

The Gospels: Where His-Story Becomes Our Story

July 13, 2003, Central Moravian Church
Dr. Arthur Freeman

Liturgy:	Celebration pp. 43-47
Hymns:	503 God's Word Alive and Active 619 God of All, Whose Love Surrounds Us
Scripture:	I Cor. 15:3-11 Mark 16:1-8 Mark 1:1-15

The Friendship Class afterwards will provide opportunity to discuss the sermon in the south-west area under the balcony.

That our New Testament begins not only with one but four Gospels indicates clearly how important these stories of Jesus are. They are no casual part of Christian history. The earliest story of Jesus, Mark, was written about 64 CE, only some 30 years after Jesus' historic ministry. This is much sooner than most of our records of historical figures. Moreover, Luke in 1:1-4 describes his method of historical research and indicates the availability of earlier sources and their use to bridge the historical gap. But there is also a very special early source mentioned in Paul's letters, namely Paul himself who provides us with early knowledge of Jesus' resurrection and the Last Supper in I Corinthians, in written form only some 20 years after these events and only a few years from the events in the age of the oral tradition Paul used. Though Paul did not know Jesus during Jesus' ministry, Paul knew Jesus one year after his resurrection through the revelations of Jesus which came to him.

Why would Jesus be so important to the early church and to us? Of course we have the importance of the records of his teaching which are central to the Gospel of Matthew and we have the importance of his life and message about life and God. But two of our Gospels, the Gospels of Mark and John, tell us not only much about Jesus but much about us, about how we should live and deal with life. The life of Jesus then came to be seen as providing us with a model or paradigm for the living of life, our living of life. In becoming our model Jesus courageously ventured into life's adventure, he lived through all we would experience, and he determined to become our Companion, our Companion not just as one who knew life but as one who, once resurrected, would provide a presence, that we might never be alone --- for he knew what it was to be alone and he knew that God did not intend this. And he knew that life could hardly be lived alone.

Because the Gospels became so important to the lives of persons, three of the four show signs of having been transformed as they were used. We only have time to indicate that it is in the Gospel of Mark where in the manuscripts we have indication of at least two different endings, if not more. The second ending contains all the things we would expect: appearance to the women, appearances to Jesus' disciples where he gives them a world mission, instructions on baptism, the promise of signs such as casting out demons, speaking in tongues, handling snakes, and drinking poison. Everything is cared for. Nothing is left to question. They even see him go to heaven.

What scholars consider to be the first ending is quite different. Women come to the tomb to anoint his body, concerned about how they will get into the tomb. When they arrive the door is open and they enter and see a young man dressed in white. He speaks to them and then reminds them of what Jesus had previously said:

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 will again lead you as a shepherd leads a sheep; going ahead of you to Galilee, there you will see him, just as he told you. – So they went out and fled, for terror and amazement had seized them: and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

There are no male disciples here, there are no appearances of Jesus, there is no commission to mission, there is no leaving of Jesus to go to heaven for he has indicated he will stay with them. There is no discussion of baptism and signs. They hear a message from a young man who really is in a sense a preacher of the message or Gospel about Christ, but they see very little. They don't know what to do -- for they are afraid. Mark designed an ending with which all Christians can identify. The women represent the readers of the Gospel. They hear a message (the Gospel) and they don't completely understand it and can't quite believe it. And they don't know where things are going, whether Jesus is really alive, and whether he will again go before them. His going before them is the major issue. Will they now have a life just remembering some things about Jesus and what he did -- or will they have a life in which he lives and is involved. What he lived sets the pattern for their life, but the PERSON who lived this is also with them. In this way almost everything said in the Gospel, almost every experience Jesus had, almost every issue with which he dealt is parallel to our own life and experience ----- BUT ALSO HE IS HERE AS HE WAS THERE. When we deal with Christ we are both called into his experience and HE is present within ours.

Now, I want to use this discussion as a basis for examining the first part of the Gospel of Mark and what it means to us.

The Gospel of Mark does not start with Jesus birth or childhood because it wants to focus on the problems of entry into adult life. How can we enter and handle this world which is around us. The Gospel wants us to draw a parallel between Jesus' brave and intentional entry into his world and our entry into ours. At some point we must choose to be a part of our real world, to venture into it and to face and live its issues. Real world and real life cannot be evaded. In fact, our decision to do this is not only a matter of maturing, of becoming who we can become, but is related to the way Mark presents the presence of God in life: as the presence of God was in Jesus so the presence of God must also be in us and we must choose to be in the world for God. Thus to consciously enter the world in which we live is both our venture and God's. There is hardly any other way that really matters for God to be in life and for God to make a difference in life than to be in us. God being in the world in us is the most profound way of God's being in life and making a difference.

It is also important to note that the story of how to deal with life does not start with how much I can bring to life or what my problems or possibilities are, but what God in Jesus has already brought to life. Our life starts with him and his life. Let us now see how life, through Christ, is modeled in this first chapter of Mark where we find in its first words "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ" which might be paraphrased: "This is where his good news becomes our good news." And while the following words are often related to John the Baptist, they may very well apply to Jesus: "I am sending my messenger ahead of you who will prepare your way". God needs messengers to prepare the way.

Jesus leaves home and responds to a call to engage life. We are not told what led him to this but it is clear that his world had many difficulties and challenges and somehow God led him to this. He comes to the Baptist who by the ritual of baptism receives him into his adult life, and then several things happen. As he comes out of the water he sees the heavens torn apart (the reality of heaven is disclosed), the Spirit of God descends on him like a dove (the presence of God is with him) and a voice comes from heaven: "you are my Son, the Beloved" (God gives, gifts, to him his identity). Then when he knows the reality of heaven as well as earth, when he knows who he is, the Spirit drives him into the wilderness where he was 40 days --

where he faced everything the world could contain: God was there, angels were there; Satan was there (seen as the prince of the world who opposed God), and wild beasts were there. All of the reality of heaven and all the reality of life and world, all of the reality of good and evil, were there. Whatever would have to be faced or dealt with in the future, was anticipated there. Whatever was needed as resources and insights he came to terms with there.

Now it is important to note that the 3 temptations of Jesus about his mission are not present in Mark as in Luke or Matthew. The dynamics of the wilderness are presented, but their description is kept general because the story must apply to you and me as well as Jesus. This is true of so much in Mark: what Jesus' experience provides is relevant for our experience. Regarding the Temptation, it is important to remember that this should probably be called "the Trial" where the forces of life "tried" Jesus as the forces of life "try" us. This is a part of life which does not go away, the wilderness does not go away – but also God and Jesus do not go away.

In simplest fashion, what we have then is Jesus, feeling the call of life and the call of God, venturing into life and finding out what both God and life are like. Though the rest of his short year of life will be far from easy, he now knows what life is and how to approach it, he knows its difficulties and its resources, he knows how to live it.

Now let's just spend a few moments reflecting on what this passage from Mark may mean to each of us, remembering that Mark put it into the form we find because he knew that the story of Jesus means much to us when we look at it, live with it, open our hearts and minds to it. This is what we call "Devotional" or "Spiritual Reading of Scripture." This means that we are not looking at the passage merely to understand its historical meaning or to get information, but to understand its personal meaning. Moravians through the Daily Texts and the Passion Week Manual are used to doing this. Our special adult programs on Spiritual Formation during the church school hour in Sept. – Oct. and Jan. – Feb. of this next year will deal with this. We hope you will consider participating in these sessions.

Please then reflect with me upon the Markan passage in this time of silence and reflection:

The passage is about having the courage to venture into a difficult world and discovering the resources to live. What are the more difficult issues into which you need to venture? Where do you find the courage?

Have you been able to discover the reality of God in your life and the help that God can bring? Have there been any times when you felt heaven was torn open and you saw the possibilities God can provide?

Have you discovered that you are God's daughter or son, whatever else your identity, and do you know you are beloved and can live from this identity?

Since Jesus lived out before you a life that you too will live, can you discover him as your Companion in life, one who goes both with you and before you since he already knows what life is. How do you make use of his companionship?

Take just a few moments to sit down with Jesus in some corner of your mind and to talk over with Jesus, who shares your life, what you have discovered.

Amen.