

The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 12, 2021

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year B, Proper 19: Isaiah 50:4–11; Psalm 116:1–8; James 2:1–5, 8–10, 14–18;

*Mark 8:22–9:1**

Matthew and Luke both recount Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Christ. But neither includes the healing story Mark used to introduce Jesus’ question to his disciples, “Who do humans say that I am?”¹ You hear this passage today because your rector takes advantage of this Prayer Book permission: “Any reading may be lengthened at discretion.”²

But why is this story omitted from the lectionaries of the major denominations? Until modern biblical study became widespread, Western Christians regarded Mark as a shortened version of Matthew. Matthew uses roughly eighty percent of Mark.³ Although many questions remain about the relationship of the four gospels to each other, there is broad agreement that Mark was the earliest of the four gospels and that the evangelists we know as Matthew and Luke, independently of each, had a written copy of Mark as the two retold the Good News of Jesus Christ with their sources and understanding.⁴

In his commentary on Mark, Joel Marcus frames his analysis of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem with the healings of two blind men. The first of these we heard today. The second, the healing of Bartimaeus as Jesus leaves Jericho for Jerusalem, will be heard four Sundays before the end of the church year. Between the healings of two blind men, aside from Peter’s brief insight into Jesus’ identity, which he quickly sets aside, the twelve are men who hear but do not hear, see but do not see.

¹ Mark 8:27.

² *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 888.

³ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 171.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 114–16.

In the words of Professor Marcus, “The Markan disciples show themselves to be ‘blind’—terribly imperceptive and in need of illumination of Jesus’ teaching. They ask inane questions⁵ . . . make stupid remarks⁶ . . . grasp for personal power⁷ . . . [and] mistake the merciful nature of Jesus’ mission.”⁸ A second touch healed the blind man; the resurrection will open the ears and eyes of faith to Jesus’ disciples who do not hear or see. The last words of today’s gospel, “Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come with power,”⁹ introduce the next story, Jesus taking Peter, James, and John to the mount of transfiguration. On the mountain, they see but do not see, hear but do not hear.

I suggest that Jesus’ disciples did not recognize the depth of the suffering ahead for all of them. Unlike John’s telling of Jesus’ crucifixion, where Jesus says to his mother, “ ‘Woman, behold, your son!’ Then . . . to the disciple he loved, ‘Behold, your mother!’ ”¹⁰ in Mark, no disciples were with him. He was alone and reviled by priests, scribes, and two who were crucified with him. His only words are from a psalm, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”¹¹ In Mark, Mary Magdalene, and Mary, the mother of James, and Salome will find the tomb open and a young man sitting inside. He says to them, “Do not be amazed . . . He has risen, he is not here . . . go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you.”¹² Remember that it was in Galilee that Jesus’ ministry was welcomed.

⁵ Mark 9:10–11; 10:10.

⁶ Mark 9:5–6.

⁷ Mark 9:33–34; 10:35–40.

⁸ Mark 9:38. Marcus, 589.

⁹ Mark 9:1.

¹⁰ John 19:26–27.

¹¹ Psalm 22:1.

¹² Mark 16:6–7.

For many days now, almost everyone following the news has been touched by the terrible evil that killed so many on September 11, 2001, and upended the lives of many thousands of families.

A couple of weeks ago, I started cleaning out two closets in the room in the rectory that I use as my study. One of the things I found was a copy of one of my Uncle Lawrence Matthew's last newsletters as pastor of Vienna Baptist Church, outside of Washington, D.C. in Fairfax County, Virginia. I was in the congregation for his last Sunday on June 14, 1998. He had been the senior pastor there for 25 years.

His newsletter article began with the words, "These days my life is filled with lasts." Then, he began naming some of them and remarked, "My last Sunday to lead a worship service is almost here."

At the end of his reflections, he wrote, "For right now I need to stay with my "lasts" and my grief. After all, haven't I been saying for lo these many years how important it is to embrace our losses and thereby allow grief to do its healing work? So I'll just listen to my own words and do some more hurting—and healing." With great respect to my uncle, a very fine pastor and preacher, I'm not sure how far healing goes.

As a pastor, I have never been with a couple whose child has died, young or old, who has let go of their grief. I've visited graves with parents, and there are always tears. Likewise, brothers and sisters who are killed in war leave a scar in the lives of their families, decades after they died when others came home.

I do think grief opens us up to healing and new opportunities for living with faith. Jesus rose in Jerusalem, but his home was in Galilee, where good news was welcomed, the hungry fed, the sick healed, the dead raised. But for Christians, it is dying and resurrection to the life of the world when, in the words of the Revelation to John, "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I

heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling of God is with humans. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.’¹³

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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¹³ Revelation 21:1–4.