

**The Disciples Did Not, However, Understand
What this Rising from the Dead Meant -
(Nor Did They Understand Much of Anything Else)
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Mark 8-9

Interviewer: Our theme is “Sundays with Mark”. So in the tradition of “Tuesdays with Morrie”, we’re using a technique called retro-visualizing Mark in order to bring him to the present time and ask him a few questions on some of his intentions in writing this gospel, especially chapters 8-9. Keep in mind that the person who wrote the gospel of Mark, was probably not named Mark. But is it okay with you if we just call him Mark?

Let’s conjure up Mark.

(A rather weak FLASH! Mark appears)

Interviewer: Is that it? That little flash?

Mark: That’s all I’ve got.

Interviewer: Well, let’s begin our visit. Last we heard Jesus had crossed over into gentile territory, gentiles being people who were not Jews. What do you want to tell me about today?

Mark: Today I want to tell you about his followers. Now a lot of religious books make the followers of holy figures out as saints. But this group, I’ll tell you, they didn’t get it.

Q How so?

Mark: Remember my story of Jesus feeding five thousand people with five loaves and two fishes?

Interviewer: Yes I believe I do.

Mark: Well it happened again. Jesus is traveling with a huge crowd of people for three days into the desert, and here they are, yet another time, without food. Once more Jesus gathers up all the food, which consists of seven loaves of bread and a few small fish. This time there are only four thousand, not five thousand people, and they have seven baskets of food left over.

Interviewer: Do you think this miraculous feeding happened twice?

Mark: To tell you the truth, I’m not sure if the same feeding was remembered two ways, or this happened twice. I wrote it as if it happened twice, because there were different details, and it showed us something about the disciples. You would think that after Jesus fed the people once, the disciples would figure out it could be done again. But no.

Now here’s what’s interesting. The feeding was almost the same, but the numbers were different. In the feeding of the five thousand there

were five loaves, two fishes and twelve baskets were left over. In feeding the four thousand there were seven loaves, a few fish and seven baskets left over.

Remember those numbers because they just sit there until the disciples are out in a boat with Jesus. Check out the manuscript. What do the disciples bring along?

Interviewer: (pick up a bible) One loaf of bread, exactly.

Mark: Right, one loaf. Jesus warns them about the yeast of the Pharisees. The disciples start apologizing, thinking Jesus is going to be angry because they are coming up short on bread again.

Instead Jesus says, "Why are you talking about bread? Don't you get a thing? Think numbers. Think symbols. Hey, disciples when I fed the five thousand there were five loaves of bread."

Tell me, how many books of Moses are there?

Interviewer: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. That makes five.

Mark: Every Jew knows that. Then Jesus asks how many baskets of bread were left over. They say twelve. Tell me, how many tribes in the federation of Israel?

Interviewer: Twelve.

Mark: What did the wandering Hebrew people eat when they were starving in the desert?

Interviewer: Manna, bread from heaven.

Mark: When I found this story I thought: Who are the people who carried on this story trying to remind Jesus' listeners of?

Interviewer: Moses?

Mark: Bingo. This Jesus didn't come from nowhere. I want people to know that.

Interviewer: But what about the seven loaves and seven baskets left over after the feeding of the four thousand?

Mark: That's why I kept the second story. This story is making another point. Remember that Jesus and the disciples have now crossed over into gentile territory. The four thousand he fed were gentiles, not Jews. How many loaves of bread were there?

Interviewer: Seven.

Mark: and how many left over?

Q. Seven.

Mark: In Jewish numerology, seven is a number of inclusion, and the seven baskets stand for including the gentile world in God's message.

Interviewer: Do you think that people who read these stories today will figure out such subtleties?

Mark: I doubt it. Even the disciples didn't get it. Look at what happens next in the boat. We've now gotten past the numbers with the disciples, but Jesus tells them again to beware of the yeast of the Pharisees.

Interviewer: So what's wrong with yeast? It makes bread rise.

Mark: Sure, in modern times it does. In my day yeast wasn't a nice culture sealed in a little package. It was also considered a mold that could just as easily ruin food as make it better. Remember, when I wrote this manuscript the Romans had just destroyed Jerusalem and the temple, and there were Jewish leaders, like the Pharisees, sucking up to Herod who was in bed, as it were, with the Roman authorities, saying, "Hey, we're the good Jews. We don't stir up rebellions. We're here to help you govern peacefully." These leaders were like collaborators with the Nazis during World War II. Jesus is warning the disciples that the religious authorities having slumber parties with the governing bodies could infect the faith like a bad mold, yeast.

Interviewer: Do the disciples get this?

Mark: Not really, which is why I have Jesus saying to his disciples, "Do you not yet understand?" and which is why I follow with a story of Jesus healing a blind man by spitting in his hands and rubbing saliva in his eyes. The disciples can see about as well as a blind man with spit in his eyes. Even when the blind man does see, all he can see is people who look like trees walking. I know I'm being hard on these disciples, but that's the way it is for me too. When I learn something new, I don't usually see it clearly at first. A new idea for the first time is like seeing trees walking around. Only later does it come into focus.

Interviewer: I know you don't think the disciples ever get it, but what about the next story where Peter says Jesus is the Messiah?

Mark: Yes, that is a good moment for Peter. Although sometimes I wish I had never included it. Besides, the more important point is that the whole story shifts here. Jesus and his disciples are now beginning their journey to Jerusalem. The last story I tell about Jesus before he gets to Jerusalem is the healing of another blind man, a beggar named Bartimaeus. Jesus gives him sight, and unlike the first blind man healed, this guy sees clearly. I'm trying to make it clear that this whole section is about seeing. Where were we now?

Interviewer: We're back earlier with Jesus on the way to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. He asks the disciples who people say he is.

Mark: Ah yes, and they say the people think he's John the Baptist, or Elijah, or one of the prophets. And then I have Jesus ask a very good question, "Who do **you** say that I am?" Peter is the one who answers, "You are the Messiah" which means the chosen or anointed one of God. (It's Messiah in Hebrew, Christ in Greek. It's a title, never intended to be Jesus' last name or a cuss word).

Interviewer: You say you wish you hadn't included this story. Why?

Mark: Well, I'm afraid I'm partially responsible for Peter winding up as the first pope. But to tell you the truth, it's Matthew who goes off the deep end here adding his stuff about Jesus telling Peter, "You are the rock (a cute play on his name, Cephas, which means rock) on which I build my church..." and then Matthew goes on about Peter having the

keys to heaven, and what he allows on earth God allows and what he forbids, God forbids. Well God forbid.

It's important for people to realize that in all the stories I found about Jesus, and I can't say too many times that my gospel is the oldest one - Matthew and Luke copied from me - and in my stories Jesus never calls himself the Messiah. Jesus seems to accept Peter's use of the term. No human had used this term Messiah for Jesus before this time. Only the spirit world, the voice from heaven at the baptism and the evil spirits of the demons that Vince talked about so well last week, used these elevated terms. Peter is the first person who says that Jesus is the anointed one of God. Jesus once again says, "Don't tell anyone." Remember, it's a secret.

I don't believe Jesus really wants to talk about himself as a Messiah, and that's the way I present him. He doesn't want people worshiping him or giving him titles. Jesus is more concerned about the coming Kingdom of God. For Jesus the kingdom is a place where healing, feeding, teaching, and telling parables are what's important.

Interviewer: So it sounds like the disciples are getting it now.

Mark: You'd think so! I have Jesus explain quite openly to other followers and disciples that this is a very dangerous mission and that he will be rejected by all the authorities. For the first time, Jesus says, he will be killed for this and on the third day, rise.

What does Peter do? He pulls Jesus back from the crowd and rebukes him, saying you don't really have to do this. Jesus says to Peter, "Get behind me Satan." Peter is like the devil in the wilderness, offering Jesus an easy way out. Peter doesn't get it.

In my story Jesus then mentions the cross for the first time, telling the crowd and his disciples that if you want to be my followers you must "take up your cross and follow me".

Everyone has to take their own metaphorical trip to Jerusalem.

Interviewer: In our time we've come to understand taking up our cross to mean bearing the hardships of our lives, like a chronic disease or an annoying neighbor's barking dog.

Mark: That's not a bad idea, but it's not what I meant in writing this gospel. In my time the cross was a very specific, terrible thing. During Passover when Jews from all over Israel came to Jerusalem, Romans placed two crosses, holding the dead bodies of those they claimed to be traitors, in front of every entrance to Jerusalem. It was a warning not to go against the Roman state.

In those days a cross was a Roman cross, period. To follow the way that Jesus speaks of is to take that metaphorical journey to the Jerusalem of one's life, dying to an old identity and rising to a new way of living.

In all this talk, once again, the disciples don't get it.

When you get to the end of my gospel, come back to this sentence in chapter 9:32 “But the disciples did not understand what this rising meant and were afraid to ask him.”

Interviewer: Was it only this rising from the dead that they didn't get?

Mark: No, it was the whole sense of opposites. Look right there in chapter 9 vs. 33. He's just told them about his dying and rising, and as soon as they get on the road he notices that they're arguing. He stops and asks, “What are arguing you about?” Like children caught fighting on the playground they say, “Nothing”.

Jesus knows they were arguing about who was the greatest disciple? Can you imagine it? “I'm the greatest. No I'm the greatest. Jesus likes me best. Does not. Does. Not. Does...”

Jesus tells them that if they want to be first, they must be last. He's teaching them the paradoxes of life. A paradox is a statement of truth in what seems to be opposite and contradictory.

Greatness is the opposite of what it looks like. The greatest of all must be the servant of all.

Interviewer: Were the disciples really this dense? Could they understand nothing of Jesus?

Mark: Actually, no I don't think they were this dull?

Interviewer: Then why do you describe them this way?

Mark: For two reasons. I'm writing in a community forty years after Jesus died. My community knows two things the disciples did not and could not know in their time. First my little community of followers knows that Jesus did go to Jerusalem where he was crucified and in some form or fashion rose. Second, in my time Jerusalem has just been destroyed and thousands upon thousands of our sisters and brothers have died at the hands of the Romans. Everything my community understands about greatness has been turned upside down.

Interviewer: So why again, make the disciples so obtuse?

Mark: To make them be like us. Most of the time we don't get new truth either. It's when we think we know everything that we get into the most trouble. It's when we think we're absolutely right that we're most likely wrong.

You know you captured this idea in that great Lenten booklet you put together. Do you have one right there? Good. Read the poem by Yehuda Amichai from March 21.

Interviewer: (Hold it up) This one?

Mark: Yes that one.

Interviewer:

From the place
Where we are right,
Flowers will never grow
In the spring.
The place
Where we are right

Is hard and trampled
Like a yard.
But doubts and loves
Dig up a world
Like a mole,
Like a plow.
And a whisper will be heard
In the place where
The ruined house once stood.

Mark: That's what I was trying to get across. When we're tilling the soil of ideas that we haven't trampled on for years then we're ready for some flowers of new truth to grow in our lives. Be ready, because next week, Vince and Andy are taking you through some very tough stories. For this morning, let's accept that in our confusion, new life rises.

Prayer –

I invite you to a time of prayer and meditation. Put anything in your hands on the floor. Place your feet on the floor. Sit up straight. Place your hands open in your lap. You may close your eyes, or look at the candles, or look out the window. Take a few deep breaths
(Tane' begin playing softly – #296 – Spirit, Spirit of gentleness...)
Imagine the spirit of this universe, the spirit underneath, within, and above our world, a spirit of gentleness and restlessness that been flowing through all of time and eternity...

Now let this spirit bear you along, lift you as if you were on a magic carpet, soaring to a place that is familiar and sacred to you, a place of personal power.

Look upon your life from this place, and hear this voice of the holy calling you to understand life's paradoxes, that to be great is to serve, to be first is to be last, to die to the old is to rise to the new. Let an old fear go. Accept a new promise...

Return

Amen, blessed be.

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Resources for this sermon –

Bernard Brandon Scott – Westar Seminar on Resurrection Feb 11, 2011,
Long Boat Key, FL.

Marcus Borg – Conversations With Scripture: The Gospel of Mark,
Morehouse Publishing, 2009.

Say to This Mountain – Mark's Story of Discipleship, Karen Lattea, ed.,
Orbis Books, 1996