone that guarded the tomb; who would roll it away? Instead they entered the tomb and were greeted by an angel seated at the right side of where Jesus had been laid (Ps. 110:1?). As one would expect, the women were afraid, and the angel's words didn't exactly calm their nerves. In spite of their being commissioned to give witness to what they had seen, a consistent Easter theme, the women fled from the tomb and said nothing to anyone because of their fear; and there the story ends.

Or does it end there? We have two endings that have been added by later scribes (v.8b and vv.9-20). While we don't know if either of these endings goes back to the original Gospel, we do know that later believers struggled to find ways of giving a more faithful witness to the best news of all, the grave could not hold Jesus.

How would you add your witness to the story? I think that's what Mark intended for us to consider. How has the good news of Jesus' resurrection transformed my life? What difference does Easter hope make in your everyday experience? The women had an excuse; no one had been resurrected before. We, on the other hand, have two thousand years of testimony to the victory Jesus attained on that first Easter Sunday. How much more pressing is the need for us to speak that truth to people today! We are disciples of one who is so much more than a wise teacher who did remarkable deeds. We follow a Living Lord, with whom we walk and talk and find strength and hope for the living of our days. And when our days on this earth are done, we have the assurance our life will continue. Because Jesus lives, so will we! Easter is not just a single day on the calendar; it is a source of hope that springs eternal and one that makes every moment so much more fulfilling.