

## The Cast | People Engaged In the Story of Jesus Christ

### *The Five Friends OR The Beautiful Letdown*

Rev. T.J. Campo

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#### Mark 2.1-13

*When He had come back to Capernaum several days afterward, it was heard that He was at home. <sup>2</sup> And many were gathered together, so that there was no longer room, not even near the door; and He was speaking the word to them. <sup>3</sup> And they came, bringing to Him a paralytic, carried by four men. <sup>4</sup> Being unable to get to Him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above Him; and when they had dug an opening, they let down the pallet on which the paralytic was lying. <sup>5</sup> And Jesus seeing their faith said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." <sup>6</sup> But some of the scribes were sitting there and reasoning in their hearts, <sup>7</sup> "Why does this man speak that way? He is blaspheming; who can forgive sins but God alone?" <sup>8</sup> Immediately Jesus, aware in His spirit that they were reasoning that way within themselves, said to them, "Why are you reasoning about these things in your hearts? <sup>9</sup> "Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven'; or to say, 'Get up, and pick up your pallet and walk '? <sup>10</sup> "But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins "-- He said to the paralytic, <sup>11</sup> "I say to you, get up, pick up your pallet and go home." <sup>12</sup> And he got up and immediately picked up the pallet and went out in the sight of everyone, so that they were all amazed and were glorifying God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this."*

<sup>13</sup> *And He went out again by the seashore; and all the people were coming to Him, and He was teaching them.*

During this season of the year we usually look at the source documents of the Christian faith, the four accounts universally accepted in all branches of the church as the authorized story of Jesus Christ's life.

This year we're paying special attention to the numerous characters that appear in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and are engaged by the main Character. In His presence, they are lit up for us to see. In them we see people we know and... if we're courageous... we may just recognize ourselves.

Today, we meet a group of friends who won't take "no" for an answer. They have a need; they see Jesus Christ as the answer to their need and they must get TO Him ...and will get to Him at any cost. And Jesus Christ not only honors their persistence (really more like desperation!) but He also uses the whole crisis moment to reveal something about Himself

that leaves the whole crowd looking to God in a new way: joyful – “we have NEVER seen anything like THIS!”

The air in this episode is dense with conflict. Accusations will fly. People come to a fork in the road and have to choose sides, issue a verdict, make a determination. THIS whole section of Mark centers on THAT idea – Jesus Christ is a Troublemaker. If we see His works and hear His words, it’s impossible to remain neutral. There are 5 controversy stories in a row here in this section of Mark’s account.

It’s a time of revelation when God is showing something about Himself and about His Messiah. And it’s an environment of tremendous spiritual growth for some people. AND it’s an opportunity for US to consider a setting that’s VERY fertile for growth and take stock – what does a spiritually fertile growth environment look like? How can we identify one? Is it possible that YOU are in the midst of such a situation even NOW and don’t recognize it? And, of course, IF and WHEN we face conditions favorable to rapid spiritual growth what (if anything) should be our response?

Let’s look at four indicators that this was a time of revelation and growth and see if these may be existent in our own recent experience: This was a time of: 1) Controversy 2) Companionship 3) Commotion and 4) Conclusion.

Jesus Christ is making a stir. We’ve seen Him in John at the Passover, turning over tables in the Temple. Now, He’s back at home, the base in Galilee. Ch. 1 ended with the note that people knew about Him “to such an extent that Jesus could no longer publicly enter a city, but stayed out in unpopulated areas; and they were coming to Him from everywhere” (1.45). He’s having to reject the celebrity status they’re inflicting on Him (1.38) just so He can move and tell the people what’s happening – the Good News!

Mark Ch. 1: He went into the Garden – the wilderness – as the New Adam and lived with wild beasts and overcame the serpent and has emerged victorious. And now He’s reclaiming the lost world and showing the reign of God over sickness and evil spirits.

BUT He’s not a kind of social engineer or reformer out to enhance our lives – He’s making claims about Himself that NO ONE’S ever made. And He’ll even say, “Don’t think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I didn’t come to bring peace, but a sword (Mat 10.34).” And the religious professionals of His day would’ve been okay with a reformer but what they found was ... a blasphemer! This was a Man claiming to be Unique...and AS SUCH... He can’t be simply incorporated INTO their teachings (or OURS or anybody else’s!). If what this Person said is TRUE then everything is now changed and we have to readjust!

C. S. Lewis said it: “Christianity, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The only thing it cannot be is moderately important.”

And THAT of course was controversial THEN and just as controversial NOW. AND yet...that revelation has to be faced...to sidestep it, is to quit this spiritually rich soil where real growth and transformation are available.

Second – Spiritual discovery and growth not only requires us to face controversy, IT ALSO (at some point) involves OTHERS, companions! And even though we live in a time and place where it's "every man for himself"... that idea...can't stand...won't hold!

This is a story of FIVE friends. They came together to get one of their number the help he needed. The four carriers are in a sense the unsung heroes of the story. They share a common faith; have the same confidence that THIS PERSON is indeed unique.

And the companions act out vividly and physically what has been IMITATED literally billions of times in the last 20 centuries, i.e. the truth that almost always some friend or friends play a significant role in a person coming to Jesus Christ both initially and in subsequent encounters.

Our own doctrinal statement in the Presbyterian Church STATES this IN MUCH STRONGER terms than most American Christians are willing to put it: "the visible church...the house and family of God OUTSIDE OF WHICH THERE IS NO ORDINARY POSSIBILITY OF SALVATION". That's to say that, ordinarily, we don't enter into relationship with God except as we are ALSO in relationship with other people, i.e. with God's community, the Church.

That's to say that, ordinarily, we don't progress in relationship with God except as we are ALSO in relationship with other people, i.e. with God's community, the Church.

And what this text may add to the discussion and illustrate is that it's not simply contact with the church but friendships...companions...giving and receiving in those one-another relationships.

The Western ideal of personal autonomy and what the Berkley sociologist Robert Bellah called "expressive individualism" deeply affects us (inside AND outside the church). We find ourselves in a society fragmented and friendless and yet God made us to be COMPANIONS, in community, not every man for himself but instead (from the beginning) "it is NOT good for man to be alone".

There IS a place for the practice of intermittent solitude and meditation in True Spirituality but TO DISCOVER AND KNOW GOD...will inevitably require companionship ("with bread") i.e. people with whom you break bread and share life and talk about spiritual things...people you carry and who carry you.

And sure, these five friends are more emblematic or symbolic – this isn't the THING Jesus Christ is teaching in this passage... but IF they ARE an emblem ... well, WHAT an emblem they ARE!

And how many Christians here today would be able to point to some person, a parent, a co-worker, a neighbor or friend or fellow-student and SAY, "Yeah, that person carried ME to Jesus Christ...when I couldn't get there myself...didn't know the way..."

And what a great way to think about THIS church, that OUR relationships within AND with those OUTSIDE the church are really ABOUT carrying others to Jesus Christ. I know you come here to be lifted up... to be built up...the Potter wants to put you back together again!...and that's great! It's OK and I personally NEED to be with YOU...together...in community with my companions...restock the shelves!

But what about also... carrying others... being willing to be inconvenienced to carry people TO Jesus Christ and TO the Potter's House... to say to others, "the Potter wants to put you back together again"? What could be more Christ-like than to be a carrier?

Jesus Christ IS the Great Carrier for everyone who trusts in Him. He carries us. He bears our weight of guilt and shoulders our Cross. He TAKES the burden of our failings and sin. He lived the life I failed to live and died the death deserved to die.

When we're called to do this for one another, Paul puts it so strongly, "Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ." (Gal 6.2) This is the LAW of Christ; it's His animating principle, His job description, His reason for coming. And how fitting for His people who ARE carried... to then become carriers. Maybe... no, certainly... all those unchurched friends need a lift... to church... to the Potter's House.

A third element in an environment that ripe for spiritual growth/discovery is that there's commotion. Most people ...really ALL people who meet Jesus Christ ...and then meet Him again ...and again are first disrupted out of the normal routine through some unforeseen interruption. Sometimes, it's strictly INWARD – maybe a discovery of moral failings. I may see myself through the eyes of a loved one that I hurt or SEE MYSELF as coming far short of God's requirement to love Him and love others completely.

OR there may be some unexplained, unexpected emotional disturbance, like depression or anxiety.

Sometimes it's a physical trauma (an injury or sickness) or a relational commotion.

There are a few different commotions or disruptions to routine in this episode. First, some physical interruption left this man paralyzed/disabled.

His health had been disrupted. A lot of people have a similar story of health interrupted (It's MY own story – I actually went through a roof and met Jesus Christ that way)...but it often leads people to spiritual seeking.

Then, of course, the coming of Jesus itself was a commotion. The news went out, "The Rabbi who heals people is in TOWN!"

Finally, the extreme need coupled with the unique opportunity leads to this desperate tenacity. They can't get in so they go up. Whether it was thatch or a flat clay roof...they "unroof" it and lower their friend in front of Jesus Christ...and Jesus says...He SAYS...NOT what we expect Him to say...NOT "Be well and walk" BUT instead, "My child, your sins are forgiven"

He gets to the root cause of all that's wrong with life on the fallen planet, "Your sins are forgiven."

And YET Jesus Christ finds this fertile soil to uncover the real issue, i.e. His identity/authority. It's the main point in this scene. He says something that ONLY GOD HAS A RIGHT TO SAY: "Your sins are forgiven."

To the theologians it SOUNDS like He's claiming to speak for God...OR EVEN claiming TO BE GOD HIMSELF! And Jesus Christ reads the question on their hearts and meets the question WITH a question, "Which is easier to say, 'Your sins are forgiven' or to say 'Arise, take your cot and walk'?"

And the implied answer is: people can't DO either one! You can't speak to a body and make it whole and the ONLY One who can forgive sins is the One against Whom those sins were COMMITTED!"

Both are things that only GOD can do!

And Jesus Christ agrees with that conclusion (our FOURTH point – CONCLUSION) and He makes a statement of identity, "In order that you may know that (I) the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins, 'Arise take your cot and walk home.'"

And the man did! And everyone makes way – wouldn't make room for him to get IN but DID make room for him to get out!) And it ends with JOY – the witnesses make this inescapable conclusion: "Jesus Christ is the Son of Man, the New Adam, the rightful King of the New Creation, the Incarnation of God, the One who has the right (ἐξουσίαν and δύνανται) to forgive sins, top deal with the root problem plaguing creation."

That's what Jesus Christ's ACTION is disclosing – AND making this kind of conclusion is an essential element of real spiritual encounter. In fact, it's THE sign of a spiritually vital situation: Jesus Christ is discovered, revealed. And it's not just an academic thing; there's beauty and power in the discovery.

The people worship God – they stand joyful and astounded and raising their hands in praise.

That's one way to know that NOT only have you found yourself IN the rich soil of ENCOUNTER with God but the encounter actually happened! The seed and the soil combined and there's growth and FRUIT! You see God for Who He is and YOU'RE MOVED to awe and to worship. It's a repeated pattern in the Bible.

Look how the Book of Ruth ends with Ruth and Naomi in worship and the older woman sings, "'Blessed is the LORD who has not left you without a redeemer today,'" (Ruth 4.14).

Look how Joseph's ordeal ends (end Genesis), "you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive" (Gen 50.20). Realization!

Listen to the conclusion of Job's experience, "I had heard of You by the hearing of the ear; but now my eye sees You" (Job 42.5). Breakthrough/discovery!

And we could go on and on through the whole Bible.

The point IS: it's good to be able to recognize when you're in the midst of a spiritually RIPE moment, a season of discovery and growth BUT you only KNOW that it's been fruitful when you see, and taste...and sense something about our Great High Priest, something worthy and astonishing about God and His grace and it moves and stirs you to worship!