

The Gospel of Mark and Congregational Transformation

**GO! BE THE CHURCH**  
Mission Evangelization as a Strategy for  
Congregational Transformation

Week Six:  
Disciples Witness to Their Relationship with  
Christ  
Text: Mark 14-16

Day One  
Read Mark 14

**The Holy Spirit Birthed the Church**

On the day of Pentecost, faithful Jews from across the world were in Jerusalem celebrating God's giving of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai. Jesus' disciples were together. They had prayed since Jesus' resurrection and the Passover: *"And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high"* (Luke 24:49).

The motivating force that changed the disciples of Jesus into apostles for Christ was Jesus' resurrection and ascension into heaven. He reminded Andrew and Philip *"The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit"* (John 12:22b). Jesus died on the Cross and was resurrected to redeem humankind, yet he died so that the Holy Spirit could come in power for humankind. *"Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only will you do what has been done to the fig*

*tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' it will be done"* (Matt. 21:20b).

The mighty wind and tongues of fire, followed by the utterance of unknown tongues, signaled the arrival of the Holy Spirit. On that day the disciples took to the streets proclaiming Christ crucified and resurrected in languages they could not normally speak to people they did not know from all over the known world – and the people understood what was said! Indeed, Peter was empowered to preach a sermon that added 3000 disciples to their number in one day! The Holy Spirit radically transformed the way the disciples understood Jesus' ministry among them and transformed the disciples into apostles – those sent to share the good news of Jesus Christ.

Only seven weeks prior to Peter's powerful sermon, he had huddled before a fire in a courtyard unwilling to even admit that he knew Jesus, let alone follow him as a disciple for three years.

**Preparation for Death**

Read Mark 14: 1-9. It is Tuesday evening – two days before the beginning of the 8-day Passover celebration, and Jesus is in Bethany at the home of Simon the leper sitting at a table with Simon and Jesus' disciples. Bethany is a short walk from Jerusalem – approximately 2 miles. A woman comes in the door with an alabaster jar of ointment and anoints Jesus' head. The men express indignation because her actions seem wasteful. During Passover, to remain in compliance with the law, she could sell the ointment and give the money to the poor. It is worth almost an entire year's wages. But Jesus understands this woman's act as an act of devotion and love. She is anointing him for his burial and appears to be the only one in the room who truly understands the significance and seriousness of the situation. She is anointing his body for

burial, he chides, and there may not be another opportunity. The disciples still do not understand. Jesus tells those at the table to remember this woman's act of love. Soon this will mean something very different to them than it does at this moment.

Now read Mark 14:12 – 26. The day has come when preparations are made for the traditional Passover meal of lamb, bitter herbs, unleavened bread, and wine. This would be the last time Jesus would eat with his disciples. This hallowed meal is a time of looking back—a time of *remembering*. Passover is first recorded in Exodus 12. It is the story of the liberation of the children of Israel from slavery in Egypt. This was the time of year when the Jewish pilgrims made their way to Jerusalem to commemorate God's mighty acts of salvation on their behalf.

In Mark's gospel, Jesus speaks of the Covenant God had with the Jewish people in which God promised to love them. Now Jesus is telling his disciples that his *life's blood* replaces the Old Covenant with a New Covenant for everyone (not just the Jews). Do the disciples understand? Will they remember? Do we understand the significance of this for the Church today? Do we remember when we observe Holy Communion?

Too often, when we "remember", it is not the new thing that God is creating that we remember. Instead, we remember the "good old days" when the church was filled to overflowing, when the church was stronger, when all we had to do was open the doors and people would come streaming in, when Rev. So-and-so was pastor and the church was flourishing. But it is during Holy Communion when we are asked to remember the love Christ has for all people – inside and outside the church walls. It is when we remember the significant sacrifice Jesus made on the world's behalf to redeem us and free us not from slavery in Egypt or from an

oppressive Roman Empire, but from slavery to sin and death. Behold, God is doing a new thing – and pray that the new thing will include a reawakening in all congregations to the urgency and beauty of the Kingdom of God and to a commitment to God's will being done on earth as it is in heaven.

**What does it mean to remember Christ when we celebrate Holy Communion with our Community of Faith?**

**What does this "remembering" have to do with your congregation becoming a healthy, effective, thriving church?**

## Day Two

### Committed to God's Will

Read Mark 14: 32 – 42. Sorrow and grief encompass the scene, as Jesus prays in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus is deeply grieved. In some translations, he says, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death." (NIV) or "My soul is exceedingly sad (overwhelmed with grief) so that it almost kills me!" (Amplified Bible)

Jesus cries out to God, "Abba" meaning "Daddy". It will not be what Jesus wants, but what his Father wants. Jesus who once stood high on the mountain in the light is now thrown to the ground in the night. He is committed to doing his Father's will

but it is not going to be easy. How hard it is for Jesus! Do you think he might understand why it is sometimes hard for us?

Jesus asks three disciples to come with him, to stay awake and to watch. Jesus asks for prayer and spiritual support. What do they do? They fall asleep. Not once, but three times Jesus finds them sleeping! Humanly, it is easy to understand – after all, it is about 2:00 a.m. But Jesus is struggling. Jesus is wrestling and his closest friends are sleeping. Jesus understands his disciples very well. He says, “*Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.*” They are speechless and by their actions show they are clueless as to what is to happen to their master. The third time he returns to find them sleeping, he tells them that “*the hour has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.*”

Disciples of all times and places are challenged to be watching, waiting, and praying so that when the hour comes they are ready. His commands, “*Enough!*” and “*Get up,*” are wake up calls to us as well as to the disciples.

**What would “*Enough!*” and “*Get up!*” mean in the context of your congregation?**

Read Mark 14:53 – 65. Jesus is betrayed by Judas Iscariot, captured, and taken to a late-night meeting of the religious court, quite illegal by the standard of the day. The council had laws against meeting in secret and against meeting on the Sabbath or on a Holy Day such as Passover. There is

conflicting testimony. The false witnesses do not agree. According to law, Jesus could be set free. “*A single witness shall not suffice to convict a person of any crime or wrongdoing . . . Only on evidence of two or three witnesses shall a charge be sustained.*” (Deuteronomy 19:15) There should have been no condemnation!

Then the high priest asks, “Are you the Messiah?” What a statement Jesus makes! He says, “*I AM.*” If that is not clear enough, he goes on to combine two passages of scripture proclaiming the coming of a Messiah. Jesus could have chosen to remain silent and he would have been set free. However, on his own testimony, he is condemned.

The leaders react to this blasphemy by tearing their clothes. No man can make these claims without offending God. There is no need for a witness, as the accused has witnessed against him. The call for the decision is made. The vote for recommending the death penalty is unanimous. Tomorrow, Jesus will be handed over to the Roman governor for execution.

Now read Mark 14:29 – 31 and Mark 14: 66 – 72. Many of us can relate to Peter—the first disciple called, the first disciple to proclaim Jesus as Messiah, and the one who assures Jesus he will never deny him. And what does Peter do? For starters, he sleeps in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus even calls him by name—Simon! We can almost hear Jesus saying, “Not you, Peter. You just told me to count on you!” Again, Peter snores with the other two.

Contrast Jesus before the court with Peter standing in the courtyard. Peter denies knowing Jesus, not once, but three times! Even as Jesus is being accused of being a false prophet, one of his prophecies is being realized. How quick are we to deny our discipleship when we are threatened? How

many of us are willing to deny our discipleship when issues of justice challenge the privileged life we enjoy?

**Think about Jesus' commitment to follow his Father's will.**

- **Why did Jesus choose to obey God, even at great personal sacrifice?**
- **Who are we in these passages? When do we sleep when God calls upon us to be awake? When do we deny Jesus?**
- **Are we always in all circumstances willing to be identified as a follower of Jesus Christ?**

## **Day Three**

### **Read Mark 15**

#### **The Cost of Commitment**

Focus on Mark 15:16 – 37. After confirming the decision of the previous evening, Jesus is handed over to the Roman procurator, Pilate, who served in the province of Judea under the imperial legate of Syria from 26 to 36 A.D. Mark never refers to Pilate as governor, and yet his role is understood as such. His reputation for cruelty and mercilessness is recorded in history because of his methods of putting down a number of rebellions. Yet Mark paints Pilate in a more compassionate light than Jesus' accusers.

Jesus is put through a second trial. Pilate's question is different from the one asked by the High Priest Caiaphas. He throws it out scornfully to Jesus. Is Jesus King of the Jews? Jesus' response mirrors Pilate's question, "You say it," or "If you say so." Was Jesus revealing his true identity here, while veiling it to unbelievers? The chief priests confront Pilate with many accusations without substantiating evidence that Jesus was subverting the state. When asked again, Jesus is silent. Pilate reminds Jesus of the many charges against him. He refuses to defend himself. The governor is amazed at Jesus' silence. He will not defend himself. Pilate does not understand this and wonders why this man will not attempt to save his own life.

Contrast Jesus' departure from Jerusalem with his entry only days before. The picture is not like the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. It is a slow, tortured march out of the city as the soldiers take Jesus to Golgotha, the "place of the skull." The notice is hung, "King of the Jews." Throughout Mark, Jesus cast out demons, healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, and hearing and speech to the deaf. He even raises people from the dead. Jesus used his power over nature to calm the seas and feed a multitude. Mark tells us Jesus does these things because of people's belief. What they do not understand is that on the cross, Jesus continues doing his Father's will. Will these people at the cross now believe?

The people at the cross mock Jesus. His followers have deserted him. Jesus is alone on the cross. For Mark, Jesus on the cross is fully human and experiences human suffering because he is committed to this for a purpose. He had many chances to save himself. He could have avoided going to Jerusalem. He could have left the Garden of Gethsemane and never returned. He could have saved himself at the trial before the council. He could have saved himself at the trial before

Pilate. The soldiers even mocked him about saving himself on the cross.

At his death, he had a psalm on his lips. Psalm 22 begins, *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* Is this a cry of abandonment? Persons who were sick and suffering had recited this psalm for centuries. Jesus is now claiming this same Psalm. The Psalm that begins as a cry of anguish, moves to a psalm of remembering God’s help in former times, continues with a prayer for healing and deliverance, and concludes with a hymn of praise. Jesus knows human pain! His disciples and followers are gone. In agony, alone, and using a psalm of hope, in spite of current circumstances, he continues to remain connected to God.

Why does Jesus allow himself to get into this situation? Read again Mark 10:33 – 34. Jesus is committed to this for a purpose. Death will come but after three days he will rise again.

Read Mark 15:38 – 39. You may recall that Mark described the heavens being torn open at Jesus’ baptism the same way the temple curtain is now torn at Jesus’ death. The Temple was seen as the place where God dwells on earth and a copy of God’s heavenly temple. Mark’s vision is that the boundary of heaven is like a curtain. The tearing of the heavens and the tearing of the Temple curtain are connected in Mark’s vision. The tearing of the heavens occurs at the beginning and at the end of Jesus’ earthly ministry.

Jesus has replaced the high priest, the old religious order. In the old order, only the high priest could enter the most sacred place behind the curtain where God resided. Now there is no boundary. The curtain is torn. God is with us. We are not separated from God.

What was proclaimed in both the beginning and the end? Jesus Christ is the Son of God! Mark proclaims this in his introduction to the gospel and it is proclaimed at Jesus’ baptism by the voice from heaven. And then the centurion proclaims this at the cross. The baptism is the foreshadowing of the cross. The cross confirms the baptism. Paul understood this in his letter to the church in Rome. Paul writes, *“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?”* (Romans 6:3) Just as God claims us at our baptism, so God claims us and restores us to right relationship through the crucifixion of Jesus on the cross.

At the foot of the cross the centurion, a Roman soldier, recognizes that something unusual has happened. We can assume he has seen many crucifixions in his service to Rome. Finally someone understands—not the disciples, not the women standing at a distance—but a Roman soldier. The truth has been told throughout Mark but now it can be understood. Not until Jesus dies does the soldier truly understand who Jesus is.

Jesus died about 3:00 in the afternoon, having hung on the cross only 6 hours. Jesus is buried on Friday afternoon at around 4:30 P.M., just prior to sundown and the start of the Sabbath. Joseph is a native of Arimathea. He is a respected member of the Sanhedrin, and one who waited expectantly for the kingdom of God. John 19:38-39 reveals that Joseph and Nicodemus (another Sanhedrin member) are secret followers of Jesus. Luke 23:50-51 records that Joseph had not consented to Jesus’ death. Because the Sabbath was arriving, Jesus’ body must be buried according to the Law. Knowing this, Joseph made his urgent appeal to Pilate. The governor was surprised that Jesus died so soon. He was skeptical, and wanted proof against the possibility that Joseph was rescuing a condemned man. Once the centurion

confirmed that Jesus was dead, Pilate released the body to Joseph.

**Consider what the suffering and dying of Jesus on the cross means to you.**

- **Do you really understand what it means to be loved by God?**
- **Do you really grasp this love that is so strong that nothing can separate us from it?**
- **Do you really experience this love of a relentless God who pursues us into all our hiding places?**
- **What is it that holds us back from committing to this love?**

## **Day Four**

### **Read Mark 16**

#### **Is This the End or the Beginning?**

Read Mark 16: 1 – 8. Two of the women, who witnessed Jesus' crucifixion and saw where Jesus was buried, return early Sunday, just as the sun was dawning, with spices and oils to properly prepare Jesus' body. Normally, after death, a body was anointed with oils such as myrrh and nard as a part of the burial rites. (Remember the woman who anointed

Jesus' head with expensive oils in Mark 14:1 – 9. Jesus remarked, "... she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial.") Having no knowledge of a resurrection, they expect to see Jesus as they had seen him last — dead. They are concerned about moving the heavy granite stone sealing the tomb, only to discover that the stone has already been rolled back.

At the entrance of the tomb, there is a young man wearing a white robe, presumably an angel (messenger). They are "*alarmed.*" The young man identifies the one who was buried here, and announces he is raised and not here. And if there is any doubt, he tells the women to look and see that the shelf where they laid him is empty. Then he commands the women to tell the disciples and Peter, their leader, that he will go ahead of them and meet them in Galilee. There he will be seen, just as Jesus has promised.

Mark's focus is not on *who* is in the tomb, but on who *is not* in the tomb. Jesus is not there. Still not seeing Jesus dead or resurrected, the women flee from the tomb, seized with terror and amazement and "*they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*"

They are afraid. But it is not the kind of fear we associate with terror, but with awe, amazement, and the unexplainable. Their fear, their overwhelming awe resulted in flight and silence. And that is the end of Mark's story.

"Wait a minute! Hold on! What kind of end is that?" The message that Jesus is raised and is truly the Son of God is finally ready to be told to the world. What do the women do with the message? They run away in fear! Do they tell anyone? What happens next? That is not much of an ending. As far as Mark is concerned, he told the story. Everything is wrapped up — Jesus is the Son of God. This was revealed from the beginning of the gospel. Mark let us in on the news,

but the people in the gospel did not understand this. It was hidden, but now all is revealed at the cross and the empty tomb. **What we do with the story is up to us. Do we proclaim it by living it, or do we run away in fear?**

This unresolved end challenges us. Bible scholars argue that Mark's gospel ends at 16:8. Two additions are added later, a shorter and longer one. Jesus appears to his disciples in the shorter addition (16:8b). The longer addition includes three more appearances (vs. 9-20). Language syntax and rough editing indicate these additions were written by manuscript copiers and editors. What does your Bible notes say about the additional endings?

We do not like unresolved endings. Mark may have deliberately chosen to close his story with verse 8. What happens next is your story of faith and belief. What happens next is the Church's story of commitment and faithfulness. Will you stand with the centurion at the cross and proclaim the truth? Or will you stand in the distance in fear and disbelief? Will you commit yourself to follow Jesus, looking forward to what is to come or will you look back at what once was?

**Consider how to end Mark's story.**

- **What will you do with the news that Jesus is the Son of God?**
- **How will you choose to live your life, knowing what has been revealed about Jesus?**

## Day Five

### **What Difference Will Commitment Make?**

Commitment is a tough word. It isn't always comfortable to be tied down or obligated. But throughout our lives, we do make commitments to belong to something or someone. At some point we commit to a career path and sometimes that involves committing to attend the appropriate school for training. We may commit resources to buying a car or a house. Most commit themselves to another person in marriage and to children that are born to that union.

There are different ways to understand commitment. Commitment can be thought of as an obligation or duty. Or we can use words like dedicated, steadfast, or faithful – words that apply to Jesus' understanding of his mission to do the will of his Father. The one we follow – the one we are called to emulate – was the very embodiment of God's Grace.

**What do think you might regret if you took up Jesus' call to "Follow me"? What do you think your congregation would miss out on if, corporately, she faithfully gave herself to being a missional church?**

**On the other hand, what would be easier to bear if you were able to commit to living under the authority of Christ? What difference will this commitment make in your life? What difference would a corporate commitment make to your congregation's mission to**

**reach into your community with the love and grace of Christ?**

Jesus knows how very difficult this commitment will be for us. Think back over this study. Jesus knew how hard the road would be from the River Jordan to Golgotha. There would be high moments on the mountain and low moments in the garden. Through it all Jesus found his strength in God's presence. The cost of following Jesus is high. You may have to rethink your priorities or rearrange your schedule. Your congregation may have to live through the difficulty of change. You may even have to suffer. However, in both the joy and the suffering is a promise, one that God will never break—the promise of God's love and God's presence with us.

**What is God urgently calling you and/or your congregation to do right now?**

Church historians refer to the growth of the church during the first three centuries as the Apostolic Era. They claim it ended when Christianity was designated the national religion by the Emperor Constantine. Nevertheless, the Church has evidenced apostolic power across the centuries, when believers have allowed themselves to be empowered by the Holy Spirit and motivated to do the mighty works of God.

We live in a time when Christianity in America is experiencing the beginnings of renewal and revival. There may be a membership decline in European and North American churches but many churches, empowered by the Holy Spirit, are turning around. Non-churched people are actively seeking to discover their spirituality and search for the Divine. What will they find when they come knocking on your church's door? What do you think you will find when you go knocking on their door? Make no mistake; the question is not, *Is God calling me?* or *Is God calling our church to be missional?* The question for you to answer is; **How** will I and **how** will we respond to God's call?

**Consider where God is calling you or your church (or both). What step of commitment do you need to make?**