

## Gospel of Mark

We will learn that this gospel, prepared for a Roman audience, used a completely different structure than that of Matthew. Mark told the same story, but went straight to Christ as an adult, and organized the story to go forward to a midpoint, and then back with stories that parallel what came forward. While not every story is part of a pair, to try to show this structure, I have included parallel passages when they seem to match.

*April 10*

Mark 1:1-4 Christ proclaimed (16:1-20)

Mark announced good news in the same way the Romans publicized the good news of their latest military victories. The term "gospel" was used politically and Mark was the only one of the four writers to begin his account this way, though now we call all of them by this term.

It is thought this was the first gospel written, and that Peter served as a primary source. Matthew and Luke contained many parallel stories to those in Mark, and the three are called synoptic gospels which means they can be "seen together" since they contain much of the same material. John would come later and fill in material from the earlier part of the ministry, add stories and longer discourses, and use his unique structure as well.

Mark structured his story by having parallel stories moving forward and then folding back from the midpoint of the transfiguration. In this case, the proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God corresponds to the commissioning of the disciples by Jesus to take his message to all of the world.

The theme of Mark differed from Matthew's approach to his Jewish audience. Mark wrote to Romans and made the case that Jesus was the anti-Caesar. Caesar demanded acknowledgement as Lord, but Jesus invited people rather than conquering them, and proved to be the Lord of a far better kingdom. Mark began with John the Baptist's proclamation that a great Lord was coming. Rather than dominating them, he would empower them with the gift of the Holy Spirit, a gift that would enable them to change the world.

*Am I living in the power of the Holy Spirit and doing my part to transform the world around me?*

*April 11*

Mark 1:5-11 Baptism (Passion 15:21-47)

Mark, the same John Mark who quit missionary work with Paul, is thought to be the author of this gospel. (Acts 15:38). It is said that Mark became a translator for Peter in Rome, so listened to his stories and sermons and wrote them down after Peter's death.

Perhaps having heard the stories spoken helps explain why Mark's style is so brisk. In the King James he used the term "straightway" 19 times as though all is happening very quickly. His content paralleled Matthew and Luke, but was usually shorter. He handled Jesus' baptism in three verses, his temptation in two, and his start of the announcement of the kingdom in another two. The baptism prefigured Christ's death and resurrection, and our identification with him. (Romans 6:4)

Here we are introduced to the first time Jesus was acknowledged as God's son. At the Baptism God said "You are my beloved Son." This would be repeated at the transfiguration when a voice from heaven would say "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him." Mark used the phrase "Son of God" at key moments in his gospel: 1) to introduce the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God (Mark 1:1), 2) as evil spirits were thrown out and identified him (Mark 3:11, 5:7), and 3) when the Roman officer declared his faith as Jesus died (Mark 15:39). It would take the disciples he called much longer to truly realize his identity.

*Have I dropped everything to follow Jesus, acknowledging him as God's son?*

*April 12*

Mark 1:12,13 Temptation (Trial 15:1-20)

Mark gave no details of the conversation with Satan, but focused on Jesus' 40 days of solitude and temptation. The number of days recalled stories of wilderness experiences through the Old Testament, such as that of Moses, the Israelites wandering, and Elijah. In each of these stories there is a striking encounter with God that took place in a barren and lonely place.

The Judean wilderness is made up of barren, lumpy hills, dry and uninhabited. Mark mentioned wild animals, and the ecology at that time was richer than today. Jesus could have encountered bears, leopards, wolves, hyenas, jackals, foxes, boars, wild asses, antelopes, or cobras. There is no mention that they were harmful to him; the harm came on a spiritual level.

After Satan left him, angels came and comforted him. These competitors in the supernatural realm give us a image for the unseen competition that surrounds us and can affect our moods, relationships, perspectives, or even the mob mentality that can overtake people to harm others.

*Do I stay alert to underlying spiritual conflicts that may be at work around me?*

*April 13*

Mark 1:14-20 Disciples called (Disciples fail Mark 14:50-72)

Mark condensed the call to the disciples to an essence that applies to all of us. "Come be my disciples..." said Jesus, and "they left at once and went with him." Peter and Andrew then

walked with Jesus a little farther up the shore, and they encountered their business partners, James and John. These two friends immediately left their father and went with them. These core four disciples were the start of a movement that upended the world.

Our initial response to become a disciple may have taken place as an invitation from a friend or at an evangelistic rally or at a moment with a book or some other spiritual influence. After we have first responded, there may be moments when we feel we are being asked to serve. That inner call is something we always want to respond to “at once” or “immediately”. No hesitation. Just an underlying willingness to do something Jesus wants from us now.

*Am I quick to respond to opportunities to serve?*

*April 14*

Mark 1:21-34 Ministry begins (Ministry ends Mark 14:43-49)

Mark introduced a story not included in Matthew, the dramatic healing of a demoniac in Capernaum where Jesus had become a regular preacher at the synagogue. This introduced Jesus as someone with extraordinary spiritual authority over evil. In Mark, he is said to cast out or drive out demons sixteen times.

In the Old Testament, there were four types of characters that particularly prefigured Christ: kings, prophets, priests, and champions/warriors. Joshua is a primary example of a liberating warrior as well as Judges like Gideon who rescued the people from oppressors. While all the gospels use the imagery of all four, in each gospel one particularly stands out. In Matthew it is kingship that is emphasized; Luke emphasizes the teaching and healing work of a prophet; John emphasized priesthood, and through the emphasis on authority over spirits, Mark focused on rescue from oppression. This fits his theme of Jesus as a liberating Lord better than Caesar.

Authority over evil spiritual forces is something Jesus’ passed on to his disciples when he sent them out two by two. (Mark 6:7). After the resurrection, he did so again, and we can take that authority today. (Mark 16:17)

It must have been meaningful for Peter to have his own mother-in-law healed. Jesus was better than antibiotics, and she was instantly healed from her fever. She then served them a meal together looking ahead to the last meal they will share at the end of the book. Jesus once more healed the crowds and Mark said “he ordered many demons to come out of their victims.”

*Do I boldly pray against evil wherever I see it?*

*April 15*

Mark 1:35-2:2 Praying alone (14:32-42)

Here we are given a detail not in the other gospels that must have been a vivid memory for Peter. Jesus went outdoors somewhere to pray, and Simon Peter apparently organized a search party to find him and let him know he was in demand. Jesus then began an itinerant ministry through Galilee, preaching in the synagogues and expelling demons.

Mark repeated the story of the remarkable healing of a leper, but added the explanation that this success and the man's enthusiastic recounting of his healing meant crowds made it impossible to keep up a pattern of teaching in synagogues. Instead, Jesus had to go to outdoor spaces to manage the crowds.

For a break, perhaps, they returned to Peter's hometown of Capernaum and the house was soon packed with people, and Jesus preached there. Whether in a place designated for teaching, outdoors, or in someone's house, Jesus kept preaching and healing. Whatever our calling, we need to be flexible regarding precisely how and where we carry out ministry. The point is to serve.

*How flexible am I regarding how and where my ministry takes place?*

*April 16*

Mark 2:3-12 Confrontation with leaders (12:35-44)

We've read this story that shows an early confrontation with the religious leaders which we know will culminate with the crucifixion. The issue was that they thought it was blasphemous for Jesus to forgive sins, whereas we see that he was the only one with authority to do this.

A new detail is that those arriving with the paralyzed man dug through the clay roof to lower the man to Jesus--creative! Two words stand out in the story: "mat" and "forgive". The external mat paralleled where the man was on his journey to forgiveness and wholeness.

Paralyzed man on a mat	Was brought to Jesus
Friends lowered the man on his mat	Jesus forgave him
Jesus asked which was easier to say:	
"Pick up your mat and walk"	Or "Your sins are forgiven."
Critics were silent, but Jesus said:	
"Take up your mat and go home."	"I have authority to forgive sins."
The man jumped up, took the mat He was healed and forgiven	

In our lives we may have external markers of our inner needs, and we can point to something as evidence of that transformation of moving from our needs to Jesus' solution.

*What is my "mat"? Is there some tangible thing that symbolizes my spiritual needs?*

*April 17*

Mark 2:13-17 Wholehearted discipleship. (12:28-34)

While the name here is "Levi, Son of Alphaeus", this is another name for Matthew, the tax-collector. The text is almost identical, but adds after mentioning "notorious sinners" that "there were many people of this kind among the crowds that followed Jesus.". Despite his good job which presumably paid well, Matthew did not hesitate to give it up for the much better calling of following Jesus.

Jesus attracted the disreputable and welcomed them to his table. His actions contrasted sharply with the respectable religious people. How often we are tempted to be more like the religious leaders than like Jesus, and close our hearts to vulnerable people. From his example we know this is not right and that we need to learn to engage anyone with great love.

Perhaps there are people in whom we have invested time and love and care and prayer, but they disappoint and fail spiritually. It is still not the time to give up on them, but still share Christ's love.

*Am I connecting to "notorious sinners" with grace?*

*April 18*

Mark 2:18-22 Fasting and feasting

Jesus was reproached for being better known for dinner parties than for fasting, and for informal snacking rather than scrupulous Sabbath observance. In the Old Testament there were six feasts and one fast annually. Of the feasts, several were harvest festivals and all involved relaxation, sacred assembly, a festive meal with meat, bread, and wine. They were joyful celebrations. In contrast the annual fast was a time of reflection and repentance.

I take a lesson from Jesus' comment that because he is with us it is a time for joy. I take a lesson from the proportion of feasting the fasting. Yes, we humbly confess our sins and plead for God's mercy or blessing. But, having received it, we live joyfully, full of celebration.

*Am I living from a baseline of joy?*

*April 19*

Mark 2:23-3:8 Opposition (Mark 12:13-27)

Jesus' escalating controversy with the religious leaders kept running into very different perspectives on the Sabbath. The religious people saw it as a day that was highly restrictive and in which one scrupulously needed to avoid any small, casual act that could remotely be classified as work.

Jesus saw it as a day over which he was in control as the creator of it, a day to do good, a day to save lives. When he did good to a man who needed healing, they could not see anything but such a great violation of the rules that Jesus should be put to death.

How strange! The death penalty for healing a man. This is a shocking perspective. But we see it in our time in extremes that justify violence for religious rule-breaking. It is most obvious to us, and seems most absurd when it comes from a different religious tradition. But we have cases of our own, and terrible historical examples.

It validates our anger at unloving behavior when we see that Jesus felt anger. He expressed it with a look, but then was constructive and healed the man rather than give in to their limited and loveless viewpoint.

*How am I reacting to those with different opinions than mine?*

*April 20*

Mark 3:7-19 Responding to Christ

Mark uncharacteristically had six verses about an expanded ministry in Galilee where Matthew had only one. He emphasized that people were coming to Jesus from Gentile territories because the news of his miracles had spread so wide.

Mark also emphasized his theme of Jesus as liberator. The evil spirits would shriek "You are the Son of God!". This role as the spiritual champion, liberating his people, was a challenge to the Caesar as well. The emperors were considered divine, if not quite at the level of the gods, since Latin had two distinct words. But in Greek, the distinction was lost and they were called "sons of god." The spirits were acknowledging his greater lordship.

As Jesus selected twelve of his disciples, he now called them apostles. Disciples are followers and people who are being transformed. Apostles are those sent out to serve others in the same way Jesus did. That included preaching. Unlike Matthew who devoted a chapter of teaching to their preparation, here they were given the authority to cast out demons.

Today we are simultaneously called to be disciples who learn from Christ, and apostles who are sent out to liberate others. We receive and we give.

*Have I learned to be someone who is liberating others?*

*April 21*

Mark 3:20-35--He is crazy

Jesus' family saw how busy he was and wanted to take him home. They had come to the conclusion he had gone crazy. This point was unique in Mark, perhaps because it troubled Peter that Jesus experienced family rejection.

He was also being rejected by the religious leaders who saw his authority over evil spirits and said it came from being in league with the devil. Jesus pointed out how illogical this was. Jesus' family had not given up, and they were still trying to track him down and perhaps persuade him to give up his crazy lifestyle. But Jesus affirmed to his friends and disciples that they had become his true family.

This theme that we who believe become part of the family of God, adopted into the royal family, having Christ as brother and being brothers and sisters as believers will be elaborated in the epistles. No matter what our natural family was like, we are given a new dignity and security when we enter the embrace of God's family. It can heal our wounds.

*Have I joined Jesus' family? Am I willing to experience some distancing from my own family if that is necessary*

*April 22*

Mark 4:1-10. Fruitful vs. unfruitful (12:1-12)

We've come to the familiar and beautiful parable of the farmer scattering seed. It is the same as the first of the kingdom parables in Matthew 13.

One can ask why we have repetition between the gospels. How does this help us learn? A similar pattern occurred in Exodus when the tabernacle was commissioned. First the plan was described in seven chapters, and then all was repeated as it was constructed in another six. The repetition served to emphasize the centrality of its imagery and the importance of worship to the identity of the people.

Perhaps that is the same here. The parable of the sower is deeply important, and we need to enter it once again and examine if we are open to hearing God's word and letting it sink deep into our hearts and be fruitful. Every repetition allows the story or parable to go a little deeper.

Are there hard places in my heart? Are there places that are without permanence? Is there competition in my life for what is of real importance? Can I humbly ask God to work on my heart to make it all fertile and fruitful?

*How can I open my heart to God today?*

*April 23*

Mark 4:21-34 Tree of life (Tree of judgment 11:12-25)

We are challenged to be like light that shines, and like a slowly growing plant, and like a small seed that grows large enough to shelter birds. This is humble imagery and a call to influence that is gentle and unassuming and that takes time. The light is usually not what draws attention to itself, but makes it possible for other things to be seen. Slowly growing grain does not attract attention until it is ready to be harvested to feed others. The mustard bush is in the background and the birds coming and going draw attention. For me, it means I want to be a light that makes it possible for others to see Jesus. I want my life to grow in such a way that it can feed others or shelter them.

In Mark's structure of parallel stories we will have the story of Jesus cursing the fig tree and its demise, during his last week in Jerusalem. That story picks up on a theme that runs through the whole Old Testament, that when the people are righteous, they are like a fruitful tree, when unrighteous, like an unfruitful one. The lack of fruit is judged, and the failed human kingdom of Israel is restored in Christ's new kingdom.

*Am I drawing attention to Jesus? Am I bearing the fruit of the new kingdom?*

*April 24*

Mark 4:35-41 At sea (6:45-46)

Jesus called the first disciples from their work on a boat. When a large crowd surrounded him, he asked the disciples to get a boat to rescue him as he was being pressed off the beach. (Luke 3:9). In this story, Jesus calmed the storm, and in the next Jesus walked on water before calming the storm.

Mark's structure here began a chain of stories which he then repeated. First there were parallel sea stories, then stories of hearts changing, stories of healing a child, and then parallel stories of feeding crowds. The emphasis of these parallel stories is that he did similar things for Jews and gentiles.

The time spent on Lake Galilee or along its edge made it deeply symbolic in Christ's ministry. Since he called his disciples to become fishers of men, the boat became an image of the kingdom community, the fish an image of those rescued from destruction, and the lake and its storms a metaphor for the challenges of the world and its evils. Sometimes fishing for men was interrupted by crisis that threatened their survival. The boat became a place of safety, evoking the story of Noah's ark. What made it safe was Jesus' presence and power.

*Do I feel safe in the kingdom knowing Jesus is present in any storm of life?*

*April 25*

Mark 5:1-20 Transformed heart (7:1-23)



Fitting with Mark's emphasis on Jesus' power over evil spirits, Matthew's seven verses for this story became twenty. In Matthew it was two men; here it was one, and many additional details. The man was so wild he would snap any chains put on him, and night and day he wandered in the tombs and hills, screaming and hitting himself.

The man saw Jesus in the distance and ran and fell before him just as he was getting out of the boat. In this version Jesus and the demons conversed, and they identified themselves as Legion and negotiated to be sent into a herd of 2000 pigs. When people arrived, they saw that the man was dressed and sane. Though the man begged to go with Jesus, he was sent to testify through the Ten Towns region.

All of these new details offer an even more startling quality to the story. Jesus crossed the Lake for this one person's healing, and then crossed back. This was Gentile territory, and he would come back later and do more miracles in this area where the man prepared the way with his story.

For us, the example of insane to sane inspires us to pray for anyone suffering from any level of emotional distress.

*Who do I know who needs prayer for emotional distress today?*

*April 26*

Mark 5:21-43 Healing a child (7:24-30)

Matthew and Mark both told this story, but the order given was different. In Matthew Jesus calmed the storm, healed the demoniac, then the paralyzed man, called Matthew, argued with the Pharisees and had the intertwined healings of a dead child and a hemorrhaging woman.

In Mark, he healed the paralyzed man, called Matthew, argued with the Pharisees, then calmed the storm, healed the demons, and had the intertwined healings. Does this matter? Our idea that a story needs to be told in chronological does not seem to have been either Matthew's or Mark's agenda. Instead, they structured their narratives according to an idea or scheme they had in mind.

In Matthew we have alternations between five teaching sections followed by stories. In Mark we have a complex but beautiful structure that takes a series of stories, reaches a midpoint, and then turns back with parallel stories. Mark also connected his stories with a sense of geographical movement between Jewish and Gentile territories, often with the Lake in between. There was a balance between Jesus reaching out to Gentiles and to his own people. His ministry to Gentiles was surely good news for Roman readers.

*Do I share Jesus' love for people from all cultures?*

*April 27*

Mark 6:1-13 Unbelievers (8:11-21)

Jesus tried a return to his hometown and it was a failure. People thought they knew him and were skeptical about the rumors of miracles that had drifted back to them.

The disciples saw this and had this experience in the back of their minds. After going from village to village, Jesus sent them out two by two with authority to cast out evil spirits. He warned them to travel light and warned them they might get the kind of rejection he had experienced in Nazareth. They went out and cast out demons and healed many.

In the parallel story coming up Jesus warned them about the unbelief of the Pharisees and of Herod. His opponents were religious leaders who should have had the wisdom to recognize him as Messiah. Instead, their very devotion had blinded them and they were rejecting Jesus, to the point they would kill him. Herod would soon or had recently killed John the Baptist, and Jesus knew his rejection was a mortal threat for him as well.

Jesus gave us an example of being able to take opposition without being overly concerned and just faithfully continuing in ministry. We also need to have the inner strength of our call and ministry to be able to continue peacefully when we are rejected.

*Do I handle rejection with humility and grace?*

*April 28*

Mark 6:14-29 John's death

The tragic story of John's death was tied to potential danger for Jesus. People were talking about him and wondering if he was John come back to life. Herod favored this idea which obviously further endangered Jesus.

Jesus had presumably known John all his life. The two of them had shared a strategic moment when John baptized Jesus and recognized him as Messiah. In the other gospels we are told that Jesus reassured John that he was the Messiah when John was in prison and sent messengers to him. Jesus honored John as the greatest prophet, and on a purely human level, John's death was a blow and a loss.

The flashback gives us this sad story of spirituality defeated by worldliness. In this dangerous situation Jesus' ministry headed more and more into Gentile territory.

*Does Jesus' example tell us that withdrawal from danger can be wise?*

*April 29*

Mark 6:30-43 Feeding crowds (8:1-10)

Once more the fishermen decided to get away from the crowd by getting into a boat. It did not work because the crowd perceived where they would land and got there first. As Jesus stepped from the boat, his compassion led him to feed them. My Bible map puts this in Galilee near Capernaum. Later we will have a matching story that seems to take place on the Gentile side of the Lake. Once more, this balanced Jesus' ministry to his own people and that of other nations.

The ministry had become so busy and successful "they didn't even have time to eat.". Their attempt to get away didn't work. Our lives also can become hectic enough with serving that we miss meals, vacations are interrupted, and we need to exercise compassion and even make extra meals when it is not convenient. Jesus' example lets us know that ministry is like that. We need to not complain and just do what needs to be done.

*Have I experienced being stretched beyond my limits in ministry?*

*April 30*

Mark 6:45-58. At sea (4:35-41)

Jesus sent his disciples to the boat to head to Bethsaida while he went for some private prayer time. Bethsaida was the largest city near Capernaum, the smaller fishing village on the Lake where Peter's business made it a headquarters for Jesus. Bethsaida was outside of Herod's territory in that of the more benign Philip the Tetrarch. It seems that it either straddled the Jordan or was on the eastern side, and was more multicultural.

The storm that came up, Jesus' arrival walking on water, and the subsequent calm changed their plans. Once more, his presence brought them safety and they went back to the Galilean side to the west. It interests me that with Peter as the presumed source, Mark did not mention Peter's brief and spectacular attempt to walk on water. It is hard to know whether a sense of success or of failure dominated Peter's memory of this moment, perhaps both.

Once more in Galilee a crowd awaited them with those who were ill. Jesus traveled through villages, healing, including those who merely touched his robe. For us today, prayer is like reaching for the robe, and perhaps receiving an answer is like touching it. It is a compelling image of people with great needs and God with great power to meet those needs.

*What is my great need today?*

*May 1*

Mark 7:1-25 A clean heart (5:1-20)

The problem in Galilee was once more the harassment by religious leaders who believed Jesus kept breaking rules. Jesus challenged them with a quote from Isaiah that gave the idea of merely offering God lip service. Their hearts were not in it. Worship was a farce and man made teaching trumped God's commands.

It sounds painfully close to our modern American Christianity where, for whatever reason, we have drifted from obedience to superficial speech. We may say we obey God, but then actually make choices and decisions that go against his very clear teachings. The heart is what matters, and God knows our hearts. He can search them, can share with us any difficulties that need to be addressed, and can change them.

*Is my faith from the heart, or am I operating on a superficial level, just saying the right things?*

*May 2*

Mark 7:24-30 Healing a child (5:21-43)

Jesus explicitly went into Gentile territory, and perhaps as in the case of the Gadarene demoniac, he knew he had a divine appointment. It was with a Gentile widow, much as Elijah had an appointment with a Gentile woman in this same region in his day. Though he sparred with her, he gave her what she asked for.

As a parent, her request for her daughter paralleled the request of Jewish Jairus for his daughter. These two parents cared deeply about their children, something true for all people from all cultures. Mark once again balanced Jesus' ministry to Jews and Gentiles.

For us today, pleading with God for blessings on our children is a constant prayer. For most parents, the needs, wounds, disappointments, and fears of one's children are as compelling as if they were one's own. It is an important lesson to be willing to go to Jesus, and be as persistent in begging for help as this Gentile woman who doubtless felt she really did not have a right to make demands of a Jewish healer. We may not feel we have any rights before God, but we can persist.

*Do I believe God will answer my prayers for my children or other children I love?*

*May 3*

Mark 7:31-37 Healing a deaf mute (Mark 9:14-29)

We here have a story unique to Mark, and it is another healing story for a Gentile. No mention is made of crossing Galilee, but surely they did so since Tyre and Sidon were on the Mediterranean, and the Ten Towns were on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee.

We recall that people from the Ten Towns had heard of Jesus thanks to the crazy-cemetery-living demoniac he had healed. The people brought a deaf and mute man to Jesus who healed him. After the transfiguration Jesus would heal a child who was both demon-possessed and deaf. These healings once more seem to balance Jew and Gentile.

Today our medical science has advanced to the point that we are able to do a great deal for those who are deaf or mute. God has given wisdom to extend his healing power through these technological advances. This is not a contradiction to but rather an extension of Jesus' gift of healing. For this we thank God.

*Can I be practical in supporting getting medical help for those who need it?*

*May 4*

Mark 8:1-10 Feeding crowds (6:30-43)

Similarly with the previous healing, the feeding of the 4000 among the Gentiles balanced ministry to Jews and Gentiles. Jesus saw that people had run out of food, had been there three days, and might faint on their journey since they had a long way to go.

His kindness and practical compassion led him to multiply food yet again. They ate until they were full, they collected leftovers, and then Jesus sent them away. At the end of this Jesus and his disciples once more got in the boat and set off across the lake.

Today in our world it is estimated that one out of nine people are hungry. There are non-profits and international governmental organizations that work hard to change that. These organizations need our donations, our volunteerism, and our prayers. And God may give us the opportunity to share personally, face-to-face with people who are hungry.

What is the reality of feeding the hungry?

One has to have faith for provisions

Because the one with the heart

Rarely has the big pocketbook.

But, miraculously, the crowds are satisfied.

*Am I practical enough to prepare food for people going on a journey?*

*May 5*

Mark 8:11-21 False teaching (Mark 6:1-13)

As they headed back to Galilee where Jesus knew they would once more be confronted by the Pharisees, he warned them about the false teaching of these people, calling it yeast. They were worried they had just one loaf of bread, but Jesus pointed out the miracles of

multiplication he had done to say “don’t worry about it.” Often we do worry about God’s provision, forgetting the many times he has already proven faithful to us.

But the real point was that Jesus was setting up a contrast between the emphasis on rules and show-off spirituality, and an emphasis on trusting, unworried, companionship with him. That still applies. Do we want to be known as people who do everything right, or do we want to be known as people who live close to Christ? Looking important and looking spiritual do not matter nearly as much as having a heart that turns to Christ no matter my circumstances.

*Am I trusting Christ for life’s practicalities?*

*May 6*

Mark 8:22-26 Blind healed (10:46-52)

Here is another miracle unique to Mark. While healing blindness was a sign of the Messiah, and each gospel contains these stories, the method in this one was unusual. He led the man out of town, spit on his eyes, and laid hands on him. The healing was gradual, with his vision blurry at first. Jesus touched him again, and the healing was complete.

This is comforting when we are seeing a gradual healing or when something is a subject of ongoing and repeated prayer. Our hope is to go from fuzzy to clear and not give up.

Again, medical science has made astonishing strides in helping the blind to see. Without my contacts or glasses I can very well identify with people far away looking blurry and vague. But thanks be to God for his wisdom in helping people learn how to extend his work of healing. Eye surgeons do wonders. Even today, used reading glasses taken to poor rural developing world areas can have a transformative effect in allowing the (partially) blind to see.

*Is there something still only partially answered in my life that I need to keep praying for? Is there a way a can contribute to ministries that help others see.*

*May 7*

Mark 8:27-30 Christ is Messiah (11:1-11)

Peter had the privilege of stating aloud what they had come to believe, that Jesus was the Messiah. The contrasts between the gospels are interesting, and here there is no mention of the keys of the kingdom or the church being built on the rock as there is in Matthew. Perhaps it was a sign of humility in Peter’s story-telling to leave that out.

Peter’s declaration would very shortly be something he saw with his own eyes at the transfiguration. The supernatural glory of Messiah would become visible to him. Not long after

that, when they entered Jerusalem in triumph, the people would identify Jesus as Messiah by saying he was coming in God's name, bringing David's kingdom, quoting prophetic Psalms.

Jesus reinforced this in his arguments with the Pharisees and quoted a Psalm that called the Messiah David's Lord. Jesus would condemn himself in the eyes of the religious leaders by applying Messianic prophecy to himself. Pilate would ask if he was King of the Jews and Jesus would reply "yes.". But Peter had the honor of being the first to this declaration in a profound moment of truth.

*Do I grasp that calling Jesus Messiah meant he was the ruler of a coming kingdom?*

*May 8*

Mark 8:31-38 Prediction of death and resurrection (10:32-34)

This was the first of Jesus' three clear predictions of suffering and resurrection. Peter's failure to comprehend Jesus' prophecy of his coming suffering, death and resurrection was not covered up. He took Christ aside to reproach him, and Jesus rebuked him, saying "Get away from me, Satan!"

The discourse on taking up our cross adds something not in Matthew. Jesus warned that if we are ashamed of Jesus and his message now, he will be ashamed of us when he returns. He not only was struggling to get them to understand his coming suffering, he was struggling to get them (and us) to understand that discipleship will mean suffering.

Perhaps Peter's protest to Christ came from the idea that for the Messiah to die would be shameful and also not fulfill prophecy. He was hoping for success as we do. As Jesus told him, that is a human perspective, and God has a much broader one that encompasses suffering.

*Am I ashamed to declare God's message of the cross?*

*May 9*

Mark 9:1-13 Transfiguration

Perhaps those who made the chapter divisions chose to include the final promise of the previous teaching, that they would see the kingdom of God in power, because it was so beautifully fulfilled in the transfiguration. This must have been one of the most powerful experiences of Peter's life. To see Christ in all his glory, to see Moses and Elijah, great heroes of the faith, to hear God's voice. Truly an overwhelming experience.

In Mark this is the central moment. Up to this point Jesus had been gradually shown to be the Messiah. After this, in the next chapter, they will begin the journey to Jerusalem and his certain

death. Mark placed parallel stories before and after this point, surely by design. In chapter headings I have tried to reflect his structure, and some of the key points are as follows:

### Transfiguration

Prophecy of death/resurrection.	Prophecy of death/resurrection
Peter declared Christ as Messiah.	Crowds cited Messianic psalms
Parable of seed being sown	Parable of the vineyard
Apostles sent out	Last supper
Conflicts with Pharisees	Pharisees condemned him
Peter called as a disciple.	Peter's denial
Jesus' baptism	Death and resurrection
John came announcing Christ	Apostles sent to announce Christ

In all these things, the centrality of Christ to our world became evident, and the glorious moment of the transfiguration was a central revelation of God's son.

*Is there anything more important in my life than Christ?*

*May 10*

Mark 9:14-29 Child healed (Mark 7:31-37)

In this story it was explained that in addition to epilepsy, the child was deaf and mute. Jesus healed this, but it was a protracted process. The child had a convulsion in front of Jesus, and when Jesus rebuked the spirit, there was a second convulsion that seemed to leave the child dead, but Jesus picked him up.

There are two encouraging lines here that add to Matthew's account. The father, struggling, said, "I do believe, but help me not to doubt!". How often this captures what we feel in a difficult situation. The other was Jesus' statement that "This kind can be cast out only by prayer and fasting.". This encourages us to take our hard cases and bring them to God with particular intentionality. If even Jesus had to endure two convulsions before the child was healed, perhaps we need patience too in the face of hard cases.

*Is there a spiritual struggle where I need to persist?*



*May 11*

Mark 9:30-37 Predicts death (8:21-38 and 10:32-34)

Jesus spent extra private time with his disciples, trying to prepare them for what was coming, but they did not understand and were afraid to ask. As the central of three predictions of his death, one could actually choose this as the very center of the book and fold the stories back on themselves starting here. There is a healing of a child and the elevation of children on either side. The transfiguration and the triumphal entry would then be the parallel stories.

Another choice for the center point is Peter's declaration that Jesus is Messiah because the tone changes from miracles and ministry to the ominous move toward the opposition in Jerusalem. It is right after that declaration that the first of these three prophecies of the passion is given.

But however one sees the structure of Mark, the prophetic certainty is emphasized by three prophecies. There will be other sets of three that build toward the crucifixion: three instructions to stay awake and watch, three denials by Peter, and three questions by Pilate to the crowd.

At this point in the book, we are leading to the final passion narrative, and the last week of Jesus' life which takes up a third of Mark's narrative.

*How central is Jesus' death and resurrection to my life?*

*May 12*

Mark 9:33-37 Child elevated (10:13-16)

Not being able to fully grasp the prophecy of death and resurrection, the disciples were silent and failed to ask questions. Their group headed south toward Capernaum, and shortly they would continue south toward Judea and the eastern side of the Jordan (10:1), then through Jericho (10:44) and finally toward Jerusalem (11:1).

Not understanding that they were headed to the predicted crisis, they wasted time arguing over their relative importance. Once more Jesus said that being a servant and being least were what mattered. He took a child in his arms and compared himself to that child. We don't habitually understand the cross, humility, or childlikeness. All of these things are contrary to our human nature that wants no suffering, positive attention, and being seen as having a level of sophistication. We don't quite understand a faith that includes suffering, and we don't want to ask.

*Do I see Jesus in every child that I meet?*

*May 13*

Mark 9:38-50 Jesus' name

This passage began with John complaining about another person using Jesus' name, but Jesus defended the man. Part of our learning to live in peace is to take the advice not to try to control others. Each person and each ministry is accountable to God himself. God knows, and it says he will reward people for small acts of appreciation. He once more elevated children, warning against harming their faith.

Some of what Jesus said here we have seen before, but the final paragraph was new. He said we will all be purified with fire, which connected again to suffering and testing. As Job said, "when he has tested me like gold in a fire, he will pronounce me innocent." (Job 23:10). We are also to have the preserving qualities of salt that prevent decay or infection. The result is the ability to live in peace.

*Is there something I can do to build peace where there is conflict?*

*May 14*

Mark 10:1-12 Marriage

Jesus here took a firm line on the permanence of marriage, and defined remarriage as a form of adultery. This is a hard saying for us today when divorce and remarriage are so prevalent in our culture. A current estimate is that one third of marriages end in divorce, and about half of those divorced remarry, both in the church and in the culture as a whole. It was also surely a hard saying for the Roman readers in whose culture divorce was common and not a particular source of shame.

In Matthew the question about marriage is in a series of entrapment narratives. In Mark it is in a series of narratives that elevate the position of children. Fathers had complete control over their children in Roman society, and the idea that they should be revered would have been countercultural. Jesus had healed a child right after the transfiguration, then said that he himself could be seen in children, then he included a stern warning of punishment for anyone who harmed a child. Since apparently it was legal even to kill one's own children, this was a challenge to attitudes in that society. After this discussion on marriage, Jesus once more blessed children.

Jesus elevated women and children, and those attitudes have gradually made changes. They have come slowly for us, with for example, women not having voting rights until 1920 in the United States, and there are still gaps in wage parity. Children can still be easily dismissed, so we need all of these challenges even in our own day.

*Do I deeply value family life, women, and children?*

*May 15*

Mark 10:13-16 Child elevated (9:33-37)

Jesus had already told the disciples that if they welcomed a little child, they were welcoming him. But when some parents brought their children to Jesus for a blessing, the disciples seemed to have forgotten this and considered them a bother. Jesus was "very displeased". Once again he elevated children as important members of the kingdom and commended them for their faith. The beautiful image of Christ taking children into his arms and blessing them became a model for our relationship to all children.

As I examine myself I think I have more to learn about childlike faith. Too often what I call faith for something carries a tinge of anxiety or worry rather than relaxed and happy trust. I need to immerse myself in seeing the loving compassion of Christ to recognize that God is completely trustworthy, and being his child is safe and peaceful.

*How can I be more childlike in my faith?*

*May 16*

Mark 10:17-31 Responding to Christ's call (cf. 2:13-17, 3:13-19)

The failure of the rich man to respond to a call to discipleship contrasted with the willingness of the twelve to respond and leave their professions, their daily life, and make a 100% commitment to Christ. After their encounter, Jesus introduced the idea that discipleship is more important than family. One can let go of parents or children or siblings, and that will be rewarded.

The encounter of the rich man who was not able to let go of his possessions to follow Christ raises question in our era of celebrity Christianity. We have created a system whereby some Christian leaders become wealthy, salaries are large, and publicity and attention can even be larger. In contrast, there are many unsung, unknown Christians who live simply, give up possessions to immerse themselves in poor communities, and really don't much care if they don't have creature comforts. Probably it is why Jesus said that things will balance out in the end, with the seemingly unimportant people getting more recognition.

We Americans are hooked by consumer goods and need this story as a challenge to our materialistic values. There is a level of strangeness in the growth of storage facilities in our time to keep things we are not using. Perhaps we could consider selling these things or give them to the poor?

*How attached am I to my possessions?*

*May 17*

Mark 10:32-34 Prediction of death (8:31-38 and 9:30-32)

This marked the moment when Jesus started toward Jerusalem and his inevitable death. On one level, the disciples and others recognized how dangerous this was and were filled with dread. Jesus kept trying to prepare them for the inevitable, but on some level they were still hoping for a happy ending. Jesus walked in front, then disciples, and fear-filled crowds followed.

Jesus pulled no punches about the torture he was about to undergo which doubtless increased their dread. We know life is not always happy endings, and we dread that. But Jesus' example calls us to have courage when we face harsh experiences. Rather than dread or fear, we move forward with determination.

If something difficult and dreadful does happen, we have the example of Christ's courage as he was arrested, tortured and killed. While he so often fills our lives with good things, with blessings that more than compensate for difficulties, we still have to face painful things as he did.

*Have I learned to ask Christ for any courage I need?*

*May 18*

Mark 10:35-45 Serving Others

James and John wanted seats next to his throne. It says all the disciples were indignant, but for Peter, as the other one of the closest three, he must have been annoyed they were pushing him aside. Jesus said he would suffer and they would suffer, and there were no guarantees for a spot next to him. Their ideas about power and leadership were upside down and they needed to be servants.

Jesus had upended the Roman system of fathers over children, husbands over wives, and now he upended that of master over servant. In each case, he associated the kingdom with the weaker and more vulnerable party.

We need to be servants. We need to be prepared to suffer. We need to have a life that enters into and accepts God's plan for us rather than dreading it, whatever it might be. We need to be people who prioritize the weaker and vulnerable.

*Am I exercising leadership as a servant, and entrusting any recognition to God, rather than needing it now?*

*May 19*

Mark 10:46-52 Blind healed (8:22-25)

As they approached Jerusalem, they went through Jericho and Jesus healed blind Bartimaeus. Bethsaida was in Gentile territory, so his healing of the blind man there matches up to this healing of a Jewish man. There was no long drawn out process, since the healing happened in the moment Jesus said "your faith has healed you."

What does it mean that our faith heals us? This phrase is repeated four times in the gospels. The encouragement is that we can actually live with a level of childlike faith that trusts God to touch our bodies through a combination of science and something beyond science. Many people have healing stories large and small (I have a small one as I write this today). If we have not yet learned to pray in faith for healing, we can ask Jesus to help us learn.

*Who can I pray for today who is suffering from some illness?*

*May 20*

Mark 11:1-11 Christ is Messiah (8:27-30)

In John's gospel we are told that Jesus had already spent a lot of time in Jerusalem and the temple on feast days. In Mark's telling of the story, this is the first time the ruler had arrived, and the crowds celebrated him as bringing King David's kingdom back.

The enthusiasm of the crowd was surely alarming to his opponents among the religious leaders. In a climate of simmering political rebellion when Rome was ready to clamp down hard on anything threatening their power, this seemed dangerous. The astonishing thing for me is not only that prophecy was fulfilled by this, but that such an enthusiastic crowd could so quickly vanish or be transformed into crowds wanting Jesus to be crucified. The troubling inconstancy of group thinking and how easily it can be manipulated by clever leaders is a great warning.

We celebrate this moment each year on Palm Sunday, remembering the joy of receiving the king. Our hope is to remain in that welcoming mode in our lives, a mode that finds worship and praise easy and spontaneous.

*How can I worship Christ today?*

*May 21*

Mark 11:12-25 Tree of judgment (Tree of life 4:26-34)

Mark intertwined the story of cursing the fig tree and the cleansing of the temple which helps us see the deeper meaning of both. In the Old Testament the fig tree was used as symbolic of God's people Israel. If they were fruitful, all was well. If they were not, judgment fell as it does on this tree.

The temple, the center for encountering God in worship, was a sign through history of how they were doing. It went through periods of being defiled with idols, followed by periods of being cleaned up and restored, followed by further intrusions of false worship. It was built with great joy as a sign of God's presence with them, then was destroyed because of their unfaithfulness.

Jesus knew it would soon be destroyed for the last time. The people had rejected him, which was the ultimate failure. The leaders had chosen the 'idols' of their own rules and making money over God himself among them. Fig tree and temple were being judged for fruitlessness.

We also need to continually recall that we are to be fruitful people carrying God's presence in the world. There is no room for a fruitless life. We are to be God's temple, carrying his presence into the world.

*Am I bearing spiritual fruit? Am I filled with the beauty of the Holy Spirit?*

*May 22*

Mark 11:27-33 Authority questioned

The crowds were still a restraint on the religious leaders. The leaders were angry at Jesus' driving merchants out of the temple, and questioning his authority to do such a thing. But they were trapped by his reference to John the Baptist. The people still believe John was a prophet and so would riot if the leaders spoke ill of John. Jesus was not afraid of them. He already knew they were going to succeed in arresting and killing him, and it did not matter if he kept offending them. He knew the crisis was inevitable.

Jesus admirably modeled for us someone who had the deep self-knowledge that led to appropriate self-confidence. Psychologists speak of having that inner sense of personhood that allows us to interact appropriately with those who love us and those who do not. Jesus showed both sides of that certainty to us.

We too, need to live with a deep inner certainty of God's authority on our lives, and the authority we have. If we trust him, he is able to protect us, to be with us in crisis, or to be present to us in our deaths. Not fearing opposition or death can give us a strength to tell the truth to people who are acting unjustly. No fear.

*Am I afraid of the opinions of others? Am I afraid of death?*

*May 23*

Mark 12:1-12 Fruitless vs. fruitful (4:1-20)

Jesus told the pointed story of the tenants of the vineyard (another Old Testament symbol for Israel) who murdered the owner's messengers and his son. They knew he was talking about them, and they wanted to arrest him.

But the crowds who had welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem as Messiah were still on his side. the leaders were afraid of the reaction of these crowds. They had not yet succeeded in vilifying Jesus, but with the week, the tide would turn in their favor. Or perhaps the mob that yelled "Crucify him" was made up of a different group of people more allied with the leaders. There was not an obvious tipping point when he lost favor with his fans. But a point came when the leaders no longer feared the crowds and could proceed with executing this man they had decided was an enemy too dangerous to live.

*Do I have a tendency to go along with the crowd?*

*May 24*

Mark 12:13-27 Authority questioned (Mark 2:23-3:8)

We've seen these dialogues of entrapment before and how Jesus evaded their traps. but in the process of reading them again we learn more of his philosophy of how to manage our political life and evidence for resurrection. These important points provide guidance and hope that we need. We need to be respectful, but not dominated by government. We need to trust that there is life after death.

Our whole energy is not to be dissipated into worldly politics, something that can be so tempting for us. Nor is our whole focus to be an escape into heaven from the frustrations of life. What seems to be advocated is a balanced engagement with life as it is, and greet hope for life as it will be.

*Do I both seek the good of our community now and hope for a perfect community when Christ returns?*

*May 25*

Mark 12:28-34 Wholehearted discipleship (Mark 2:13-17)

In Matthew's account of this story, it ended with Jesus' affirmation of love of God of neighbor as the most important commandments. For His Jewish readers, it made sense that Jesus said that all the other commandments and demands of the prophets were based on these two commandments. But the Romans Mark was writing for were not familiar with the Law and Prophets, and he left that out.

In this version the dialogue continued and the questioner affirmed that he realized that love is more important than sacrifices. Jesus told him this understanding meant he was close to the kingdom.

The contrast between love and sacrifice is an interesting theme running through the Old Testament in the Psalms and prophets. There they complain of the ritualized nature of sacrifice that has become disconnected from meaning. But Jesus will connect love and his sacrifice by saying, "Greater love has no man than this than to lay down his life for his friends."

Paul, in his discourse on love in I Corinthians 13 assured us that the greatest thing is love. He told us to make it our highest goal. But he also wrote, "May I never boast in anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." (Galatians 6:14). He saw unity between the sacrifice of the cross, God's love for us, and our response of love.

*How can I love God and neighbor more today?*

*May 26*

Mark 12:35-44 Authority claimed

Having bested his opponents, Jesus gave more evidence that they didn't know it all by drawing out the seeming contradiction that Messiah was simultaneously David's Son and David's Lord in the scriptures. He also attacked the religious leaders' pride, materialism and hypocrisy.

We could say today we need to be cautious of well-dressed, wealthy, and honored Christians, and examine what lies underneath. The story that followed was Jesus critiquing the offering of the rich and commending the humble and small offering of a widow. God sees the proportion we give, and the inner part of what we give. Again, we could say today that the attention we give big donors should not be more lavish than appreciation for small gifts.

These critiques of our religiosity are as legitimate today as they were in the past. Jesus emphasized the inner real person versus the image projected. May we have the grace to let go of any need for people to bow to us in the marketplace. Perhaps the modern equivalent to that might be having a prestigious position. We need to be self-aware of the temptations.

*In what area of my life do I need increased humility?*

*May 27*

Mark 13:1-13. Destruction of the temple

Jesus called the temple magnificent and apparently it was exceptionally beautiful. It was white, shining, and on the top of a hill. Josephus said it looked like a mountain of snow. Herod the Great tried to gain favor with the Jews and worked on it starting in 20 BC. The New Testament



says it took 46 years to build, which would mean it was completed in 26 AD, shortly before Christ's ministry.

Jesus warned it would be demolished, no stone left on another. That happened in 70 AD, less than 40 years after this conversation. The disciples wanted to know when it would happen and Jesus warned them that their persecution would be one of the signs. Looking ahead to Acts we see that persecution warned of did begin. They had to depend on the Spirit to speak in their defense when they were arrested, and we have the examples of Peter, John, Stephen and Paul. Paul stood before governors and kings was prophesied here. All of those things happened before the destruction of the temple.

Jesus then began to draw on what would happen at the end of time before his return. He promised that those who endure will be saved, which encourages us to persist no matter what.

*Do I have the character trait of endurance?*

*May 28*

Mark 13:14-37 End times

This discourse on the end times ended a little differently than in Matthew. Jesus compared himself to a man on a trip who had left instructions for his employees, and told the gatekeeper to watch for him since when he would return was unknown.

What does that mean for us today? Prophecy speculation is a cottage industry on the internet, and books and conferences add to the speculation. Consequently, it is easy to get cynical as various ideas don't happen. The return has not conformed to human ideas. How can we stay balanced and do the watching Christ told us to do without becoming the stereotype of the bearded man with a placard saying the end of the world is coming?

Perhaps one answer is to not take ourselves too seriously as experts. We see things like the restoration of Israel, preaching of good news to every nation (verse 10), wars and earthquakes (verse 8), refugees suffering (verse 19), and even potential ecological problems that darken the sun (verse 24). But we don't know. We need to be good spiritual employees and keep our eyes open at the gates.

*Do I find the idea of end times alarming or comforting? Why?*

*May 29*

Mark 14:1-11 Extravagant love

We have the contrasting attitudes to Jesus of the religious leaders who were determined to put Jesus to death, and to the woman whose loving anointing was a preparation for his death and burial.

It was extravagant since the cost was almost a full year's wage. Here was someone wealthy enough to have something well worth selling and giving to the poor, but she decided to use it on a poor man. When harshly scolded, Jesus promised that her good act would be talked about throughout the whole world.

The religious people gained an ally in Judas who saw no sense in lavishing a year's wage on Jesus. He arranged for the betrayal. What a contrast between the woman who could not love enough, and Judas whose love was cold.

*Do I have the loving heart to give all I have to Jesus?*

*May 30*

Mark 14:12-26 Last meal (Mark 1:31)

Jesus' ability to know what would happen next extended to practical things like knowing the disciples would meet a man carrying a pitcher of water that would lead them to a room for the Passover. Prearranged or serendipitous, I am not sure. But the result was the Jerusalem location for this sacred meal.

At the Last Supper they drank from one cup. This meaningful meal is one we repeat today, learning that what we share is Christ in the bread and wine. And though we are not worthy to come to his table, we are invited and welcomed to share his cup.

Carried to the Table - Leeland

Wounded and forsaken  
I was shattered by the fall  
Broken and forgotten  
Feeling lost and all alone  
Summoned by the King into the Master's courts  
Lifted by the Savior  
And cradled in his arms

I was carried to the table  
Seated where I don't belong  
Carried to the table  
Swept away by His love  
And I don't see my brokenness anymore

When I'm seated at the table of the Lord  
I'm carried to the table  
The Table of the Lord.

Fighting thoughts of fear  
And wondering why He called my name  
Am I good enough to share this cup  
This world has left me lame  
Even in my weakness  
The Savior called my name  
In His Holy presence  
I'm healed and unashamed  
You carried me, God  
You carried me

*Does coming to Christ's table give me a sense of belonging with him and his people?*

*May 31*

Mark 14:27-42. Peter's failure (cf. His call 1:14-22)

Peter did not come off at all well at this point. The first and leading disciple, he took the lead in pretending he did not know Jesus to save his own skin. When warned, he had insisted this could not be, "Even if everyone else deserts you, I never will...Not even if I have to die with you!". We know his good intentions did not pass the test.

In the garden he fell asleep three times while Jesus prayed. Even though there were three guilty disciples there, Jesus called out Peter for a scolding.

We all have Peter-like qualities where we really mean well, but we do not follow through. Our denials may be more trivial and petty than Peter's, and we may get lazy and sleepy at less critical points than the garden, but we cannot pretend never to have failed. What is encouraging is that he repented, and so can we. His failure did not remove him from leadership and important work in spreading the gospel, including helping Mark tell these stories. He did not cover up his sin, and nor should we.

*Where am I being too lax in my commitments?*

*June 1*

Mark 14:43-52 Maybe it was Mark

At Jesus' arrest all the disciples, including well-intentioned Peter, deserted him. A young man following in his pajamas nearly was grabbed, but managed to escape naked. Tradition has developed that the naked escapee was Mark, the gospel writer. There are at least two theories.

One is that the Last Supper was actually held at his house, and later in Acts his home became a regular meeting place (Acts 12:12). Or perhaps he was out in the garden sleeping to guard the family property.

Perhaps it was someone else, but the Mark who wrote the gospel has been identified with the John Mark in Acts. Barnabas, his cousin, and took him with Paul on a missionary journey. He was with Paul in prison in Rome (Colossians 4:10) and was part of the team that included Luke (Philemon 24). In Rome, working as translator for Peter according to tradition, Peter claimed him as a son (I Peter 5:13).

Who knew that the naked kid at the arrest would grow up to be such an integral part of the spread of the church? We are greatly indebted to him.

*Are we always on the lookout for future spiritual leaders among younger people?*

*June 2*

Mark 14:53-65 Christ condemned

The outcome was predetermined, so this was far from a just and unbiased trial. Even so, it was a struggle to come up with the guilty verdict until Jesus made the claim to be Messiah. His comment drew from two Messianic prophecies. Psalm 110:1 had God's invitation to the Messiah to sit at his right hand. Daniel 7:13-14 was a vision of a man coming in the clouds of heaven, approaching God, and being given authority, honor, and royal power over all nations. It said that his eternal kingdom would never be destroyed.

To Jesus' listeners, this was megalomania and blasphemy. They started spitting at him and hitting him. Yet the unfolding of history and the spread of those who truly believed Jesus was Messiah, the Son of God, has left the spitters looking extraordinarily bad.

Mark added the detail that they blindfolded him and wanted him to tell them who had hit him. May we never be the kind of religious people who think violence and mockery and cruelty somehow honor God. Even in an Old Testament case of blasphemy where the death penalty was used, the party was not so mistreated.

What happens to us religious people when we lose our way, and even if we do not engage in physical abuse, we engage in verbal abuse? We lose the perspective that love is the highest calling, something these Jewish leaders studied and should have known. Their anger overrode their values, and we can fall into the same trap.

*When am I most in danger of forgetting that love matters the most of all?*

*June 3*

Mark 14:66-72 Peter failed

One can imagine that this was one of Peter's most horrible and shameful memories. Hours before, he had bravely said he would die with Jesus, and now with just a little needling by a servant girl, he claimed complete ignorance of who this person might be. When the cock had crowed twice, he knew Jesus' warning had come true and he cried.

His is a story of redemption, though. After the resurrection he became the leader of the early church and engaged in missionary teaching and travel. Tradition is that he was martyred in Rome. As churches were built, many had a statue of Peter at the left of the door and Paul on the right as the two great founding human figures of the faith. I live in a town with many Baroque churches, and often there they are, Peter with his keys and Paul balding and holding a book.

Peter's glorious transfiguration to great leadership began in Acts 2 when his preaching drew 3000 people into belief. How encouraging for us that our failures can be transformed. It surely begins with our tears of remorse.

*How deep is my repentance?*

*June 4*

Mark 15:1-20 Jesus' trial (cf. His temptation 1:12-13)

The Roman government could exercise the death penalty, not the subservient Jews, so they took Jesus to the governor. Roman citizens were beheaded, but slaves, low criminals and non-citizens were crucified. This means of execution had begun in Persia and through Alexander the Great, had been adopted by Rome. Constantine abolished crucifixion in the third century, but at the time of Christ it was used as deterrence for revolutionaries.

Jesus thus identified with the greatest shame possible of his day, and with the added stigma of revolutionary rebellion. The terrible suffering before the glory of his resurrection is an assurance to every Christian that he is present with us in every aspect of suffering we undergo.

To a Roman hearing this story, it would have been shocking and offensive that the hero was crucified. In a status conscious society, it would have been hard to accept that the true Lord of all had been through this. Further, it would have been painful to accept that the famed Roman law had been part of a miscarriage of justice. Pilate admitted as much, acknowledging that he acquiesced to calm a crowd.

*How can I be alert to situations today where judges make unjust decisions?*

*June 5*

Mark 15:21-41 Passion (cf. Baptism 1:9-11)

Jesus was so weakened that he could not carry his own crossbeam, and an African man, Simon, was pressed into service. He obviously became part of the Christian community because his sons were known. Jesus refused the drug offered, staying as alert as he could.

It is estimated that many people were crucified each year at the time of Christ. Thus he and his disciples would have seen this tragic sight when victims carried their crossbeams. Jesus adopted this imagery to tell us what approach to life we need to have: courage and persistence in the face of suffering.

The crucifixion began at 9 a.m. in the morning. By noon darkness fell. At 3 p.m. Jesus died. These six hours so central to our spirituality are hard to imagine. How terrible and how sad that this suffering continues to be replicated in many different ways in our world today. We are not only called to accept the forgiveness of sins that Christ's sacrifice made possible, we are called to engage with those suffering now as well. Christ is present in any suffering person, and we need to serve those we know.

*How can I alleviate suffering today?*

*June 6*

Mark 15:42-47 Taking Christ from the cross

Just as Judas had switched from Jesus' side to that of the religious leaders, we have Joseph of Arimathea who switched from the religious leaders to Jesus. He was an honored member of the high council, but he felt compassion and arranged to bury Christ.

One of our modern theologians, Jon Sobrino, has compared taking Jesus down from the cross as a model of the tender compassion we need to have for the suffering today. (Select from the book?)

*Is there someone I can "take down from the cross"?*

*June 7*

Mark 16:1-8 Resurrection

Mark's gospel, the most concise, has been chosen by Bible translators as the first New Testament book to translate. Today there are close to 3,000 languages who have this gospel in their own language.

Mark has given us an efficient account all the way through, and his resurrection account is crisp and sparse. The women came to the tomb, saw an angel, and were told to let the disciples

know they should meet in Galilee. A tender message was that Peter should be included in the invitation.

After saying they were too frightened to talk, the shorter ended says they rallied and gave a brief message to Peter and the others. Jesus sent them out with a beautiful commission: the “sacred and unfailing message of salvation that gives eternal life.”

*Am I a faithful messenger of this message of salvation?*

*June 8*

Mark 16:9-19 Christ proclaimed (1:4-8)

The second ending gave credit to Mary Magdalene as the first to see Christ, the full story of which we get in John. Then we are told about the disciples on the road out of Jerusalem, a story given in full in Luke. Jesus’ appearance to the eleven disciples, his commissioning and ascension were packed together here and Luke gives us more detail.

But Mark has served us well with the essential points of the story, and has demonstrated to us that Jesus is the Savior of the Gentiles as well as the Jews. What a great story to translate for people who do not know much about Hebrew culture and prophecy, and so are not burdened with more than they need to know at first. So many have found the forgiveness of sins by hearing or reading this book.

*Am I comfortable with my own ways of sharing the good news of Jesus?*

*June 9*

Mark: Christ the Victorious King

Mark, as we have seen, presented Jesus as a victorious King, a replacement for Caesar, their arrogant Roman lord. The emphasis on his power was not military but spiritual, vanquishing evil that held people in bondage. In Mark’s account of the commissioning of the disciples, Jesus told them to preach to everyone everywhere. He promised they would cast out demons in his name. They would be victorious over dangerous things like snakes and poison. The very last line of the book is a sign of triumphant power, saying God confirmed their message with many miraculous signs.

Within a very short time the seemingly invincible Roman power would be replaced with masses of people who followed Jesus, to the point that the empire would claim his name. All through the centuries since, he has become a power to be reckoned with no matter what political group was in charge.

But there is a personal call to each one of us to acknowledge him as our king, and to commit ourselves to him in complete obedience. As I review what Mark has taught me, I ask how I am doing in being one of his agents and ambassadors in the world?

*Do I worship Christ as a victorious king?*