

Mark's Gospel

*The Beginning of the Good News
& the New Way of Salvation*

A Practical Guide

by

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THIS BOOKLET IS AN EXCERPT OF CHAPTER 5 FROM:

So What's the Good News?
The Catechist's Guide to Reading the Gospels
(Faith Alive Books, 2016)

This book considers the historical situation in which the Gospels were composed, what they are and why they were written. The brief *Reading Guide* to each Gospel helps you to become familiar with that Gospel (including Luke's Acts of the Apostles, volume 2 of his Gospel) and the suggested resources and questions help apply the Gospels to your life.

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*“Read the Gospel.
Read a passage of the Gospel every day
and carry a little Gospel with you,
in your pocket, in a purse, to keep it at hand.
And there, reading a passage, you will find Jesus.
Everything takes on meaning
when you find your treasure there, in the Gospel.
Jesus calls it ‘the kingdom of God,’ that is,
God who reigns in your life,
who is love, peace and joy
in every person and in all persons.
To read the Gospel is to find Jesus
and to have Christian joy,
which is a gift of the Holy Spirit.”*

—POPE FRANCIS
Homily, July 27, 2014”

POPE FRANCIS’S ADVICE FOR ENCOUNTERING THE BIBLICAL TEXT

“In God’s presence, during a recollected reading of the text, it is good to ask:

- Lord, what does this text say to me?
- What is it about my life that you want to change by this text?
- What troubles me about this text?
- Why am I not interested in this?
- Or perhaps: What do I find pleasant in this text?
- What is it about this word that moves me?
- What attracts me? Why does it attract me?

When we make an effort to listen to the Lord, temptations usually arise. One of them is simply to feel troubled or burdened, and to turn away. Another common temptation is to think about what the text means for other people, and so avoid applying it to our own life. It can also happen that we look for excuses to water down the clear meaning of the text. Or we can wonder if God is demanding too much of us, asking for a decision which we are not yet prepared to make.

This leads many people to stop taking pleasure in the encounter with God’s word. But this would mean forgetting that no one is more patient than God our Father, that no one is more understanding and willing to wait. God always invites us to take a step forward, but does not demand a full response if we are not yet ready. God simply asks that we sincerely look at our life and present ourselves honestly before him, and that we be willing to continue to grow, asking from God what we ourselves cannot as yet achieve.”

—POPE FRANCIS
The Joy of the Gospel (2013), #152

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MARK

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- 14:1-17 plotting, anointing, betrayal
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- 14:32-52 Jesus' prayer and arrest in Gethsemane
- 14:53-15:15 Jesus' trial by Judean leaders, Peter's denial, trial by Roman governor Pilate
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THE EPILOGUE: THE WAY TO THE FUTURE

15:40-16:1-8 Jesus' Burial, the Empty Tomb & Easter Message to the Disciples

- [16:9-19 other resurrection materials added later to Mark's original ending]

Introduction

St. Paul reminds us that “faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ” (Rom 10:17). So likewise for us, our Christian lives begin with hearing God’s Good News that Jesus announces to us. Moreover, since our Christian lives hinge on this Good News, it is crucial that we understand what this Good News is, so that we can shape our lives by it and not some “other gospel” (Gal 1:7). For this reason, we must learn what Jesus’ Good news is (**information**) so that we can assimilate it and make it our own (**conformation**) so that it can change ourselves, our communities and our world (**transformation**) into the kind of world that God envisions.

This booklet is a chance to engage with the Gospel of Mark and to think about your own discipleship spirituality by relating it to the spirituality offered by Mark and thus to take from Mark’s Gospel what you need to become a more faithful follower of Jesus today.

By engaging with Mark’s Gospel through your reading, reflection, study and prayer, you are invited to use your imagination to enter into Jesus’ story, to make that story your own, to enter into a world that is very different from our own and ask: What if that vision of the world described by Jesus in Mark’s Gospel is true? What if Jesus’ story as the *Christ* becomes the pattern for my own story as a *Christ-ian*? What if, as Jesus proclaims in the very first words he speaks in Mark’s Gospel, “The kingdom of God is here!”

What happens when you discover God’s awesome, mysterious, powerful transforming presence? What happens when that powerful presence is found in your own life and heart? If you do, then you will know that the time of decision is at hand for you and your way of responding to this Good News will be to shape and reshape your whole life.

So let us now begin our consideration of God’s Good News as Mark understood it and presented it to his community, always remembering Jesus’ advice to his disciples as they tried to unravel his teaching in parables about the mystery of God’s kingdom:

“Let anyone with ears to hear listen!”

“Pay attention to what you hear.” (Mk 4:23-24)

Mark's Gospel

The Beginning of the Good News & the New Way of Salvation

To engage with Mark's Gospel it helps first to understand what a written Gospel is and recognize what the Gospel can do for us and our spirituality. The Greek word for gospel (*euangelion*) meant simply a message of “good news,” often about a great national victory in war. The Christian Good News was about God's victory through Jesus' life, death and resurrection over the forces of evil, sin and death that were disordering and spoiling our world. This victory made possible for everyone a new relationship with God (salvation) in a new community (God's kingdom).

The written Gospels, narratives of the Good News of our salvation, came into existence around AD 70–100. But before this time, the gospel message had been transmitted in oral and fragmentary written forms for almost forty years, for example in the preaching of Jesus' disciples and in the letters of Paul, who often talks about “the gospel of God” (Rom 1:1-6; 15:16; 1 Thes 2:2, 8-9) and “my gospel” (Rom 2:16; 16:25; 2 Tim 2:8), but who never wrote it down as the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

From Spoken Words to Written Gospels

During the last half of the twentieth century, biblical scholars and historians concluded that in the first century the proclamation of the gospel message developed in three general stages primarily distinguished by their form of expression, not their content. These three general stages of development are concisely summarized in Vatican Council II's *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, (*Dei Verbum*) #19, which also notes that each stage proclaimed the gospel message in a way appropriate to its audience.

Each proclamation—whether by Jesus, the preaching apostles or the writing evangelists—actively sought to adapt the same gospel message to the needs of the audience. So the Gospels did not just fall ready-made from the heavens or get whispered into the ears of the evangelists.

Stage 1: The Living Gospel of Jesus

The first stage of God's Good News is the message of God's kingdom rule proclaimed by Jesus during his life on earth. He announced that, as promised in the Old Testament, God was now powerfully present in Jesus himself and in his words and deeds for the final confrontation with the powers of evil in our world, which would transform the world back to the way God had originally ordered it at the time of creation. In this first stage, the primary gospel was Jesus himself, the living personal gospel.

Stage 2: The Oral Gospel of the Apostles

In the second stage, the disciples, who at Jesus' command began even during his lifetime to proclaim the message they had heard about God's kingdom (Mk 6:6-13, 30-31; Mt 10:7-14; Lk 9:1-10), continued after his death and resurrection to proclaim his message but now in a new and modified form (Acts 2:14-36). Their Good News was no longer just about God's kingdom, but now included the decisive events that actually inaugurated God's kingdom rule over our world: Jesus' life, death and resurrection. They also now invited others to share his ministry and mission to build the kingdom. This new message was proclaimed both orally and in several letters by Paul and other Christian missionaries.

Stage 3: The Written Gospels of the Evangelists

Finally, in the third stage of development, around AD 70 Mark invented a new written form of the Good News that proclaimed the gospel message by using the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Once he did this, other Christian teachers recognized its essential power and appeal and knew that what Mark had invented could be revised, but not duplicated. So they composed their own versions using his basic narrative structure but adding other things they knew from the oral tradition.

“The relationship of Stage 3 to Stages 1 and 2 is the problem for twentieth-century readers of the gospels, and herein lies the crucial need of the historical-critical method of gospel interpretation. To disregard it and to equate Stage 3 with Stage 1 is the path of Fundamentalism.”

—JOSEPH A. FITZMYER, SJ
Scripture, the Soul of Theology (1994)

THE THREE STAGES OF GOSPEL FORMATION

Stage 1: The Lived Gospel

Holy Mother Church has firmly and with absolute constancy held, and continues to hold, that the four Gospels just named, whose historical character the Church unhesitatingly asserts, faithfully hand on what Jesus Christ, while living among us, really did and taught for our eternal salvation until the day he was taken up into heaven (see Acts 1:1-2).

Stage 2: The Oral Gospel

Indeed, after the ascension of the Lord the apostles handed on to their hearers what he had said and done. This they did with that clearer understanding which they enjoyed after they had been instructed by the events of Christ's risen life and taught by the light of the Spirit of truth.

Stage 3: The Written Gospel

The sacred authors wrote the four Gospels, selecting some things from the many which had been handed on by word of mouth or in writing, reducing some of them to a synthesis, explaining some things in view of the situation of their churches, and preserving the form of proclamation but always in such a fashion that they told us the honest truth about Jesus. For their intention in writing was that either from their own memory and recollections, or from the witness of those who themselves "from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word" we might know "the truth" concerning those matters about which we have been instructed (see Lk 1:2-4).

[from Vatican Council II's *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)* (1965), #19]

The actual events of Jesus' life : (the facts) he lived, suffered, died and rose from the dead (and their significance) these events are the good news of our salvation.

The oral preaching of the disciples [their proclamation about the events of stage 1].

The written narratives of the evangelist's meaning and message of Jesus' life story [proclamations based on the oral testimony in stage 2, which is about the events in stage 1].

In summary, the four canonical Gospels are:

- (1) The Good News of our salvation first realized in the life and ministry of Jesus,*
- (2) then proclaimed and taught orally by his followers after his death,*
- (3) and finally written down in the form of narratives shaped by the story of the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Their literary form is narrative, but they are more than biographies because they are proclamations of the gospel truth—the Good News of our salvation.*

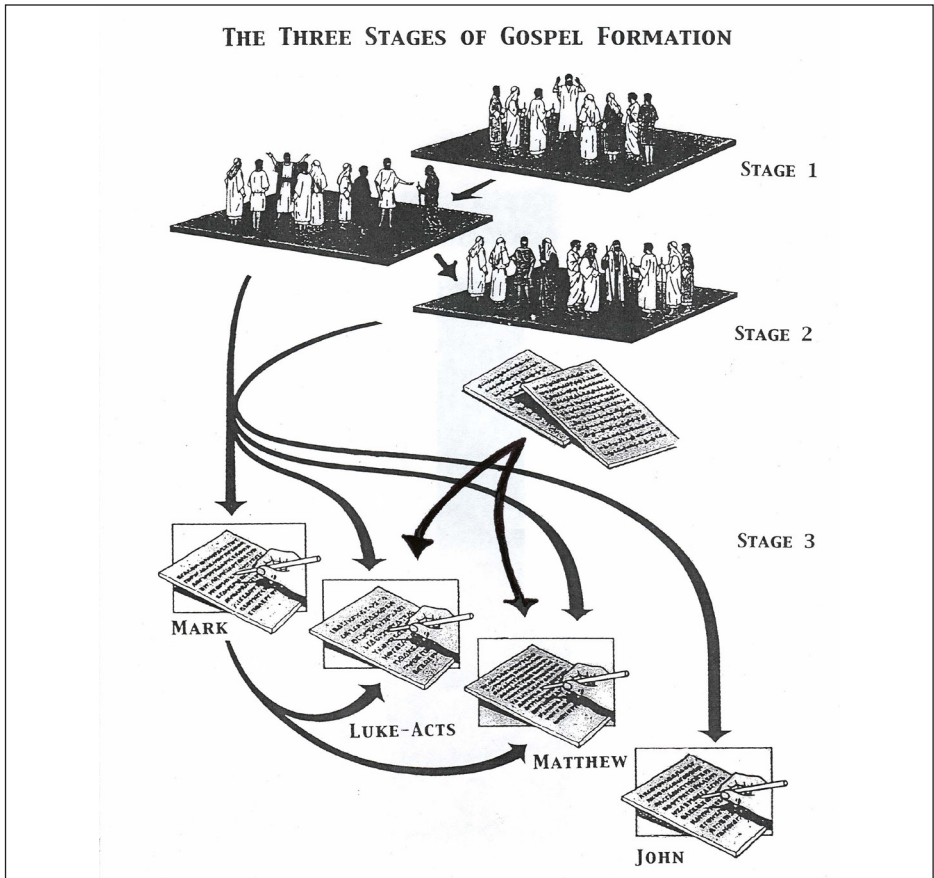
In summary, then, we can describe the literary form of the four Gospels as **written narratives** (stage 3) **proclaiming** (stage 2) **the good news of our salvation** (stage 1). Or moving forward in the stages: (1) The good news of our salvation is **realized** in the life and ministry of Jesus, (2) **proclaimed and taught orally** by his followers after his death, (3) and finally **written in the form of narratives** of the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

God's Good News and its meaning or significance for the Christian community was something the Gospel authors worked hard to communicate. Just as Jesus presented his message in ways that people could understand, so likewise the evangelists tailored their message for the needs of their readers. The Gospels were successful because they responded to the deeply felt needs of the early Christian communities and satisfied their demand for an appropriate communication of the gospel message by answering the questions that the communities needed to have answered.

The four evangelists as authors were actively and personally involved in the shaping or formulation of what they communicated (*On Divine Revelation*, #19). They composed their narratives according to how our human minds operate. We must also note that authors in the ancient world did not stress creative novelty (as we do today), but “invention”—in the ancient rhetorical sense of artfully putting the text together out of pre-existing materials. We use the term *invention* similarly when we distinguish between *discovery* as the process of finding what was already there but not perceived (e.g., electricity) and *invention* as the process of using what already exists to make something new (e.g., the light bulb). So Mark did not *discover* the gospel but *invented* a new way to communicate it.

Mark's Invention of the Narrative Gospel

Mark wove together (the Latin root of our word *text* means to weave) the relevant Christian oral teaching traditions about Jesus' words and deeds— healings and exorcisms, wonders and signs, shameful death and surprising resurrection—to present the Good News of our salvation in his account of the “beginning of the good news of Jesus the Christ, the son of God” (1:1). He shaped Christ's life story so that it could become the pattern for our *Christ-ian* life story—the story of our individual and communal life in the right relationship with God which is our salvation.



Why Did Mark’s Community Need a Gospel?

What prompted Mark around AD 70 to proclaim the gospel message using a written narrative story about Jesus? What you would do if someone asked you to summarize the basic Christian message for them? Would you give them a list of the most important doctrinal formulas? or a copy of the Creed? or maybe a catechism? or perhaps a theological essay explaining Christian beliefs and worship practices?

I imagine that someone in the decade of the sixties of the first century asked the catechist Mark to do just this for his community, and he decided that the gospel story of Jesus was the best catechetical tool to instruct Christians—especially new converts to the Christian way—in the fundamentals of what they needed to know to be followers of Jesus.

Why did communities need something like our written Gospels in order to help them with their Christian existence? The times themselves can perhaps give us some clues. After all, the ancient Christian writers did not just sit down one day and decide to write a new book for the Bible. Indeed, like all writing, we must first look to the historical situation that compelled the writers to write what they did because their readers needed their message. And this will give us clues about why the authors might have decided to write their texts in the particular ways that they did.

Between AD 65–70 the Christian community faced a new and unprecedented crisis that no one anticipated. In July AD 64, a devastating fire burned down a large area of Rome. As the Roman historian Tacitus reported, looking for a convenient scapegoat to blame, the emperor Nero singled out the small and rather insignificant group called *Christians* and arrested and killed many of them in gruesome spectacles. (But note that Tacitus indicates that *Christian* was already a label with very bad connotations among the Roman populace even before the fire because of their “disgraceful acts” and “hatred against mankind”). The important point to note is that Christians were not arrested and killed so much for causing the fire or other crimes but just simply for being Christians. So when Christians were first singled out in Rome for official government persecution for being Christians, it was no doubt very traumatic.

“Therefore, to stop the rumor [that he had set Rome on fire], Nero falsely charged with guilt and punished with the most fearful tortures, the persons commonly called Christians, who were hated for their disgraceful acts. Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or nailed to crosses, or doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired.”

—TACITUS
Annals, 15.44

As Mark’s Gospel seems to hint, many Christians might have thought (and even hoped!) that this was the end time when God would come to save them from their suffering. But Mark reminded them that just as Jesus suffered, died and rose to new life with God—so if they remained faithful

to Jesus, they too would suffer, die and rise. His Gospel warns them not to expect God's miraculous appearance to save them from their suffering. God did not do it for Jesus and will not do it for them either.

So when Christians began to be singled out for persecution, in order to know who to arrest, the Roman persecutors had to ask: What exactly makes someone a Christian? How can we tell a Christian from a Jew or from members of other religious groups? And not only the Romans but also Christians had to answer this question about their identity because now their lives depended on it.

“Many in the Church thought they were seeing the end. Mark responded with the story of another time when people thought it was the end of the gospel, the time when Jesus was put to death and buried, when everyone abandoned him. The disciples thought it was the end, but it turned out to be the beginning. In effect, Mark was telling his readers, ‘Now *you* think it is the end!’ To understand the continuation of the gospel in the Church they had to understand the beginning of the gospel. As a preacher and teacher, Mark fulfilled his mission by proclaiming ‘the beginning of the gospel.’ At a time when nearly everyone felt it was the end, Mark boldly told the story of the beginning. When so many were overwhelmed by what seemed to be bad news, he proclaimed the story of the beginning of the good news.”

—EUGENE LAVERDIERE, SSS

The Beginning of the Gospel: Introducing the Gospel of Mark, Vol. 1 (1999)

Who are we as Christians? Are we Christians to continue to be a certain kind of Judahist or is there something distinctive that sets us apart as Christians from both Judahists and Gentiles? And just what exactly is this distinctive element? What is really at stake here is the nature of Christian identity, which, until this crisis, Christians had not been forced to answer in such a direct and explicit way. The first written narrative Gospel of Mark came into existence at this particular time to help Christians in their persecuted communities to understand their Christian identity by answering this basic question.

Mark's Narrative Gospel & Christian Identity

For a community struggling with their Christian identity, Mark offers the help they need to know who they are and how they ought to respond to God's presence in our world. He reveals the coherent structure of the Christian worldview that provides them the necessary context in which they

can discover their specific Christian identity.

For a community that felt powerless in opposition to the awesome power embodied in the Roman empire and its divinity-desiring emperors, Mark proclaims a vision of the world from God's perspective. Instead of just submitting to the power of the empire, his Good News reveals that God alone is the true ruler of all creation, whose presence in our world and in its history is now transforming everything.

For a community that felt hopeless because on their own they could do little about the overwhelming sin and oppressive evil dominating their world, Mark proclaims that through Jesus God has now begun the final conquest of evil in our world. The community's mission is to participate with God's Holy Spirit in this process of transforming our world into God's "new creation," the kingdom of justice, love and peace.

"Our best text reading does not deny that these narratives might reference actual events, but merely recognizes that this dimension is ancillary to the most important truth they have to tell—the truth contained in the narrative's rhetorical power to create and define a community's identity. To put it somewhat differently, the objective of the narrative is not primarily an accurate reporting of events, but rather the sort of narrative shaping of those events which will lead the audience to believe it is their story, and so constitute their community based on it."

—DALE PATRICK & ALLEN SCULT
Rhetoric and Biblical Interpretation (1990)

What is distinctive about the four Gospels is not just their content or message, but also their particular literary form. They were written not as abstract theological treatises or letters or poems or creeds but as narratives. A narrative, or perhaps we might use our more familiar term *story*, indicates a continuous and ordered presentation which has a beginning, a middle and an end. The term *story* here is synonymous with narrative and describes only the literary form of the presentation and does not say anything about whether a narrative is factual or fictional.

We use *story* this way when we are asked about "the story of our life" or are invited "to tell our story." In either case, people don't want us to make up some fictional account but to order and shape the many things that have happened to us into a unified account that is ordered by chronology or maybe by another significant idea (e.g., overcoming obstacles, achieving suc-

cess, etc.). This is exactly what the evangelists did with Jesus' story by shaping it into a unified narrative with a beginning, a middle and an end. Luke claims at the start of his Gospel that he has written an "orderly account" to help Theophilus "know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed" (Luke 1:1-3). Clearly Luke understands his Gospel as a catechetical resource to enhance the basic instruction that the convert Theophilus has already received.

Mark: Why Write a Narrative Gospel?

But why would Mark shape a Gospel in the form of a life of Jesus? Our first response might be that this would preserve the memory of Jesus. While there is certainly some truth to this, preserving memories can be done in many other ways. One could collect and arrange various remembered sayings of Jesus, as both the "Q" source (a scholarly abbreviation of the German *Quelle*, meaning *source*) and the apocryphal (i.e., not recognized in the official list or canon of biblical books) Gospel of Thomas do, or one could present a theological summary of the gospel and its meaning, as Paul tends to do in his letters.

"Mark's gospel presents the Pauline Christ-event (also called a 'gospel') in a narrative form, which weaves together diverse traditions (including the Old Testament) to create a unified story of the saving significance of the public life, death and raising up of Jesus of Nazareth."

—JOHN R. DONAHUE, SJ, & DANIEL J. HARRINGTON, SJ
The Gospel of Mark (2002)

In contrast, Mark's great invention was to take Jesus himself and the events of his life story and shape them into something more than a biography. He uses Jesus' story as a dramatic proclamation of the Christian message. Thus Mark's narrative Gospel of Jesus in action not only fixed the general pattern (both temporal and geographical) of Jesus' life—his baptism, ministry in Galilee, journey to Jerusalem to suffer, die and rise to new life—but it also connected the community's numerous memories of Jesus' words and deeds to specific situations in his life. And most importantly, it allowed readers to encounter the personality of the remembered Jesus through his words and deeds and then connect that knowledge with their personal experience of the risen Christ (the foundation of every Christian's faith). Thus

believers can recognize the continuity between the remembered Jesus they know from the Gospel and the risen Christ they know from their own faith experience.

“In Mark, the wealth of traditional stories and sayings about Jesus came together in a new kind of literary work. It was not history, biography or travelogue, yet it included elements of these. Nor was it drama or fiction, though there were characteristics of these as well. Mark wrote about the good news, and all he presented was but the beginning of that good news.”

—EUGENE LAVERDIERE, SSS

“A Guide for Listening to the Sunday Gospel,” *Praying*, No. 5 (1985)

Scholars now conclude that soon after its invention, Mark’s written Gospel became known to other Christian communities for whom it became the new norm. Then other catechists—Matthew, Luke and John—followed his lead by adapting his Gospel for the situations and needs of their respective communities. Although they had Mark’s Gospel, they did not think it was necessary to keep reading it as the only expression of what it meant to be a Christian follower of Jesus. In fact, once their versions existed, they probably did not read or rely very much on Mark anymore.

Mark’s Gospel pulls together many strands about who Jesus is and who we are if we wish to be his disciples. But since the text is shaped to communicate a message to his readers, we must first ask historical questions about the author, the audience and their situation, and then literary questions about the form (structure), content and function of the text.

“It is challenging to read Mark as the first Gospel—as if the other Gospels didn’t exist and this is our first encounter with the story of Jesus. It requires imagining that we haven’t already heard about Jesus from the other Gospels, from Christian preaching and teaching, and from what is taken for granted about Jesus in Christian and popular culture.”

—MARCUS J. BORG

Evolution of the Word: The New Testament in the Order the Books Were Written (2012)

Thus we will discover Mark’s special emphasis about Jesus as the promised messianic prophet, teacher and kingdom-community builder who “must” suffer, and ourselves as his all-to-human disciples who model our lives on his. Mark’s Gospel is a way of remembering Jesus to re-member the

community which is threatened with identity problems, challenged by failures of faith and leadership, and distanced from the time and person of Jesus who is no longer physically present with them.

Since we do not have the time or space to deal with all of the scholarly differences of opinion regarding Mark and his Gospel, we will rely on the consensus of scholarship. More complete answers to all of these basic questions can be found in greater detail in scholarly commentaries.

Mark & His Community

First of all, we must note that the identity of all the Gospel authors is a problem that is resolved only by historical study and not by faith. Most scholars recommend caution in accepting the traditional identifications of the Gospel authors. Moreover the author's identity has little to do with our belief that the Gospels, like all Scripture, are revealed, inspired, without error regarding revealed truth, canonical and helpful for our salvation.

Who Was Mark?

Since nothing in the Gospel itself identifies the author by name, and the description “according to Mark” was added later, we can probably never know who he was personally because he reveals no information about himself or his life or his motives for writing. Moreover, we must note that he never claims to be an eyewitness of the events he reports. Most importantly, since Mark was not trying to become a famous author but rather to do something important for his community, he would not want his audience (then or now!) to focus unnecessary attention on him but rather to concentrate on his Gospel and on Jesus whose message and mission it proclaims.

According to the constant tradition of the early Church, the author was one Mark, the “interpreter of Peter.” Many think he was the John Mark in Acts 12:12, to whose house Peter goes after escaping from prison, who then accompanied Paul and Silas on their early Christian missionary journeys (Acts 12:25; 13:5-13; 15:37-39; see also Col 4:10; Phlm 24; 2 Tim 4:11) and is associated with the missionary work of Peter since he is also referred to metaphorically as “my son Mark” (1 Pet 5:13). The earliest testimony describing Mark as author of the Gospel is given by Papias (c. AD 120–140), the bishop of Hieropolis in Turkey, as reported by the Church historian Eusebius (c. 325).

Most scholars now recommend caution in taking Papias's claims at face value and many are slower to give it immediate consent. Whoever wrote the Gospel drew on early tradition of Jesus' miracles, teachings and passion, and thus interpretation must begin with the Gospel itself rather than tradition about its authorship. The Gospel reveals much more about the evangelist and his setting than does the tradition of Papias.

“Mark was essentially a pastor addressing a beleaguered and persecuted community and offering them moral guidance and spiritual consolation. The story of Jesus' miracles, death and resurrection spoke of a power which could overcome all obstacles and sustain the community through the fires of persecution. The story of the disciples' faltering progress in understanding Jesus' message and moral instruction would provide comfort to those who themselves were in danger of breaking under the pressures to betray one another and their faith.”

—JOHN K. RICHES

Conflicting Mythologies: Identity Formation in the Gospels of Mark & Matthew (2000)

Mark's Community

Who needs the good news as Mark announces it? What was the situation of his community that demanded the communication of the Good News of their salvation in the narrative shape or form that Mark chose?

Mark wrote about the year 65–70, probably in Rome (although some scholars argue for a location closer to Palestine), to a community that was a mixture of both former Jews and Gentiles. This was a dangerous time for Christians both in Palestine and in Rome. In Palestine, the Jewish rebellion during the years 66–74 shattered the peace of the eastern Roman empire. Both the Jews and their Christian neighbors were treated with equal harshness by the Roman occupational force. In the year 70, the Romans looted and destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem, which was the only place on earth where the Judean Israelites (Jews) believed God dwelt.

And in Rome, for the first time in their history, Christians were singled out for persecution by the emperor Nero who blamed them for burning Rome in the summer of 64. Until this time, the Romans had always thought of Christians as just a fringe Jewish group. But now Christians could no longer hide their identity. How would Mark's community respond when their faithful following was threatened by persecution and martyrdom? Did these persecutions mean that God had now abandoned Mark's Christian community?

Why Did They Need a Gospel Like This?

Like every text, the Gospels were written to meet the needs of the audiences who found them important for their lives. Mark's Gospel responded to the challenges posed by the first Christian persecution, when following Jesus' way to God really meant taking up the cross to follow him.

Mark's community was suffering for their faith and scrambling to discover their true identity as faithful followers of Jesus. Their persecution created a time of decision when the community had to discover God's kingdom or presence anew. They had to make choices about following Jesus' way or failing to be with him for the whole journey. Could they choose to suffer the way Jesus suffered or would they choose to abandon their faithful following of his way because it was getting too difficult?

“Many in the Church thought they were seeing the end. Mark responded with the story of another time when people thought it was the end of the gospel, the time when Jesus was put to death and buried, when everyone abandoned him. The disciples thought it was the end, but it turned out to be the beginning. In effect, Mark was telling his readers, ‘Now *you* think it is the end!’ To understand the continuation of the gospel in the Church they had to understand the beginning of the gospel. As a preacher and teacher, Mark fulfilled his mission by proclaiming ‘the beginning of the gospel.’ At a time when nearly everyone felt it was the end, Mark boldly told the story of the beginning. When so many were overwhelmed by what seemed to be bad news, he proclaimed the story of the beginning of the good news.”

—EUGENE LAVERDIERE, SSS

The Beginning of the Gospel: Introducing the Gospel of Mark, Vol. 1 (1999)

Using Jesus as his model, Mark gives his community new answers to the urgent questions of who they are and what they must do to follow Jesus in the chaotic experience of war, persecution and apparent abandonment. The stakes are high because in the face of persecution it is tempting to deny one's Christian identity rather than to suffer. In this time of heightened anxiety, when old ways are ending and new directions are not yet clear, Mark shapes his Gospel as the haunting story of the messiah who suffers so others can live, whose death and apparent abandonment culminate in new life with God.

Mark emphasizes the reality of suffering and the inevitability of the cross, which for him is the only way to new life. He encourages his community to recognize that Jesus as the suffering messiah is the key to their

relationship to God. Anyone who thinks there is another way, or that there is another gospel which does not demand your whole loyalty and your whole life, then that is not the Good News of Jesus.

A New Community of both Jews & Gentiles

Not only is Mark's community suffering but it is also deeply divided about the status of Jews and Gentiles gathered into one Christian group. As the Gentiles came flocking into the communities because of the missionary work of people like Paul, they created the demand to rethink the community's relationship to the Jewish practices and views that had been so natural for the earliest disciples. Since the original core of disciples were all former Jews, they of course thought the Jewish way of life was the right way to please God. But as the number of Gentile converts increased, the communities had to accommodate themselves to a more Gentile-oriented way of life. In twenty years (AD 40–60), the whole makeup of the community had shifted so dramatically that the split between Christians and Jews became inevitable.

In fact by the end of the first century, the vast majority of Christians throughout the world would no longer be former Jews and so would not be familiar with Jewish traditions from a first hand experience. Mark's community is already caught in this tension. Mark's stress on Jesus' struggle to build a single community out of Jews and Gentiles by doing the same things for each group is an indication of how deep this rift was within Mark's community. Jesus gathers together the divided community into one eucharistic community who shares the "one loaf" (8:14) which can feed them all.

Mark's Gospel: Structure & Style

Mark invented the written Gospel, that is, a consecutive narrative account or story of Jesus' life, ministry, death and resurrection that models for us who we are as Christians and what we ought to do to follow Jesus. His narrative also gave new meaning to the many isolated events and sayings that the Christian community remembered about Jesus by locating them in specific times and situations in his life story.

As with any narrative, Mark has a basic temporal structure related to Jesus' life that can also be loosely organized geographically—baptism in the Jordan River by John the Baptist, a ministry of teaching and healing and establishing God's kingdom community in Galilee and other northern regions,

and then a final journey to Jerusalem where he openly confronts those who want to kill him, is betrayed, suffers, dies and rises to new life with God. Mark's Gospel thus has a general threefold schema after the prologue (1:1-13): the first unit is Jesus' ministry in Galilee and regions nearby (1:14-8:21); the second is Jesus' roundabout journey to Jerusalem (8:22-10:52); and the third is Jesus' final days in Jerusalem (11:1-16:8).

“In content, Mark's Gospel was a story of the gospel of Jesus and his disciples. In form, Mark's Gospel was an act of proclamation. It made Jesus, the one who was crucified but had been raised from the dead, present to Mark's readers and listeners. Through the Gospel, the gospel proclaimed by Jesus and the Church became the gospel that was Jesus.”

—EUGENE LAVERDIERE, SSS

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Like any good narrative, Mark's plot is constructed through the revelation of many conflicts. Jesus first appears as a popular teacher, prophet and wonder worker who like Moses and Elijah preaches God's message, performs many miracles and exorcisms, and gives guidelines or laws for living out the right kind of relationship with God. But Jesus and his proclamation of a new way to live the Israelite faith seems always in conflict with those advocating alternative agendas. Mark's narrative charts how Jesus and his message are constantly misunderstood and rejected, resulting in the transformation of his followers and the hardening of the hearts of his opponents. These conflicts also embroil Jesus in the wider cosmic conflict of God and Satan, good and evil, for ultimate control of our world.

Despite all this conflict and opposition Jesus resolutely follows the way to Jerusalem and then the way of the cross. The mystery of Jesus is finally revealed in his death and resurrection. The cross casts its shadow all through Mark's Gospel. It is the key to understanding what Mark writes and what he is trying to proclaim to us who now read and respond to his Gospel.

Mark's Portrait of Jesus

Mark's new Gospel form was immediately recognized as exactly what the Christian community needed. He gave Christians a new identity by showing both who Jesus was—the Christ who had to suffer—and who they were as his disciples—people who were called to take up their own cross and follow Jesus.

“The theme of the cross can be compared to a magnet that attracts the other motifs that appear throughout the Gospel. The shadow of the cross, opposition from powerful leaders, divisions among Jesus' followers, persecutions, and betrayals—all these themes in Mark's Gospel would have been especially meaningful to an early Christian community that had suffered for the name of Jesus and was expecting even more suffering.”

—JOHN R. DONAHUE, SJ, & DANIEL J. HARRINGTON, SJ
The Gospel of Mark (2002)

Jesus: the Messiah Who Suffers

Mark's Gospel is constantly concerned with the mystery of Jesus' identity. His main effort is to show that “the Christ, the son of God” (1:1) is God's chosen servant who does God's work by suffering, as described by the prophet Isaiah in four poems or “servant songs” (Is 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12). In their original Old Testament context, these poems helped the Israelite exiles make sense of their suffering. But for Mark this servant who is innocent and just, chosen and empowered by God, yet who then is killed, is the best way to comprehend the meaning of Jesus' death as the fulfillment of God's plan for salvation. Mark reminds his audience that the messiah *must* suffer to enter into his glory, which is also the essential way of discipleship that eventually all Christians must follow.

Throughout the first half of the Gospel, Mark emphasizes that Jesus is really human like us. He has emotions, gets tired and is subject to the plots of his enemies. Under stress he can almost despair. He is not the grand and glorious messiah whom many people waited for. He is not a flashy wonder-worker who demanded fame or money for his miracles. Instead Jesus was a

messiah who is willing to give his life for others.

Mark first confirms some of the conventional Jewish expectations about the messiah. Jesus is a prophetic teacher and lawgiver like Moses, a miracle worker like Elijah and a kingdom builder like David. But then Mark negates all of these common expectations. Jesus is indeed the messiah, but instead of honor and glory he “must suffer greatly, be rejected, and be killed, and rise after three days” (8:31). The rest of the Gospel shows how this suffering messiah fulfills God’s plan for salvation and builds the kingdom community.

Jesus: the King Who Is Crucified

Mark presents Jesus’ suffering as the great reversal of the common expectation that the messiah would be a glorious king like David who would free the Israelite people from their oppressive Roman overlords. Unlike Matthew or Luke who provide clues about Jesus’ royal identity in their infancy narratives, Mark gives no hints about Jesus’ royal character until the passion. Then surprisingly enough, these royal associations appear with tremendous irony. That is, when the characters in the story mock Jesus as a king, they think it is not true. But we readers know that he is indeed a king, despite being crowned with thorns, mocked, scourged, spit upon, clad in royal colors, given a flimsy reed as an impotent scepter and finally enthroned on a cross with a sign mocking him as “the king of the Judeans.”

What kind of a king is this? This is hardly the way a real king would be treated unless he had been defeated. Is Jesus’ passion a defeat? Is he a victim? If his crucifixion is his coronation, then this is a very strange way to be declared a king! This is important if we are going to understand how Mark is working on us as readers. Our expectations of a glorious prophetic messiah and of a conquering royal messiah are not the way God has chosen for the plan of salvation to be realized. God’s way is to save us through Jesus’ suffering. Mark’s final picture of an abandoned Jesus dying alone outside the holy city challenges all the usual expectations about Jesus as a glorious and triumphant messiah, and reveals how God’s suffering servant through his death opens a new way to life with God.

Mark’s Portrait of Discipleship

Mark’s portrait of Jesus as God’s suffering servant who gives his life for all is also the clue to his portrait of genuine discipleship. What happened to Jesus

will happen to us. Following Jesus means not expecting that God will save us *from* our suffering, but that God will save us *through* our suffering. The cross is the only way to the crown of new life. But Mark stresses that Jesus' way of the cross is not a dead end. Paradoxically, Jesus' way of dying is the only way to find new life in God!

Jesus: Mark's Model Disciple

In Mark, only Jesus is really a positive model for being a Christian. He reveals how to be God's disciple by fulfilling in his own life all the characteristics of a genuine disciple: "to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons" (Mk 3:12-14). For Mark Jesus is the only disciple worth imitating, which can be somewhat shocking because we are so used to imitating the example of the disciples.

But this expectation of the disciples as our role models is just one more instance of Mark's general pattern of reversing our cherished expectations. Not only do we have to reverse our ideas about who Jesus is, but we have to change our ideas about what it means to be his disciple. Mark would admonish us not to be like they are. Whatever they are doing, be prepared to do the opposite! Rather, be like Jesus and do like Jesus does.

Although Mark offers Jesus as the model for Christians who are suffering and feel themselves abandoned by God, Mark offers no easy comfort. Jesus will not return miraculously to save us from our suffering. The only solution is to take up one's cross as Jesus did. For only by living through the suffering and death does resurrection follow. Suffering is not the end but the door to a new existence with God, who never abandons us.

Mark's Negative Portrait of the Disciples

Since Mark wants to show that Jesus is the only true disciple of God, he presents a consistently negative portrait of the disciples who always fail in their attempts to follow Jesus. They are very human and weak, never really understand who Jesus is, and so serve as negative examples for us to learn from for shaping our own way of discipleship.

When Jesus chooses the apostles he goes up on the mountain and chooses the twelve to "be with him" (3:14). As we move through Mark's Gospel, it becomes clearer and clearer that the disciples are not "with" Jesus mentally since they never seem to be able to get their minds aligned with his

vision and values. After their first generous response to Jesus' call, the rest of their experience with Jesus becomes more and more a tissue of misunderstanding of just about everything that Jesus tries to tell them. They always have other ideas about who Jesus is, what Jesus should be doing and how he should be doing it.

Nor are they physically "with" him when the chips are finally down in the passion, for when the guards come to arrest Jesus in Gethsemane they all abandon him and flee. Peter does return to follow along but only "at a distance" (14:54). But then when confronted by a serving maid, Peter three times denies that he even knows Jesus and goes off to weep. In the end, there is no indication that any of the twelve apostles are near the scene of Jesus' crucifixion. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus dies alone and completely abandoned both by his chosen followers and even apparently by God. Only a few faithful women look on from a distance.

"The secret of the apostles' immense success in preaching the gospel was that they shared Good News about a terrific person who loves each human being with inexhaustible energy. They did more than preach about Jesus. They shared the personal stories of their own development of a love relationship with Christ. They shared their weaknesses, their betrayals, and their abandonments of their best friend. They told of how Christ reached out to them and touched them with the warmth of his heart."

—FR. ALFRED MCBRIDE, O. PRAEM.
To Love and Be Loved by Jesus (1992)

No Privileged Discipleship—Carry Your Own Cross

Mark also emphasizes that a genuine Christian disciple is one who must take up his or her cross and follow Jesus on this way of suffering. Mark's negative portrait of the disciples allows him to emphasize that there is no privileged discipleship. By systematically undermining all the common claims of privileged discipleship—e.g., claims of having family connections, being one of the twelve chosen apostles, having a personal knowledge of Jesus or being a member of the Christian community—Mark shows that all discipleship claims based on anything except taking up the cross are never enough to guarantee fidelity to Jesus and the demands of discipleship and so will always end in failure. Only those who faithfully follow Jesus by taking up their cross can be genuine disciples and enter into God's kingdom.

SOME BASIC QUESTIONS FOR EXPLORING ANY SCRIPTURE PASSAGE

Here are four basic questions and several follow-up questions that you can use to explore a biblical passage and stimulate individual reflection or small group discussion. (Note that not all questions are equally answered in every passage.)

1. What does this text tell me about God? Jesus? the Holy Spirit?

- Does this confirm what I already know and believe?
- Is there something new here that I had not noticed before?
- What does God want me to know or do, change or improve?

2. What does God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit do in relation to us & our world?

- How is the divine presence and power revealed?
- Why does God come to us at this time and in this way?
- What is required of us to do or not to do in response?

3. What does this text tell me about myself?

- How am I like the persons in this scripture passage?
- How would I respond if this happened to me?
- How would I be changed if I did what the text says?
- What surprised me the most about this passage?
- What puzzled me the most?
- What challenged me the most to live out my faith more fully?
- What made me most comfortable? Why?
- What made me most uncomfortable? Why?

4. What does this text tell me about the community that God desires?

- What does this text tell me about how to love God?
- What does this text tell me about how to love others?
- What guidelines for better community living does the passage offer?

A Brief Reading Guide to Mark's Story of Jesus

This brief Reading Guide is intended to encourage you to encounter and engage directly with Mark's Gospel itself and explore his unique version of Jesus' Good News that the forthcoming kingdom of God is here. Reading the Gospel of Mark and engaging with it directly is the only sure way to begin to understand and appreciate its life-changing message and begin to discover how that message can change your life too.

The Title (1:1)

Mark's first line seems like a title and perhaps was written on a small tag of parchment to identify the contents of the rolled-up scroll. This title, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus the Christ, the son of God" (1:1), summarizes the central concerns of his Gospel narrative. He wants to help us to understand Jesus as both God's chosen one or *messiah* (Gk: *christos*) who will now fulfill God's ancient promises to the Israelite people and who is at the same time both the agent of salvation and son of God.

Mark's first emphasis helps his audience grasp through his narrative that Jesus is the promised messiah/Christ. But he also wants to indicate the kind of messiah Jesus is. The affirmation in the title takes away any mystery for the readers that Jesus is the messiah, but only by progressing through the Gospel can we discover exactly what kind of messiah he is and how he will act.

Mark's second emphasis helps his audience understand what it means for Jesus to be the "son of God." He does this by taking people back to the events of Jesus' life and ministry. But he is always shaping those events so that his readers don't just read about them but experience them through their participation in his narrative and so can grasp what it means to be a disciple and faithfully follow Jesus in their own lives.

Since in Greek, the "good news of Jesus" can mean either *from* Jesus or *about* Jesus, Mark's Good News includes both the message *from* Jesus' to us about a new kind of kingdom community that he was building that would include everyone—both Jew and Gentile—and the message *about* Jesus as God's chosen messianic agent for the forthcoming victory over the forces of evil, sin and death accomplished through his life, death and resurrection.

The Prologue: Preparing the Way of/to the Kingdom (1:2-13)

The way a story begins is important. Mark's prologue situates Jesus' story within the prophetic matrix of the Old Testament. The "beginning of the good news" (1:1) is the realization of what was promised long ago in the prophets about the messiah/Christ whom God would send to show the way for people to rebuild their relationships with God. In a combination of prophetic quotes that Mark attributes collectively to Isaiah as the great prophetic spokesperson of the coming messianic age, he indicates that the one who is coming is the one whom the whole Old Testament points to.

Note that in Mark's Gospel there are no familiar infancy stories—Jesus is already an adult when his story begins with a baptism. For us as readers, this suggests that for Mark our real life—our significant life with God—also begins with our baptism and not just with our birth.

Jesus' Baptism in the Jordan for His New Ministry

Mark describes the preaching of John the Baptist that sets the stage for Jesus' entry into the story. The adult Jesus leaves his family to begin his public ministry of announcing and building God's new kingdom community. He journeys from Nazareth to the Jordan River to reaffirm his commitment to God's rule by being baptized by the reformer John the Baptist.

"In Mark God has ripped the heavens irrevocably apart at Jesus' baptism, never to shut them again. Through this gracious gash in the universe, God has poured forth his Spirit into the earthly realm."

—JOEL MARCUS
Mark 1-8 (2000)

Mark uses Jesus' baptism and God's voice from heaven to affirm for us Jesus' identity as God's chosen son (1:1). God's approval is also accompanied by the descent of God's Holy Spirit to empower Jesus for his coming kingdom work. Like the dove that signaled to Noah and the people in the ark that God's new creation was waiting for them, this dove signals that Jesus will now begin renewing creation according to God's ways.

Confronting Satan in the Wilderness

After the heavenly confirmation of Jesus' identity as God's son with a mission,

he journeys into the wilderness for 40 days to consider what kind of son he is going to be. Being the right kind of son will mean that he must dedicate himself with complete loyalty to God and use his power for building God's kingdom community. His loyalty is tested in confrontation with the powers of evil, which now rule our world.

Part 1. The Way Through Galilee: Jesus' Ministry Inaugurates God's New Way (1:14–8:26)

The Kingdom Community Begins in Galilee (1:14–3:12)

Jesus' first words are significant for they summarize his whole message and ministry. After his baptismal calling or vocation, he journeys from the wilderness back to Galilee to begin his Spirit-empowered ministry by announcing that God's promised kingdom rule is here and if people want to belong to this community and follow this new way, then they must change their lives and believe in this Good News (1:14-15).

Jesus begins to alert people to God's presence in their lives and their need to begin to live differently. Through his preaching in parables and through his deeds of power (we usually call them miracles, which in Mark are also "teachings," 1:27), Jesus reveals that God's powerful presence has now broken anew into our world to begin the final transformation of all relationships through the process by which we are converted, re-formed and transformed.

He called this new way of relating to God and others *the kingdom of God*, and he invited followers to change their lives and become part of the kingdom community. From his base in the village of Capernaum by the Sea of Galilee, he announces that God's salvation breaks across all our humanly created boundaries. Like a magnet, Jesus draws the poor, the outcasts, the sick, women, and foreigners to himself for healing. But his words and actions threaten the Judean leaders, who even at this early stage know that they must find a way to eliminate Jesus (3:6).

Building the Kingdom Community: God's New Family (3:13–6:6a)

Jesus calls followers to share his way of seeing the world and to live as God intends. His first followers are Galilean fishermen who are invited to put their fishing skills to work catching people for the kingdom. Then from

among the disciples he calls twelve “apostles” to “be with him” and share his mission and ministry as they learn what it means for God’s presence to break into our world through the person and work of Jesus.

Jesus spends his days traversing the Galilean region teaching about God’s kingdom, demonstrating its reality through his healing, and celebrating it through shared meals. He offers his wisdom and deeds of power to teach people how to reorder their lives around God’s presence.

By following Jesus, his disciples (and us) begin the necessary process of conversion. He proclaims his vision of reality and his values. His authoritative teaching challenges us to accept a new motivation for doing God’s will and a complete loyalty and dedication to him. He invites us to change and to become his followers.

All the while Jesus is also building a new kingdom community or family for which he acts as the lord or head—but not the father or patron, who is God. Thus Mark portrays him in chapters 1–8 fulfilling many of the various roles of the head of a family: teacher, lawgiver, judge, provider and protector of the members of the community/family.

Teaching in Parables (4:1-34)

In chapter 4, Mark gathers together most of Jesus’ parables into the most extended teaching that Jesus gives in this Gospel. Jesus first teaches publicly to the crowds about the kingdom, then privately he explains his mysterious teaching to the disciples. Through the puzzling images in the parables (which conceal his meaning from outsiders—“them”—but reveal it to insiders—the disciples—and us!), Jesus reveals how God’s powerful saving presence (the kingdom of God) comes to each of us as a gift, requires our response, changes us when we do respond, and empowers us for new action on behalf of this kingdom. The parables also provide examples of the proper responses to God’s presence in our lives.

Opening the New Way: One Family for Jews & Gentiles (5:1–8:26)

In chapters 1–4, Jesus is primarily the proclaimer of the kingdom who announces God’s transforming presence in our world for salvation. In chapters 5–7, the emphasis shifts to Jesus’ work of building the kingdom of God on earth. Mark structures these chapters around the basic theme that what Jesus does for the Jews, he also does for the Gentiles.

The Sea of Galilee's chaotic waters served as a boundary that divided Jews from Gentiles. By moving back and forth across the Sea, Jesus breaks down the boundary and draws both Jew and Gentile into the right relationship with God and with each other. Through six different boat trips back and forth across the lake, Mark shows Jesus healing the true kingdom community by including both Jews on the West side and the Gentiles on the East. Jesus' ministry of unification here serves as an outward sign of what Mark himself is trying to accomplish by bringing unity to his divided community through his Gospel.

“Galilee and Jerusalem are not simply the two locales of Jesus’ ministry but also have theological import. Galilee is the place of the initial proclamation of the kingdom and of the manifestation of Jesus as a figure of power. Jerusalem functions as a place of opposition where Jesus predicts the destruction of the Temple and where he himself becomes progressively more powerless.”

—JOHN R. DONAHUE, SJ, & DANIEL J. HARRINGTON, SJ
The Gospel of Mark (2002)

Part 2. On the Way to Jerusalem: Following the Way of the Suffering Servant (8:22–10:52)

Jesus Teaches about Himself & Discipleship “on the Way”

As opposition to his teaching grows, Jesus makes the curious decision to go to Jerusalem, which is the seat of opposition and the stronghold of his most outspoken opponents. So he sets out on a somewhat roundabout journey to Jerusalem that will take up chapters 8–11. On the way he continues to instruct his followers about what belonging to the kingdom community demands of them.

Mark structures the journey in a series of three affirmations of Jesus’ identity (8:31–9:1; 9:30–50; 10:33–45) as God’s suffering messiah and a transfiguration experience in which the voice from heaven again affirms Jesus as God’s son (9:2–13). This confirms that Jesus’ messianic identity can only be rightly understood when connected to the reality that as messiah he must suffer, die, and rise to follow God’s way of salvation. The misunderstanding of the disciples invites Jesus’ further teaching about what it means to follow Jesus’ way, in particular with its new characteristics of suffering and service.

Part 3. The Way of Triumph & Tragedy: The Final Week In Jerusalem (11:1–15:39)

The increasing conflict between Jesus and his Judean opponents over his identity, mission and ministry climaxed in the turbulent events during the Passover in Jerusalem about the year AD 30 (or perhaps 33) that provide the framework for the story of Jesus' passion and death in the Gospel.

Preliminaries to the Passion (Sunday to Thursday) (11:1–13:37)

Jesus' final week began with a great public demonstration of acclaim (11:1-11). In a dramatic prophetic sign mocking the usual triumphant victory procession of a heroic military messiah on horseback, Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey while people joyfully strewed palm fronds on his path.

Once in Jerusalem, Jesus' attention focuses on the Temple, which was not merely a place of worship but also a market where sacrificial animals were sold and a bank where the state treasury was kept (note the widow's gift offering in 12:41-44). Jesus performs another prophetic sign by overturning the money changers' tables and disrupting the business going on in the Temple (11:15-17). His action was not really so much a cleansing of the Temple but rather a forewarning of God's judgment upon it and a foreshadowing of its consequent destruction when the end times came. He continued to teach in the Temple, reaching out one final time to his opponents who are actively searching for a way to kill him (11:18).

Jesus' Last Teaching: God's Final Triumph (13:1-37)

Although triggered by the disciples' questions about the end of the Temple and the future end of the world as we know it, Chapter 13 provides the disciples with guidelines for how they are to live when he will be hidden from them but never absent. His message centers on God's final judgment and the expectation of the coming of the "son of man," a title describing Jesus as the divinely chosen human agent who ushers in the end times (13:26) when God's kingdom will become the reality for our world.

In Semitic languages, when connected to a collective noun, "son of" designates the individual member of a group. Thus *a son of man* means a human person, especially in contrast to God, and so can mean "someone," "anyone" or even an indirect reference to "I myself" or "me."

But this title also takes on a particularly important meaning for Christians because the prophet Daniel describes God’s final agent, to whom all power is given to accomplish God’s rule in the world, as a “son of man” (Dan 7:13). Mark also adds further meanings by connecting this son of man with the suffering that the messiah must undergo (8:31; 9:12; 9:31; 10:33) and with the forgiveness of sins (2:10), which only God could do. Thus the multi-meaning title could point to Jesus as just another human person, or as the suffering, sin-forgiving savior or, finally, as God’s final triumphant figure brandishing the power of God for the kingdom.

The Way of the Cross & the Death of “the King of the Judeans” (14:1–15:39)

Each Gospel presents a distinctive picture of the suffering Jesus. Mark was the first evangelist to gather the disparate oral elements of the passion tradition and shape them into a coherent written narrative. The last two chapters of Mark’s Gospel are his account of Jesus’ arrest, trial, death and resurrection—his way of the cross. [For a more detailed examination of the passion narratives, see my *Who Do You Say that I Am? The Catechist’s Guide to Jesus in the Gospels* (Faith Alive Books, 2015), chapter 12].

Mark shapes the traditional material to reinforce the major themes of his Gospel. So once again Mark reverses the most common expectations about the messiah. One expectation was that the messiah would be a great prophet and teacher like Moses. The other expectation was that he was going to be a king and warrior like David who would restore the freedom of Israel by going to war against its enemies, which were exemplified by the Roman overlords who dominated the Jews. The Judean leaders charged Jesus before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate with being “the king of the Jews” (15:2) so the Romans would be quick to respond to this challenge to their authority with the swift and cruel punishment reserved for these kinds of rebels—crucifixion.

Those who were crucified were made examples so that all could see and fear the power of the Romans. Note that none of the evangelists has much to say about the gruesome details of the crucifixion. They were all too aware, as were their audiences, of the agony which this death brought. They only had to mention that Jesus was crucified and that, apparently, was enough to clue

the readers about how much Jesus suffered. We are, of course, more removed from the terrors of crucifixion but the horrible practice of the Nazi death camp doctors who crucified Jews in order to gather “scientific” data about crucifixion is well-known.

Jesus Death on the Cross

As is clear from Mark’s Gospel, Jesus never sought death but accepted his death when it came. The conspiracy of the Jewish leaders, the treachery of Judas the betrayer, the complicity of Pontius Pilate and the collusion of the Jewish crowds all contributed to Jesus’ crucifixion. But seen from a faith perspective, the meaning of his death emerged only in relation to the larger context of God’s plan for the forgiveness of sins and the restoration of right relationships between God and humanity.

THE MESSAGE OF MARK’S PASSION NARRATIVE

1. The death of Jesus is the climax of a life for others.
2. In his passage from death to life, Jesus is proclaimed as the suffering yet triumphant son of man.
3. Jesus’ death is a “theophany,” revealing God’s power at work in weakness.
4. The way of the disciple must be the way of the cross.
5. The church is, through the experience of the cross, to be a non-triumphant, reconciled church.
6. The crisis of the passion reminds the church that it must be open to outsiders.
7. The church is called to be a living “temple,” open to all people and suffused with the spirit of the crucified Christ.
8. The passion reveals that the redemptive mission of the church is world-wide and costly.

—DONALD SENIOR, CP

The Passion of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark (1991)

Since Mark’s passion account is shaped for his community who are being persecuted for their faith, he stresses Jesus’ abandonment perhaps because his community felt like it had been abandoned by its leaders—and perhaps even by God (15:34). Jesus is deserted by his disciples (14:27, 50), betrayed by Judas (14:10-11, 20-21, 42-45) and denied by Peter (14:30-31, 66-72). When confronted by the Jewish high priest at his hearing, Jesus openly proclaims his status and destiny (14:60-62). Acclaimed as “son of God” only by the voice at his baptism (1:11), at his transfiguration (9:7) and by the demons during his ministry (3:11), Mark insists that we can recognize

Jesus' true identity only by gazing on the crucified Christ and affirming with the Roman centurion that "truly this man was the son of God" (15:39). The torn Temple curtain (15:38) reveals that God is now not to be found not in the Temple but in those who, like Jesus, are suffering. The dark path of the passion is the way to God.

"Mark's theological achievement was that he integrated the traditions of the life and ministry of Jesus with the proclamation of the gospel of the cross. In Mark, therefore, the reader finds that no one confesses that Jesus is the Son of God as a result of hearing his parables or witnessing his mighty works. It is only in the context of his death that his identity can be understood (14:62), so it is only when he is hanging dead on the cross that the Roman centurion can confess his true identity."

—R. ALAN CULPEPPER
Mark (2007)

The Epilogue: The Way to the Future (15:40–16:8)

Jesus died. Nobody—friend or foe—disputed or doubted that fact. He was hastily buried and his disciples then had to wait through the long Sabbath until Sunday morning to prepare his body properly according to the usual burial customs. When Mary Magdalene and other women disciples came to the tomb bringing spices to anoint his body, they discovered that the tomb was empty and his body gone, which stunned and perplexed them. These facts cried out for meaning. Was the body stolen? Who had taken him away? For what purpose? What did all this mean?

What happened next was a complete surprise. Jesus, whom they had known and who had been crucified, died and was buried, was suddenly somehow alive again. Their conclusion was that Jesus' resurrection to new life was God's action, motivated by love, because God did not want the relationship built up over the course of a life to end in death. Rather, through God's animating and vivifying power, Jesus was gifted with new life (a "new creation") beyond the power of death. This new life and the relationship with God it stems from, are therefore deathless or eternal.

The most eventful moment in Mark's Gospel is the ending because everything in the story builds toward it. It ends not with Jesus' death but with his resurrection. Had Mark's Gospel ended with Jesus' death, there would

have been no “Good News” for anyone to report and proclaim but only a rehash of the old familiar news that everybody dies, even messiahs.

But the resurrection proclaims that although death ends Jesus’ earthly life, his relationship with God continues only because God’s power to give life triumphs over evil’s power to kill. The Good News for us is that what happens to Jesus after his death will also happen to his followers (including us!) who faithfully follow to our death Jesus’ way of relating to God.

Mark’s Puzzling Ending: the Disciples’ Fearful Failure

But the way Mark actually ends his Gospel (16:8) is somewhat puzzling, which no doubt encouraged later editors to add other material to make it more satisfying and bring it into conformity with the other later Gospels (16:9-19). In Mark, however, the apostles are not part of the resurrection narrative nor does Jesus appear to anyone. The only followers are the women who watched the crucifixion from afar (15:40-41, 47) and who come on Easter morning to anoint the body. But they only find a mysterious angel-like figure in the empty tomb who announces the Good News that Jesus is risen and tells them to go and tell the other disciples that Jesus will meet them in Galilee. But strangely enough, rather than doing what the messenger told them to do, the women “went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (16:8).

“The unresolved ending of Mk 16:8 functioned as a summons to the audience to follow Jesus in the way of discipleship, enjoying healings and risking persecution, failing and succeeding ‘on the way.’ The ending would call the audience to continue the story, expecting both successes and failures. The lack of closure helps to involve the hearer in the continuation of the story.”

—JOANNA DEWEY

“The Gospel of Mark as an Oral-Aural Event: Implications for Interpretation,”
in *The New Literary Criticism and the New Testament* (1994)

This strange ending of Mark’s original Gospel challenges the readers who have accompanied Mark throughout his presentation of the Gospel. Like the women, the community must decide either to be paralyzed by fear and say nothing or to overcome their fear with faith (see Mark 6:36 for Jesus’ directives connecting these two attitudes) and go forth to deliver the message that they now have been given.

How Mark’s Gospel Works on Us as Readers

Everything in Mark’s Gospel story has been chosen to have an effect on his readers. His choice of a narrative form subtly works its persuasive force on us first through its structure and then through its characters, especially the portraits of Jesus and the disciples. Thus the first masterstroke of Mark’s Gospel is its structure. His narrative reveals what he thinks is most significant in Jesus’ life and should therefore be most meaningful to us his readers. His written narrative not only fixed the general pattern of Christ’s life—baptism, ministry in Galilee, journey to Jerusalem to suffer, die and rise to new life—but also encourages us to use this same pattern as the model for our *Christ-ian* lives.

“The gospels were written by different men of different abilities and outlooks, whose lives had been transformed by the impact of Jesus upon them, in all cases probably an indirect impact through the witness of others who had known him directly. It would be unthinkable that these men who were responsible for the tradition had not been anxiously concerned to get it right and to keep it right.”

—JOHN MACMURRAY
The Philosophy of Jesus (1974)

Engaging with Mark’s Gospel narrative has several implications for us as readers. The first thing a narrative does is to create a bond of community between the author and the reader. Every communication, whether spoken or written, creates a community of speaker/author, listener/reader and the word/text that is shared between them. The audience is invited into the world of the text in which through their hearing or reading they are shaped by the text and better able to understand who they are and how to relate with others. The story becomes their own through their participation in it. So the community for whom Mark’s Gospel is written is also bonded together by their encounter with the gospel story. Mark choose the narrative form because his community is challenged by the threat of disunity and fragmentation. Mark’s Gospel helps to unite his community by using the example of Jesus and his gospel message.

Reading Mark’s Gospel shapes us as readers first by shaping our ideas. Mark “invents” (in the ancient rhetorical sense of putting all the elements together in a unified, coherent and believable way, whether he was historically part of that world or not) the world of Jesus and the disciples, the scribes

and Pharisees, the parables and miracles, Jesus' death and resurrection. Mark then invites us through our reading and imaginative participation to enter into this new and strange world to encounter and be with Jesus. But Mark not only present us with this world but tries to persuade us that this new world he is describing is so important that if we adopt it, it will change how we see and act in our world now. Thus we are invited to make the reality of the gospel story world our own.

But the most important thing about Mark's narrative form is that you don't have to be a theologian or even highly intelligent for it to work on you. Stories work differently from abstract logical arguments. For theologians in universities, logic might be persuasive, but it has never been so to most Christians. But a narrative works on us because it invites us into the story to get involved. We are expected to use our imagination to see what Jesus is doing, to hear his words and to let this have some impact on us.

“As a narrative rather than an epistle, homily, or some other form of writing, Mark has a narrator who tells the story to an implied reader, a cast of characters who interact with one another, and events or scenes that cover a span of time and form a more or less coherent plot. Mark is also based on the history of Jesus' life and set in a particular historical context.”

—R. ALAN CULPEPPER
Mark (2007)

Another important way that Mark's narrative works on us is through the example of the people in the story. These characters and their interactions evoke in us the desire to imitate them. The attractiveness of their personalities, the wisdom and beauty of their words, the grandeur of their deeds and the challenge of their struggles invite us to be and do likewise. The invitation to act like them is a persuasive invitation. To each of the disciples, Jesus offered the inviting command and commanding invitation to “Follow me,” to be as he is and do as he does. Mark's Gospel now makes the same invitation to us when we read it. “Follow my story,” Mark pleads. If you do you will enter into a world where God is present and ruling, where each neighbor has his or her unique personality respected and cherished. This world is like ours in many respects, and yet it is very unlike ours. This unlikeness challenges us most as we are transported into the world of Mark's Gospel.

Mark has shaped Jesus' life into a story. But Jesus' story is meaningful because it is contextualized by the Old Testament story of God's creation of the world and the nurturing of the covenant people of Israel who are to express in their lives the right relationship to God and others. Through Mark's Gospel, the Israelites' story of faithful covenant living becomes Jesus' story, and in turn his story becomes the story of every Christian. His story is our story. This is how Mark's Gospel works on us—story shaping story as it ties together the great stories of God's presence and activity in our world to transform it and us into a “new creation.”

So if we are looking for the pattern of our life—the context in which to discover what our life is all about—then we can turn to Mark's Gospel because it gives us the context in which we can understand the real meaning of our life. Jesus' story is shaped by the same pattern that was acted out by the Israelites and is now being acted out by ourselves. Reading Mark's Gospel helps us learn what the true story of our life is, and thus recognize the wrong stories that we might now be using that keep us from achieving a right relationship with God and others and our world.

Thus we can now clearly recognize that Mark's Gospel was invented to help Christians find and shape their own identity and thus to know what it means to be a Christian in a world that was not particularly Christian. As a document for forming Christian identity, Mark's Gospel provides the guidelines for the Christian way of following Jesus and the blueprints for building Jesus' kingdom community here on earth. Mark's gospel life of Jesus reveals the gospel life that every Christian is called upon to live. So if we read and study Mark's Gospel and let its power work on us, we will be invited to change and be transformed. Mark's Gospel helps us to recognize God's powerful life-changing presence in our world and encourages us to commit ourselves to sharing in making God's kingdom come.

How Mark's Gospel Shapes Us as Christians

It is clear that Mark shaped his Gospel not only to work on us as readers but also to shape us as Christians. By fixing the structure of Jesus' story as God's model disciple, Mark also fixed the structure of our story as Jesus' disciples. Jesus' relationship to God holds the key for understanding our relationship to God through Jesus in the Holy Spirit.

Since the narrative form of Mark's Gospel holds together the times of Jesus' life story, it will also hold together our life story. Thus the ending of the Gospel is very important for we learn that although death ends our earthly life, it does not end our relationship with God. Just as Jesus rose to new life through God's power, so will we. And since one person has already risen, the new order that God promised from of old—the way of God's salvation—has indeed already begun with Jesus' life, death and resurrection. The new age is here, the kingdom of God has begun!

Like Jesus' parables, the gospel story proclaims God's Good News and so provokes a crisis in the hearer/reader, which will in turn bring about a new way of relating to God and to others as Jesus' disciples. Thus Mark's Gospel will challenge us as disciples to a relationship that entails:

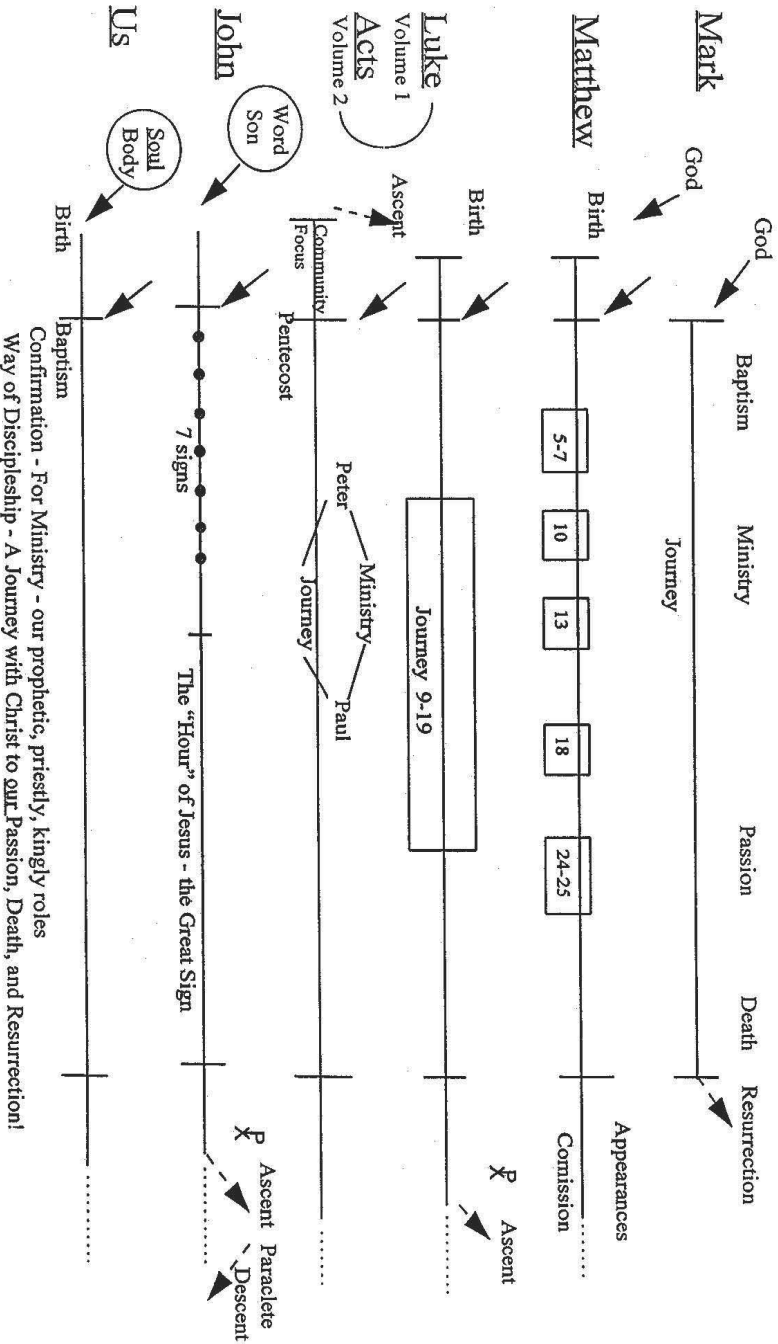
- a vivid experience of our **call** to follow Jesus on the way of discipleship
- a renewed **commitment** to the relationship with God through Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit (what we need is faith not fear!)
- a **conversion**, by which we dare to face all the changes in ourselves and our lives that we must make to live out the implications of our discipleship commitment. This demands following the way of Jesus through suffering service to death and through death to new life with God
- a **co-mission** to continue the work of suffering service begun with Jesus in our own time as we carry on the challenge of building the kingdom community and overcoming evil in our world
- a greater willingness to pay the **cost** of following Jesus on the way to God—even to the point of death if necessary.

Responding to God's Good News

We really only learn what Mark's Gospel means when we relate it to our lives. As with reading any book, the Gospel's story, characters and themes take on increased significance only when we decide that they mean more than what just we first find in the book. When we connect what we read with something in our self or our life, then we will remember what we read and let it shape us. For this reason, engaging with Mark's Gospel does not just inform but transforms us as we move beyond simply amassing scraps of information to being shaped by the meanings we discover.

As we examine Mark's Gospel, then, we will be shaping our own gospel

The Gospels as Tools of Conversion: His Story Is Our Story



spirituality (for more on this, see my *Shaping a Gospel Spirituality: A Practical Guide*, FaithAliveBooks, 2018). Mark's gospel pattern for genuine Christian existence provides one helpful way for us to shape our lives. So if we want the Mark's Gospel to help us with our Christian identity, what we first have to experience is the story itself. As we read his Gospel, we must consider how he portrays Jesus, who is the primary example of what a Christ-like life will be. He is the model for our lives as his followers. When we find out who Jesus is we can then discover who we are.

Mark shapes a portrait of Jesus that is unique and distinctive. Like individuals who are making mosaics, the evangelists share many common elements but the mosaic that each produces is distinct because of the way that each has shaped the tiles, integrated their color, size and shape to produce a distinctive picture of Jesus that they think will be most helpful to their community and its needs.

As Christian readers, meeting Jesus in the Gospels can be a life-changing experience. No matter how much you think you already know about the God of the Bible or about Jesus, you will constantly be surprised when you begin to meet them anew in the Gospel story. Whatever you might know about Jesus comes alive as you hear his words and consider his actions and discover his agenda for right relationships with God and one another. No one can encounter Jesus through the Gospels and remain untouched by this experience.

“The kingdom comes into being after a deep shift in vision, understanding and values. Anyone can choose the new imagination of what it means to be a human. In making that choice, you exit the dead-end values of the age and enter the Gospel kingdom. If you follow Jesus' example and listen for your destiny and fate, you will have to go your own way, adapting the simple, radical, teachings to your own calling and circumstances. You will evoke the kingdom in your own style, making your own life a tiny mustard seed, cultivating the seeds of your thoughts, making yourself the embodiment of the moral beauty and spiritual intelligence found in the Gospels.”

—THOMAS MOORE

Writing in the Sand: Jesus & the Soul of the Gospels (2010)

Besides the example of Jesus, Mark offers good and bad examples of discipleship. It is up to you to detect which is which and which is most relevant for your life today. All of the characters in the story exemplify some dimension of ourselves in relation to Jesus. As you read Mark's Gospel, you

are invited to discover that part of yourself that is like Peter, or James, or John, or the Pharisees or the woman healed by touching Jesus or the woman who anoints Jesus before his death. The spectrum of characters reflects the spectrum of possible responses to Jesus and his Good News message.

Mark has a distinctive sense of what being a Christian is about and a clear idea of what is most important. Engaging with Mark's Gospel will be full of surprises, a mixture of anticipation and anxiety, fun and fear. The unknown stirs up anxieties because we never know what we will face and whether or not we will be able to handle what does come. This Gospel encounter is a chance to think about your own spirituality by seeing it against the spirituality offered by Mark and to be challenged by the Gospel so that you can grow and not allow your Christian life to be stunted by old habits, old ways of seeing and old ways of being.

“Today too, Jesus lives and walks along the paths of ordinary life in order to draw near to everyone, beginning with the least, and to heal us of our infirmities and illnesses. To you who are well disposed to listen to the voice of Christ that rings out in the Church and to understand what your own vocation is. I invite you to listen to and follow Jesus, and to allow yourselves to be transformed interiorly by his words, which ‘are spirit and life’ (Jn 6:62).”

—POPE FRANCIS

Message for World Vocation Day (May 11, 2014)

The hope is that you will use your imagination to enter into Mark's story of Jesus and to make his story your own and to ask: What if that vision of the world that is portrayed in Jesus' story is true? What if Jesus' story becomes my story? What if, as Jesus says in Mark's Gospel, “The kingdom [presence] of God is here” (1:15)? What happens when you discover God's awesome, mysterious, powerful transforming presence in your self and in your life? If you do, then you know that the time of decision is at hand. To shape and reshape your self and your life will be your way of responding to God's Good News.

Mark's Gospel & Us

As modern readers of Mark's Gospel, we are also challenged in exactly the same way as those women disciples who received the Good News of Jesus' resurrection at the empty tomb. As disciples who have also heard the gospel

proclamation of the resurrection, we too have been given the task of spreading this gospel message. But how often are we tempted not to speak out or act according to our Christian values in a society that is often hostile to these values? How often do we just want to give reverence to the dead Jesus instead of courageously trying to meet up with the risen Lord in the “Galilee” of our lives?

Galilee was where the disciples first experienced God’s saving power through Jesus’ teaching and miracles and where God’s kingdom first began to be realized. Our world still is searching for Jesus but we often find it very hard to get back to Galilee. But our journey to meet the risen lord is not a geographical trip to the hills of Galilee but rather a spiritual trip to the place where we can begin to live our lives by recognizing that God indeed is the king and ruler of our lives. Living out the kingdom promise means that we will begin to be involved now in God’s transformation of our world.

“Mark’s Gospel condemns the self-oriented, fear-filled quest for security, status, and power as contrary to what God wants people to be. People who embrace these standards are destructive of others and ultimately of themselves. The result is a society of conflict and oppression.”

—DAVID RHOADS
Reading Mark: Engaging the Gospel (2004)

Mark’s Gospel was written for Christians who were suffering and persecuted. They looked around at their world and thought it was the end. So he calls it “The beginning of the good news of Jesus the Christ, the son of God” (1:1). Reading his Gospel today is still challenging but it can help us to confront and deal with the reality of suffering in our lives and in our world.

The most important thing about suffering is how we understand its meaning. How do we approach our own suffering to discover its meaning and value? Is it something we simply put up with? complain about? sulk about? despair over? get angry at God or the people for? Mark invites us to understand our suffering in relation to Jesus’ suffering. The core challenge of our Christian lives is to die with Christ, to die everyday, and not just at our final moment, because we are willing to conform ourselves in faithful following to Jesus’ example. Do we have the courage to take up our cross and follow Jesus through our death to new life? As with Mark’s Jesus, our real life

begins with our baptism when we are empowered by God's Holy Spirit. This empowerment is renewed by us at the time of our confirmation when our personal gifts of the Holy Spirit for service to the community are received, recognized, embraced as our own, and then used for the building up of the whole Christian community.

Our empowerment, like that of Jesus, is an empowerment for ministry, which means acting on the threefold pattern that Jesus instituted for his disciples: "to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons" (Mk 3:14-15). Mark also reminds us that fidelity to this way of ministry leads inexorably to opposition and the way of the cross. Only through death can we arrive at the promised new life with God, whose mysterious hidden presence even now fills ourselves and our lives and surrounds us with its transforming power.

Mark reveals that what happened to Jesus is also happening to us. But it will only happen if we are willing to be faithful followers and allow the pattern of Jesus' life to become the pattern for our own life. As we follow Jesus on the way to God, all we can be really sure of is that to be like Jesus we frame our lives according to his example of empowerment, ministry, suffering, death and new life. All we can predict with certainty is that as we follow our own way to the cross, the Holy Spirit ceaselessly surprises us and reverses all our cherished expectations.

Our challenge today is to use Mark's Gospel, as he did for his community, to discover the power of the Good News of Jesus to change our suffering and alienation, despair and betrayal into a new experience of community life. But the main thing we can predict and depend on is that, however unexpected the events are on our way of faithful following—the apparent tragedy of our life, our suffering, our defeat or abandonment, and the mystery of our eventual death—we know that God is present with us in all these circumstances. Mark invites us into a world where our main question ought to be "what if"? What if, as Jesus says, the Good News is that "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near"?

Some Questions for Exploring Mark's Gospel

- Briefly describe the structure of Mark's Gospel.
- How would you characterize Mark's portrait of Jesus?
- How would you characterize Mark's portrait of true discipleship?
- How do these portraits challenge you to a new way of being a disciple?
- Briefly explain the most important theme for you in Mark.
- Why might Mark's audience need a messiah who is misunderstood, abandoned and crucified, and disciples who fail in their following?
- How could Mark's proclamation be "Good News" for anyone?
- In chapters 1–4, which of Jesus' personality traits or titles most appeals to you? Why?
- What do you discover about Jesus' identity from the five conflict stories found in 2:1–3:6?
- How does Peter's example help you understand your discipleship?
- What do you learn about what it means to be a disciple from the call stories of 1:14-20, 2:13-17 and 3:13-19?
- How would you summarize in your own words "the mystery of the kingdom of God" as it is expressed in the parables of chapter 4?
- The two miracle stories of 8:22-27 and 10:46-52 frame Mark's passion prediction/journey section and so comment on its meaning. How do they alert us to what is happening on the way to Jerusalem?
- How does Mark's account of Jesus' anointing (14:3-9) go against some common expectations about the messiah ("anointed one")?
- In 12:13-17 Jesus cleverly resolves the legal question of what is owed to Caesar, but does not explain what belongs to God. Based on what he says and does in this story, what do you conclude belongs to God?
- If Mark 14–16:8 (Mark's original ending) were the only Gospel version you had, what would be your personal reaction/response to the passion narrative and to the empty tomb story?
- How would our Christian lives (e.g., emphasis among our beliefs about Jesus and ourselves, practices of prayer, worship, the sacraments, church organization, etc.) be different if Mark were our only Gospel?
- What is the most important thing you have learned about the "Good News" of the kingdom of God from Mark?

Some Resources for the Study of Mark's Gospel

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