

Surely This Man Was the Son of God

Mark 15:33-39

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A passage like this, the one found in Mark 15, might cause a person to wonder why the gospel writer, the one we know as Mark, would tell us that the gospel is the good news about Jesus. Where is the good news in this passage? This story takes place while Jesus is being crucified. At noon darkness comes over the land. At three in the afternoon Jesus cries out in a loud voice, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Some think his words are an appeal to the prophet Elijah, but no rescuer appears. As Jesus breathes his last, nailed to the cross, he has cried his forsaken cry to God, he has been arrested by a crowd sent from the religious leaders, deserted by own disciples, condemned by the high priest, denied by Peter who so brashly declared his allegiance, rejected by the angry crowd, sentenced by Pontius Pilate, mocked and beaten by the Roman soldiers, and even insulted by the criminals condemned next to him on his right and his left. Breathing his last, the curtain in the temple is torn in two. This passage might cause a person to wonder why Mark would tell us that this gospel story is good news.

But Mark has not left Jesus alone at the moment of his death. There is a Roman soldier present. He has been watching all of this transpire. Here is what Mark tells us about the Roman soldier, the centurion. “And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, ‘Surely this man was the Son of God.’” The significance of the centurion’s confession of faith is not lost on those who have carefully read the Gospel of Mark. It is the first time a person, the first time a human being, confesses that Jesus is the Son of God. It is a powerful confession. It might well be what the whole gospel has been building up to, that a human being, a person, would look at Jesus, would look to Jesus, and believe that surely he was the Son of God.

When I say that the centurion is the first person to make the confession that Jesus was the Son of God, I am not saying it is the first time in the gospel that we have heard the confession that Jesus is the Son of God. The fact that we the readers of the gospel have already been told Jesus is the Son of God is what makes the gospel such a compelling witness. Having been told Jesus is the Son of God, and that the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is good news, we enter into the gospel caught up in the tension of who Jesus will be, what his purpose will be, what his reception will be, and the difference his life as the Son of God will make.

When I took a course in evangelism at Austin Seminary, we had a delightful professor named David Lowes Watson. David was an Englishman, and just to hear him speak with his wonderful accent was a treat. He had an interesting way of presenting the gospel of Jesus Christ. Evangelism is literally good news and it refers to sharing the good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. David would tell us the gospel in many different ways and forms, but no matter how he told the gospel story, he always ended his presentation with this intriguing statement. He would look at us and ask, “What say you to that?” This morning I am going to do my best to put the gospel of Mark into one sermon, but be prepared. When we come to an end this morning, my dear professor David Lowes Watson has a question for us. “What say you to that?” So listen.

Even though the centurion is the first person in the gospel of Mark to make the confession that Jesus is the Son of God, his confession is not the first time we have been told Jesus is the Son of God. Listen to the first verse of the first chapter of the gospel of Mark. Listen literally to the first words in the gospel: “The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” (1:1) Mark wants us to know this gospel is about Jesus Christ, who is God’s Son. And he wants us to know it is good news. It is gospel. It is gospel that has been long in the making. Way back in the days of the prophet Isaiah we were told a messenger would come who would prepare the way for the Lord. So Mark tells us John the Baptist came in that role, to prepare this world for the Lord. The Old Testament was pointing toward Jesus. John the Baptist was pointing to Jesus. And when Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River, someone else pointed to Jesus. “As Jesus was coming up out of the water (of baptism), he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’” (1:10, 11)

But just as quickly as we are introduced to Jesus as the Son of God, we realize his time on earth will not be a simple coronation filled with adoration because Jesus is immediately faced with temptation. Jesus spends forty days in the desert being tempted by Satan. The Son of God who is loved by God has entered a world created by God and blessed by God, but nevertheless a world that is conflicted. There are forces at work against God, and we will encounter them throughout the gospel of Mark. These forces are spiritual as we see with the mention of Satan. Later in the gospel Jesus will be confronted by demons, spirits that exert their power in human lives. The forces of opposition are also human. We find religious leaders who are threatened by Jesus. We also will be faced with the difficult truth that even within the heart of those who most want to follow Jesus, there is, if not opposition, certainly resistance, an inability to fully grasp who Jesus is and a failure to trust in him completely. All of these forces of opposition and resistance will play out until that dramatic moment when the centurion makes his confession of faith. And remember, at that point we will encounter a question about our faith. “What say you to that?”

Jesus completes the forty days of temptation in the desert and his first act of ministry is to call disciples. Although we will never hear these disciples call Jesus the Son of God in the pages of Mark's gospel, their journey with Jesus is of utmost importance. We might even say we can see ourselves in these disciples. Their journey can be our journey. As they will be faced with the question at the end of the gospel, so we will be faced with the question at the end of the gospel, "What say you to that?" The journey begins when four fishermen leave their nets and their boats to follow Jesus. What an amazing journey it is. Disciples will be with Jesus as he gives evidence that the kingdom of God is near.

- Jesus teaches in the synagogue at Capernaum, where he is challenged by an evil spirit. While we will not hear a human voice confess that Jesus is the Son of God until that centurion in the fifteenth chapter, the evil spirits, the demons, they seem to know who Jesus is. In chapter one the evil spirit says, "Jesus, I know who you are—the Holy One of God." In chapter 3 and verse 11 the evil spirits cry out, "You are the Son of God." But that phrase does not find itself on the lips of a human being...until the centurion.**
- Jesus heals a leper of his unclean skin disease. He not only heals the leper, he touches the leper. He makes clear to the leper, and to all of us, that he is willing to bring healing.**
- Jesus heals a paralytic, a man unable to walk. And yet again, the healing is not the only thing that takes place. Like the touch of the leper, like the words expressing his willingness to heal, with the paralyzed man Jesus proclaims the forgiveness of sins. The proclamation of forgiveness gives us the first hint that his ministry as the Son of God will trigger opposition. When Jesus offers forgiveness, the teachers of the law who are watching are bothered, asking themselves, "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" In their eyes, Jesus is committing blasphemy. Why? Because they do not believe he is the Son of God.**
- We get that tension between good news and opposition again when Jesus calls a tax collector named Levi to follow him. There is such joy in the heart of Levi, a sinner, such great happiness to be called as a disciple that he throws a party and invites all of his friends, who also happen to be tax collectors or sinners. The religious leaders ask why in the world Jesus would break with customs that say we ought to keep far away from sinners and tax collectors. If we are religious people, we definitely should not eat with tax collectors and sinners. Thankfully there is not only opposition, there is good news. Hear the good news, right from the lips of Jesus. "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (2:17)**

- **The good news is a time for celebration and feasting, but when Jesus does exactly that he is faced with the question, “Why is there no fasting with you and your disciples?” Comparing his coming to a wedding he responds by asking how you can keep from celebrating when the groom is present with the bride. At that moment he foreshadows that there will not always be celebrating. One day the groom will be taken away. Then there will be fasting.**
- **But right now the groom is present, and Jesus, the groom so to speak, declares he is Lord of the Sabbath, which leads to opposition. Jesus heals on the Sabbath, which leads to opposition. The opposition begins to gather momentum. The religious leaders say he has power over the demons only because he is working in cahoots with the prince of demons, with Beelzebub.**
- **When his own family questions him, wondering if he is out of his mind, Jesus uses that as an opportunity to give a new definition of family, a definition that will take on added meaning when people finally understand he is the Son of God. He declares his family is God’s family, and the beauty within that statement is that his family will be one where walls are broken down and barriers are destroyed and instead of exclusion there will be a wide and warm welcome. People will find a place in his family not because they follow set laws, not because they keep certain patterns of diet or cleanliness, and not because they have the right genealogy or relationship to any particular people group, including the nation of Israel. His gift of belonging will be for all people.**
- **When he tells a parable about a sower, one who sows seed in four soils, Jesus is telling us in a subtle way that this word about him will often not be accepted. People will have eyes to see but they will not perceive who Jesus is. People will hear about Jesus but not understand. Disciples are given the special gift of seeing and perceiving, of hearing and understanding. Except when they don’t.**
- **Jesus calms a terrible storm, but the disciples are full of fear. They ask, “Who is this? Even the winds and waves obey him.” (5:41) Jesus feeds the multitudes, twice, the first time 5,000 and the second time 4,000. Bu the disciples don’t understand. Jesus walks on the water. Their response, instead of faith, is fear. His very own disciples are unable to grasp who he is.**
- **All this leads to a major turning point in the gospel of Mark. After repeated misunderstandings on the part of his disciples, Jesus heals a blind man. The blind man is able to see, and it turns out apparently the disciples have their eyes opened. Right after the blind man is given sight, Jesus asks his disciples who people say he is. Peter’s eyes are opened. He says, “You are the Christ.” That is what Mark told us, in chapter one and verse one, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ....” Peter now sees that Jesus is the Christ.**

- **What Peter does not see, not yet, is that Jesus is also the Son of God. It turns out this seeming high point of faith becomes the catalyst for Jesus revealing to his disciples that his journey on earth will end with suffering. Immediately after Peter confesses that Jesus is the Christ, Jesus began to teach his disciples that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law...and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.” (8:31, 32) That teaching did not go over well with the disciples. In chapter 8 Peter rebukes Jesus when he talks about suffering, rejection, and death. So Jesus tells them again in chapter 9 that the Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him and after three days he will rise. The response of the disciples is to have an argument among themselves about which one of them is the greatest. (9:30-37) In chapter ten Jesus tells them one more time they are heading to Jerusalem, where he will be betrayed, mocked, spit on, flogged and killed. Three days later he will rise.” No sooner has he said these hard words about what he will endure than James and John come up and ask, “Can we have a special place in your kingdom, one of us sitting on your right and one on the left?” The response of the other disciples is to get mad because they all wanted to be ones with a special place in the kingdom. Their failure to understand is met with some of the most important teaching Jesus gives about the kingdom. “Whoever among you wants to be great must become like a servant. Whoever wants to be first must be a slave.” And then he points at his own life. “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (10:32-45) Even though the disciples clearly do not understand who Jesus is and why he has come, there is a hopeful note as he enters Jerusalem. Another blind man has his eyes opened. Maybe, just maybe, the eyes of those who follow Jesus will be opened.**
- **And so he who said he would give his life as a ransom comes to Jerusalem and on the night before the Passover feast a woman anoints Jesus with expensive perfume. She breaks her jar of perfume and pours it on his head. Faced with criticism for her extravagant act, the one who said he would give his life as a ransom for many said she was preparing his body for his burial. The death of Jesus is imminent.**
- **When he gathers his disciples for the Passover, he who was so recently anointed, he who said he would give his life as a ransom, he becomes intimately associated with the Passover Lamb that is offered as a sacrifice. He takes the bread of the feast and says, “This is my body.” He takes the cup and says, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.”**

What follows so rapidly is directly related to Jesus giving his life as a ransom. He entered Jerusalem on a Sunday to cries of “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” By Friday he is the stone the builders have rejected. Jesus is crucified. With mind-numbing speed we come to the passage about the centurion. “With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard his cry and saw how he died, he said, ‘Surely this man was the Son of God.’”

The tearing of the curtain could well be a bookend to the baptism of Jesus way back in chapter one, when heaven was torn open. At that point it was the Father in heaven who said, “You are my Son, whom I love.” Now that we have both the power of God demonstrated in his miracles and his teaching and his touch, we discover the love of God, in his death. He gave his life for us. It was a ransom. Now, with the full extent of his love demonstrated by his death, the curtain is torn open. We are able not only to see but to perceive. We are able not only to hear but to understand. Surely this man was the Son of God.

Although the centurion has the ultimate human word in Mark’s gospel, it is not the final human word. The last word we hear from a human in the gospel of Mark is a question shared by the women who come to put spices on the body of Jesus, after he has died, after he has been laid in a tomb, and after the owner of the tomb has rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. They go on a Sunday morning, a morning we now know as Easter morning, Easter Sunday. They ask themselves on the way to the tomb, “Who will roll the stone way from the entrance to the tomb?” The answer to that seems to be God. God rolls the stone away. Jesus, the beloved Son of God, is not abandoned to the grave. He is raised from the dead. And he is alive even now. The tomb is empty and Jesus is risen. That is why Mark calls this incredible account of the life of Jesus the gospel. It is good news.

I told you about my wonderful professor who taught a course on evangelism. He taught a course about the good news of Jesus Christ. When he would finish telling us the good news, he would pause for a moment, and then he would say to us. “What say you to that?” Today you have heard about the life of Jesus, about the beautiful way he lived life, truly loving and serving and treating all of life as if it was a precious gift, inviting each and every one of us to find our place in his family, to belong in his family. Today you have heard that Jesus died. But you have also heard his death had a purpose. He offered his life as a ransom. And now the stone is rolled away and Jesus is alive. He is alive. He is alive and he is with us. My dear friends, my dear, dear friends, we finish our time this morning with a profound question just waiting for us to consider, waiting for us to address, waiting for us to wrestle with...I believe waiting for us to embrace. You have heard the good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. What say you to that?