

## **Upside Down**

Psalm 22:23-31

Mark 8:31-38

Scholars generally agree Mark wrote the earliest of the Gospels. A few hold out for John. John is like a comet, soaring in and out of the narrative the other three share. Depending on who wrote it, the Apostle John or some other John, that Gospel could have been written any time from AD 35 to 100. For various reasons too involved to dive into here, the consensus is that a disciple of John's wrote it in the '80s or '90s. Meanwhile, almost the entire text of Mark appears in Matthew and Luke. A school of Bible scholars working in the 1800's realized this probably meant Matthew and Luke had copies of Mark in front of them as they wrote their Gospels. Also, biblical experts have long felt that Mark's identity as the Apostle Peter's scribe is solidly established. Peter likely would not have been able to read and write. He needed a scribe. The Book of Acts tells us of the close connection between him and a disciple of his named John Mark. It takes a hop (not a leap) of logic to get from all these facts to the idea that Mark wrote first. After years of reading on the subject, this pastor buys it.

Why does this matter? First, if true, this theory puts Mark at one remove from Jesus. If Peter was indeed his primary source, this means Mark has first-person accounts to use as source material. Events like the transfiguration and even the resurrection (Peter was the first male to see the empty tomb) came to Mark in first-

hand accounts. Perhaps Mark had been present for some of Jesus' life, perhaps not. But all four Gospels make it clear Peter had attended to virtually Jesus' entire ministry. Second, the sooner an account of a life appears, the more likely it is to be accurate. Thus, while Mark is the shortest of the four Gospels, its importance lies in its immediacy, both temporal and physical.

Today we read Mark's account of the first time Jesus told his followers he must die to accomplish God's plan. Mark 8:31: "(Jesus) *began* to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again." That word *began* can mean "he started talking", or it can mean "told them for the first time." As one principle of biblical interpretation holds to Occam's Razor (the simplest explanation is usually best; or as Professor Collin Story at my seminary said, "The longer it takes you to explain it, the less I believe you."), I believe this verse means Jesus was telling his disciples of his passion for the very first time. This episode follows immediately after the strange story of Jesus restoring a blind man's sight by scraping up some dirt, spitting on it and rubbing it on the guy's eyes. The disciples have just witnessed a miracle—not the first in the Gospel of Mark but an early one. Jesus may want to prevent them from assuming that because he has such power they have hitched their wagon to a star. "Hey," they might be thinking, "maybe dropping everything to follow this guy was a good career move after all."

To which Jesus appears to be saying, "Not so fast." The African American slaves of the south had a saying, "Watch out for the easy gold." The longer the slave trade lasted, the farther into Africa the slave traders had to go to capture their victims. By the 1820's virtually

all of the slave traders in the first stage of the process were themselves Africans. Quite often, their method of snaring future slaves was the night-time raid. Commonly, however, they used a small payment of gold with the promise of far more if their victims would come with them to a city beyond their dreams. Beyond their nightmares was more like it. When the unsuspecting people walked through the palisade walls of that “city” they discovered it was in fact an armed fortress. Their exploiters would take back that little bit of gold and slap them in manacles. Soon, they would find themselves picking cotton or harvesting indigo in the beastly humidity of the American Southeast. Their whole lives had been turned upside down.

One thing we can say for Jesus: he did not try to trick anybody into coming along with him. He forthrightly told people what signing up with him meant. He told them what would happen to him and in other passages what would happen to them. They thought a being with the power to restore the sight of the blind had to be God, and since God had all power, he would prevail against all the forces of the universe. By extension they—who had after all, dropped everything to walk around behind him—would rise in this world to heights they had never believed possible. “Not so fast,” Jesus in effect tells them. “I must die, and spend three days dead.” We will come back to his next next point—which is Good News—in a few minutes. For now we must address more bad news. Jesus tells his hearers that if they really want to follow him they must “take up their crosses”. This image foreshadows the day the Romans would force him to drag his own cross through the streets of Jerusalem. Not only must you get killed, you must carry the instrument of your own death.

Well this is a cheerful message, sure to win the hearts and minds of all who hear it! In truth it is a chilling prophecy. But Jesus means it. He adds one of his favorite themes, that the first shall be last and the last, first. God will turn every human expectation upside down.

We still hold onto the fallacy that following Jesus makes us winners, above those who do not follow Him. In fact, as Matthew 25 makes clear, he calls us as his followers to serve the last and least, not to lord it over them. A woman named Naomi, an American Reformed Jew, ran a distribution center for a network of food banks that is the largest in the country. Located in the South Bronx, she supervised the utilization of an abandoned factory as a storage and transport hub. (The South Bronx, with the exception of Yankee Stadium, is basically substandard, multi-unit dwellings and abandoned factories.)

Naomi had that uniquely American Jewish combination of personality traits, one-third wry humor, one-third tart negativity and one-third compassion. She briefed our group of youth and sponsors on exactly how to do the work of sorting and loading we had come to do. Use gloves the *whole* time she told us, for, “You never know who else has handled those cans and what diseases they may have.” Do not climb down into a dumpster, even if you drop an entire flat of product into it. Things like that. She spent far more time briefing us on who their clientele was, and how they had come to so deeply need the food we would process for the next six hours. Then she talked about where that food would go. Churches and former churches mostly, churches still operating and church buildings abandoned by their now-extinct congregations. All over four boroughs. Step vans full (think UPS or Fed Ex), because it was too hard to navigate New York City in a semi. They had developed a profile of their “average client”. I forget the numbers save one. The average annual income of their clients did not come to even half of the federal poverty line.

And yet. Naomi introduced us to Joaquin, an extremely thin man who appeared to be in his thirties. He spoke to us with a strong Hispanic accent. Joaquin had come to America on a makeshift boat with no motor. He and twenty-some others had left Cuba under the cover

of darkness and prayed their rudimentary sail would propel them the ninety miles across the Straits of Florida. They landed without much incident on one of the Keys. He walked into a police station and declared himself a Cuban refugee. At the time he knew only a few words of English. But the intake officer spoke Spanish, though Joaquin said he had a “terrible Mexican accent”. Soon, he had asylum and a bus ticket to the Bronx, where his cousins lived.

Joaquin had risen to become the Assistant Director of the food pantry distribution center. He had worked as a peon, a field worker, in Cuba. He had maybe a third-grade education. He was a devout Roman Catholic. So here he was, working for an American Jewish woman to facilitate the feeding of literally thousands every day. He said something our youth repeated to each other for as long as any of them present there that day remained in our youth group: “If I can do this with Jesus, you can do anything with Jesus.” That the youth would usually say this with a fake Hispanic accent only added to its power. If I can do this with Jesus, you can do anything with Jesus. Sometimes we feel like the last and the least. No one present listening to these words can remotely consider themselves the least economically. Yet at times we *can* feel lost, defeated, downtrodden. We can feel like we have dragged our crosses through the city. Yet Jesus offers consolation—through the piece of good news we mentioned earlier. For while he speaks of dying on his cross, he does not stop there. He adds that after three days he will rise again.

In Mark eight Jesus does not put this final implication into words, yet it hangs in the passage with a palpable force. And he does speak of it elsewhere—as does the Apostle Paul—so we can confidently add it here as well. If we must die with Christ, so we shall live with him. Because he rose, we can too. If I can do this with Jesus, you can do it with Jesus. And this resurrection of ours works in both this world and the next. So far as I can remember,

Joaquin did not make this connection, but I will. Think of the mast and spar. Do they not form the shape of a cross? Did he not put his life into his hands while trusting in the work of a cross? Absolutely one of the last and least, he rose to the relative heights of an executive position in a humanitarian organization operating in one of the great world cities.

One of the youth listening to Joaquin that day in 2005 grew up on a Christmas tree farm in Northern Michigan. Now she has a PhD in physical therapy and practices in Grand Rapids. One of the adults survived breast cancer and now travels with her husband. They have visited Cuba. Other youth there that day work as a sound engineer for a quality brand of audio speakers, a mother of three whose live-in boyfriend had to go on disability a decade ago, a nurse, a pediatrician and one who served time for attempted arson but who now leads a Bible ministry in the county jail. What do all these people have in common besides having heard Naomi and Joaquin that day? They are all follow Jesus. They come from diverse backgrounds. They have diverse life experiences. But I am in contact with most of them, mostly through social media, and I know enough about each to make this statement confidently: *each one them, and quite a few more beside, understand that following Jesus does not guarantee a cushy life. He has this habit of turning our expectations upside down.*

But upside down is his intention. It is his strategy for gaining our attention and teaching us. He seriously wants us to get it. We do not follow him to gain riches or power, nor even happiness. No, we follow him to gain the spiritual maturity to serve the last and the least, and somehow, to enter into his presence when our time comes. Take up your cross and follow Jesus. It leads down before it leads up, but lead up it does. Take up your cross.