

**Be Astonished
His Authority Over Death
Mark 5.21-43**

February 25

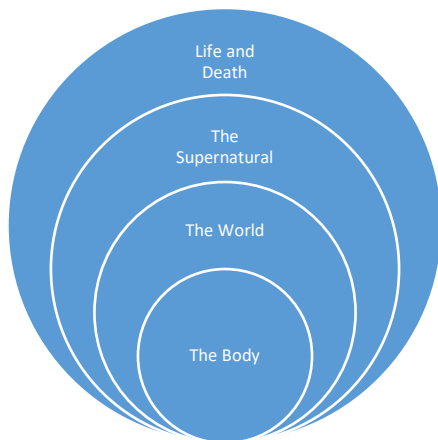
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We find ourselves this morning in Mark's ancient biography of Jesus, the earliest of the four gospels, captured for us in the Christian New Testament.

Incidentally, if you don't own a copy of the New Testament, you are welcome to take home one of the Bibles in the seats near you. If English isn't your first language, and you don't have a Bible or a New Testament in your own language, we have a number of other translations available for free out in the Landing. Please feel free to take one of those.

As we follow along in Mark's gospel, following behind Jesus in the unfolding of his public ministry, we watch him come into, confront, and then exercise power and authority over, ever-widening spheres within the human experience.

The Widening Circles of Jesus' Authority



These circles, which several of you lovingly reminded me are not concentric circles but are tangential circles, capture the ever widening scope of Jesus' authority as it's revealed to us in Mark's gospel. In the passages we've looked at so far, he has demonstrated his power over our physical bodies, over the natural world, and over the supernatural world.

Today we come to a passage in which Jesus comes face to face with the most formidable barrier of all. Death.

Death is the inevitable and final reality for every one of us as human beings.

Benjamin Franklin was quoting an already old and familiar proverb when he said, "In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes."

Or as Steve Turner put it a bit more bluntly, "The thing about dead is we're all gonna be it."

Its inevitability, its finality, combined with the universal havoc that it wreaks in the human experience, separating us forever from one another: those are the reasons death is called "the last enemy" in the New Testament. (I Corinthians 15.26)

So what happens when Death, that inevitable and final and terrible thing, and Jesus come face to face?

We find out in Mark chapter 5.

Before we turn there, I want to take a moment to reflect with you just a bit further about our own experience of the reality of death.

Somehow, even though it's true that death is certain, and awaits every one of us without exception, many of us can pass half of our lives or more without an awareness of the inevitability of death for ourselves or for those we love.

Rainer Rilke wrote a poem in which he said

It seems
our own impermanence is concealed from us.
The trees stand firm, the houses we live in
are still there. We alone
flow past it all, an exchange of air.
Rainer Maria Rilke, Second Duino Elegy

Augustine, probably the foremost Christian thinker outside of the New Testament, made an interesting observation about our sense of mortality.

According to Augustine, we live out our lives as human beings between two negations. There was a time when we were *not yet*, and there will be a time when we will be *no more*.

But we don't stop to think about that, at least not in our younger years, not until we've experienced loss personally, or have moved past the midpoint of our lives and begun to have a sense of the slow inevitable tilting of our lives toward our death.

At that point, suddenly things flip. Where till that point we have had an almost casual disregard of time, now suddenly all of life is lived to the soundtrack of a ticking clock.

Time is running out. Every life is heading toward the exit. Every relationship is heading toward a farewell. Death suddenly looms.

What Augustine suggests is that we don't begin to come awake spiritually until we come to this moment of awareness.

Up until then, we see ourselves and everyone else as a given, as an inevitable part of everything that is. Then we realize there was something before we got here, and there will be something after we are gone from here

I have not always been. Somehow I came to be. Which sparks the first real spiritual questions a person might ask: Where did I come from? Who is responsible for my being here? And where am I going? What happens when I die?

It takes an awareness of our coming death to begin to direct us to the source of our lives. Suddenly confronted with the overwhelming reality that there will be a day when we will have to say goodbye, and we and our loved ones will no longer be here, we stop and begin to ask deeper questions connected to how it is that we are here at all, and what our purpose should be in our few short days.

Does that fit with your experience? It certainly does with mine.

When I was twenty both of my parents died in a plane crash. Till that point I had seen life as a game. I just played, not taking anything seriously, running from one distraction to another.

When my dad's plane went down in a storm in the Blue Ridge Mountains during finals of my sophomore year, I suddenly looked at life differently. For the first time, my death, and the inevitable death of all those I loved, became a reality and I began to ask what really mattered in life, what was important.

I began to get serious about life for the first time. Friends became more important. I became more interested in the human experience, in literature, philosophy, psychology, history. The pursuit of what mattered led me to questions of purpose, which led ultimately to God, to Jesus, and to surrender.

Solomon in the book of Ecclesiastes says

Death is the destiny of every person; the living should take this to heart. (7.2)

O my forgetful soul, wrote one Puritan pastor who must have just finished reading Augustine, awake from thy wandering dream;

turn from chasing vanities, look inward, forward, upward,
view thyself, reflect upon thyself,
who and what thou art, why here, what thou must soon be.

At the heart of the story we're about to read is a man for whom the reality of this double negation has become horribly and pressingly real. For this man, every second resounds with the hammering of a ticking clock as the life of a loved one tilts toward death. It's also the story of a man who, in that painful moment, desperately turns beyond this world to the One by whom he, by whom his loved ones, by whom this very world, were made.

Where, as death first begins to show itself on the horizon, do you set your eyes and fix your hopes?

Mark 5.21-22

When Jesus had again crossed over by boat to the other side of the lake, a large crowd gathered around him while he was by the lake. [Then one of the synagogue leaders, named Jairus, came, and when he saw Jesus, he fell at his feet.]

Jesus has just had a tumultuous ride with the disciples through one of those notorious gale-force storms that can suddenly whip up on the Sea of Galilee, a storm which he has quieted with a single spoken word, out of the force of his own authority over the *physical* realm.

Then Jesus has had an equally tumultuous encounter with the gale-force storm on the inside of a lonely and broken man on the eastern shore of the sea. This storm too he has quieted with a single spoken word, on the basis of his own authority over the *spiritual* realm.

Now Jesus and his disciples return to Capernaum, where they began the day before. Arriving back at the shoreline, he and his disciples find a crowd of people who have been waiting for him.

Because of the awe and astonishment with which people have been experiencing his teaching and his miracles, word goes before him wherever he goes throughout the region.

Today, word of his coming arrives on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee ahead of him. "There he is! Here he comes." By the time Jesus is stepping out of the fishing boat a crowd has already gathered to meet him.

As we'll discover in a moment, the crowd is made up of people from all walks of life. What they have in common is need, as they come to Jesus with some unmet desire or longing or hope.

Some heard him preach in this very spot the day before, teaching about how to live the sort of fruitful life for which God made us [Mark 4], and they are hungry to know more about how that can be their own experience.

Others have heard about the healing that took place in the synagogue a few weeks before, and all the other healings that took place later that night at Peter's house. Some in this crowd were there and saw it for themselves [Mark 1]. Now they wait to experience that same healing touch for themselves, or for someone they love.

Jesus steps off the boat and into a sea of longing and hope and desperation in the form of this crowd of expectant, hopeful people.

Maybe you can identify with that deep longing or hope that nothing in this world has been able to answer.

This is the story of two of the people who waited for Jesus in desperation: one a respected person, a person of privilege, who boldly steps forward, the other a shunned person, a person forced to the margins, who hangs back.

Mark 5.21-22

[When Jesus had again crossed over by boat to the other side of the lake, a large crowd gathered around him while he was by the lake.] Then one of the synagogue leaders, named Jairus, came, and when he saw Jesus, he fell at his feet.

How long has he been standing on the shore, looking out across the water to the south and east, squinting against glare of the sun, waiting for sign of the fishing boat in which Jesus left?

He waits for Jesus *anxiously*. His beloved daughter is sick, and he is beside himself with worry for her.

He waits for Jesus *expectantly, trustingly*. His kneeling before Jesus expresses that he is confident that Jesus has the power and authority to heal.

But he also waits for Jesus *urgently*. Time is swiftly running out.

As Jesus climbs out of the fishing boat, Jairus pushes forward and kneels on the sand in front of him.

Mark 5.23-24

He pleaded earnestly with him, "My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live." So Jesus went with him.

The word "dying" literally means "at the end." Who knows how few minutes remain before it is too late and nothing can be done.

Jesus sees and hears his heart. He shares his sense of urgency and turns to go with the man.

But that's when Jairus's story collides with the story of another desperate person.

Mark 5.24-26

A large crowd followed and pressed around him. And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse.

This woman's life has been a living death.

I don't pretend to know what it would be like to experience this. I can only imagine how physically and emotionally exhausting this would have been, dealing with constant inconvenience and anxiousness and embarrassment.

But horrible as that might be for someone in our society today, it would have been doubly so for this woman. That's because she was Jewish. And according to Jewish ritual law in Leviticus 15 (15.19-27), as long as a woman is experiencing menstrual bleeding she is considered to be ritually unclean, and so is everything she wears, and touches, and sits on, and so is every person she touches.

As long as that is the case, you are forced to stay physically apart from friends and family, staying in a separate place, not having any contact with anyone.

So when bleeding never stops, you don't just have to stay apart. You have to *live* apart, in the shame and isolation and exhaustion of your illness. This woman has experienced that separation and isolation and shame for *twelve years*. Now she is at the end of her means, at the end of her wits, and at the end of her options.

But she too believes that Jesus has power and authority over the physical realm, just like Jairus does, so in spite of all that drives her away, her desperation drives her forward.

Mark 5.27-29

When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, because she thought, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed." Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering.

What drove her to believe that if she merely touched his clothes she might be healed, we don't know for sure. But the Old Testament has a wonderful promise about the

coming Messiah, the King who God promised would come one day to fulfill all of God's purposes and promises for humanity. The promise is found in Malachi chapter 4.

Malachi 4.3

But for you who fear my name, the Sun of Righteousness will rise with healing in his wings. And you will go free, leaping with joy like calves let out to pasture.

I wonder if this passage may have been the hope to which she clung that drove her to touch Jesus's robe. In Jewish culture, men wore long robes and sewn onto the corners of those robes were prayer tassels. And those corners of their robes with the tassels were referred to as their "wings."

How this woman must have longed to leap and dance and be free instead of slinking around in shame! So she reached and touched one of those wings as he passed. And instantly she was healed.

Mark 5.30-31

At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who touched my clothes?" "You see the people crowding against you," his disciples answered, "and yet you can ask, 'Who touched me?'"

Can you imagine the dread this woman must have felt when she saw Jesus stop and turn around and try to find her among the people in the crowd? Finally, after twelve years, she is set free, but she is about to be dragged before the crowd and made an example of for violating the Jewish cleanliness laws and touching Jesus and others in the crowd.

Hardly could she have imagined the gentleness and grace with which she would be met by Jesus.

Mark 5.32-34

But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it. Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering."

Not only does Jesus not scold or shame her, he uses the tenderest of terms to speak to her: beloved daughter, treasured by God, your faith has healed you. Go in peace; be set free.

By bringing her in front of the crowd and having her tell the story of her healing, Jesus was not publicly shaming her. He was doing just the opposite. He was publicly declaring

her healed, and clean, taking away her shame, and reinstating her into the embrace of the community.

What an amazing moment of redemption! Daughter, go in peace and be freed from your suffering. What would it mean to hear those words spoken to you?

But remember this story of the bleeding woman was an unasked-for intrusion into the middle of another equally desperate story.

Jairus must have been absolutely beside himself when Jesus stopped and turned back, trying to find the woman who touched him. And then as she came forward and admitted what she had done and why, sharing her story. And then as he spoke his word of blessing over her.

How fearful he must have been that this intrusion, this interruption, would mean the end of his daughter's life. Come on! Please! Hurry!

And then the thing he fears most comes to be. He looks up and sees his friends coming towards from the house. Sees their eyes. Realizes it's too late.

Mark 5.35-36

While Jesus was still speaking, some people came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue leader. "Your daughter is dead," they said. "Why bother the teacher anymore?" [Overhearing what they said, Jesus told him, "Don't be afraid; just believe."]

Just picture what those next moments would have been like. Some of you have experienced the death of a loved one. You know all too well.

The man's urgent and anxious face now twists into a crumple of grief and loss. Tears pooling in his eyes, losing his breath, his shoulders slumping, his knees giving way, his heart breaking.

All death is breathtakingly painful. It always feels wrong. But many agree that there is no more painful loss than a parent's loss of a child. Some of you know. Everything about it feels so horribly wrong.

His heart utterly broken, his hopes utterly dashed, he turns to go.

But Jesus reaches out gently, touches his arm, looks into his grieving eyes.

But then, in the face of Death – this inevitable and final and terrible foe that always, since the beginning of the human experience, has had the last word – Jesus speaks words to Jairus that offer a hope that this man never could have imagined might still exist.

Overhearing what they said, Jesus told him, “Don’t be afraid; just believe.”

Could it be that even over death itself, the last great enemy, this Jesus has power and authority?

Mark 5.37-40

He did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James and John the brother of James. When they came to the home of the synagogue leader, Jesus saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly. He went in and said to them, “Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep.” But they laughed at him.

Why Peter, James, and John? We’re never told in the gospels why these three are often singled out and brought along. (In Mark alone: the transfiguration 9.2, the final discourse 13.3, praying in Gethsemane, 14,3). Presumably, as ones who will later take on key roles in the early church, Jesus brings them along to equip them for the unique roles they will each have in the days to come.

At the heart of the commotion was a band of professional mourners who were expected according to the custom of the day to be present when someone died in the first century. They were loudly clapping, beating their chests, wailing, crying out. Jesus sends them away.

Jesus says the child is not dead but asleep. This is not a medical diagnosis but a theological one. He knows full well that she’s dead. Her heart has stopped, her breathing has ceased.

This is a statement of Christian hope. Asleep here, as in other places in the New Testament (I Thessalonians 5.6, Ephesians 5.14), refers to the hope of being wakened again to life after one has died. Playing on how a sleeping person appears to be dead and a dead person appears to be asleep. The question is: will they wake to new life? This little girl will.

Mark 5.40-41

After he put them all out, he took the child’s father and mother and the disciples who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, “*Talitha koum!*” (which means “Little girl, I say to you, get up!”).

Again he speaks in the tenderest of terms: *talitha*, little lamb, this time not to a woman suffering a living death, but to a girl suffering death itself.

Mark 5.42-43

Immediately the girl stood up and began to walk around (she was twelve years old). At this they were completely astonished. He gave strict orders not to let anyone know about this, and told them to give her something to eat.

Astonished. The disciples. The girl's parents. The mourners. All of them. All of them except Jesus. Completely astonished. It means absolutely beside themselves with the greatest possible astonishment.

Why? For this little lamb, the last great enemy has been defeated. Suddenly the terrible and inevitable finality is no longer so inevitable and final.

They are utterly astonished because they've just experienced something for which there is no human explanation. They know the scriptures.

Isaiah 25.6-9

The LORD will remove the cloud of gloom,
the shadow of death that hangs over the earth.
He will swallow up death forever!
The Sovereign LORD will wipe away all tears.
In that day the people will proclaim, "This is our God!"

Jesus has just done what no human being can do, what only God can do. And those who see it respond with flat astonishment.

We'll have to wait till the events of Good Friday, when Jesus offers his life on the cross in exchange for our lives, and Easter Sunday, when Jesus swallows up death forever and rises from the dead, to see the last enemy defeated once and for all.

It is in those events at the end of Jesus' life that this this-world, here-and-now awakening back to life for this one little girl becomes the this-world-and-the-next, now-and-forever hope for all of humanity. Jesus here gives a foretaste of what's to come.

The story ends with a loving and thoughtful gesture. Jesus makes sure that the girl has something to eat. Newly risen to life, he sees that she has a meal that will sustain and strengthen her.

Communion

We who have put our faith in Jesus, he has touched us, and spoken our names, and invited us to rise from death to life, and he has put before us a meal that will sustain us and strengthen us.

On the last night he spent with his disciples before he offered his life in our place, Jesus took bread, and he broke it, and he said, "This is my body, which is broken for you. I will not eat this meal again until it finds its fulfillment in the kingdom of God. Eat this, remembering me."

And at the end of that same meal, he took the cup, and said, "This is my blood, which is poured out for the forgiveness of the sins of many. Drink this, remembering me."

If you are not a follower of Jesus, I encourage you to use this time while the plates are passed to consider what it might mean for you to bring your hope and need and longing to Jesus, the compassionate King, to reach out in faith and touch him, to experience him reaching out in love and touching you, speaking your name, inviting you to rise, and bringing you from death to life.

And if you find yourself at a place where you would like to learn more what it would mean to become a follower of his, come talk to me after the service, or talk to the person who invited you to worship. We'd love to explore it with you.

And if you are a follower of Jesus, I invite you to take part in this meal that Jesus gave us as his followers to sustain and strengthen us.

Please take the elements as they come to you. There is a gluten free option available on the plate if you desire one.

As you eat the bread, I encourage you to focus on this:
We die with Jesus in his death. The old has passed.

And as you drink the cup, I encourage you to focus on this
We rise with Jesus in his life. The new has come.

Come and enjoy this feast.