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THE FESTIVAL OF SAINT MARK  
April 25, 2010

Isaiah 52:7-10  
2 Timothy 4:6-11, 18  
Mark 1:1-15

## **Mark 1:1-15**

<sup>1</sup>The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

<sup>2</sup>As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way;

<sup>3</sup>the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight,’”

<sup>4</sup>John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup>And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. <sup>6</sup>Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup>He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. <sup>8</sup>I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

<sup>9</sup>In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup>And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. <sup>11</sup>And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” <sup>12</sup>And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. <sup>13</sup>He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

<sup>14</sup>Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, <sup>15</sup>and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

According to this morning's lesson from the Gospel of Mark, the first words of Jesus recorded in scripture are "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, repent, and believe in the good news." That is an action-packed opening sentence for Jesus, but even those words may be too constrained. The phrase that is translated "the kingdom of God" should instead be translated "the rule of God". There is a difference. The "kingdom" of God is a place. The "rule" of God is something that is happening; and it is happening now. And we are supposed to do something about it.

April 25 is the Festival Day of Saint Mark and it falls on a Sunday this year. So our paraments are red and we have special scriptures that talk about Saint Mark and a gospel lesson that is written by Saint Mark.

April 25 has been observed as St. Mark's Day since the ninth century. Why April 25 was chosen no one knows, but the writer of that Gospel gave us a great gift and it would be in order to say a bit about St. Mark.

He was not one of the twelve apostles. We often think he was, because when we try to name the twelve apostles – once we get past Peter and Judas (who are always easy to remember) we start trying to think of ten others - and there is the Bible with four apostolic-sounding names just waiting for us: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. But the lists of the twelve apostles found in the Gospels do not include the names of Mark or Luke. They were not among the twelve. As a matter of fact, there is no information in the Bible that Mark ever personally saw Jesus.

The gospel, itself, is anonymous. In other words, there is nowhere in the Gospel According to Mark where the author writes, "My name is Mark and I'm writing this Gospel". No name is given to an author. However, as far back as the earliest manuscripts can be found and the earliest church fathers quoting scriptures, this has been called "The Gospel of Mark". And, although Mark was a common enough name in the first century, the Mark

who wrote the Gospel is thought to be the *same* fellow who is called John Mark in the Book of Acts and who is mentioned by Paul in his letters and is mentioned by Peter in his letter.

In 1 Peter 5:13 Peter refers to Mark as “my son”. This gives rise to the earliest traditions about Mark. Of course, traditions are different from scripture. Scripture is what is actually found in the Bible. But traditions are often as old as the earliest copies of scripture and much of our understanding of our faith comes from the first couple of centuries of the church.

It is this tradition that gives us the story that Mark was an associate of Peter. Mark accompanied Peter to Rome. As Peter preached to the people of Rome, Mark copied his sermons about the life of Jesus. Then, after Peter was executed in Rome, Mark compiled these sermons into what we now know as the Gospel of Mark. That would explain how someone, who was not one of the twelve apostles, was the first to write down an account of Jesus’ life. It would also account for why the Gospel of Mark and, consequently, the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, are so often told from the point of view of Peter and what he said, did, and thought.

After Peter’s death, the story is that Mark went to Alexandria in northern Egypt. He was bishop of the early church there and was martyred in the streets of the city.

Saint Mark is the patron saint of the city of Venice. In the ninth century remains that were reported to be those of Mark (although after eight hundred years we might be skeptical) those remains were taken from Alexandria to Venice where they have been kept in a shrine. The chapel that holds the remains is subterranean which, in Venice, means they are often inaccessible – water being what it is.

There is an energy in the Gospel of Mark.

Mark tells about what Jesus *did*. He portrays Jesus as almost constantly in action. A favorite word of Mark is the Greek word which means *immediately*. It occurs over forty times in sixteen chapters. This is the shortest of the four gospels but it has the most details. Matthew and Luke tell us a blind man called out to Jesus; Mark tells us his name (his father's name, too.) Matthew and Luke tell us a storm blew up on the Sea of Galilee; Mark tells us Jesus had his head on a cushion in the boat. Matthew and Luke tell us that Jesus healed a man who was possessed by demons; Mark describes the man – and it is quite a description. “He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain; for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones.” (Mark 5:3-5) Then Mark brings Jesus into the picture and we proceed with the healing.

Mark has the fewest words of Jesus, the fewest parables and teachings. Mark has a habit of writing, “Jesus taught them many things” and then not writing any of the things he taught. There is no Sermon on the Mount in Mark, no Lord's Prayer or Golden Rule. He does not record Mary's words in *The Magnificat* or the profound dialog between Jesus and Nicodemus. Our lesson for this morning is the first fifteen verses of Mark's Gospel and it is typical of Mark's style. “In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” And the Spirit **immediately** drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts (You notice there isn't a lot of chit-chat between Satan and Jesus, no comparing verses of the Bible like in the other Gospels.

Mark says Satan tempted Jesus. It didn't work. Next item.) and the angels waited on him. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

That is who Mark is - a man who never saw Jesus during Jesus' life, but who knew the church. From the earliest days, he saw the faith of the followers of Christ and saw what Christ could do in people's lives.

The story of the Christian Church is repeated in the life of each individual Christian. No two year old has ever toddled away from a crafts table after pasting together his first construction paper cross and talked about how the experience gave him a new insight into the Heidelberg Disputation – that is not how we develop our faith. We start by being part of the community of people who know Jesus. We hear stories about the things that Jesus did. We hear assurance about the things that Jesus *still* does – in *our* lives. As our journey continues we learn more. We think more deeply. We reach new insights and welcome new mysteries. But we start by being with other Christians and hearing about Jesus.

The Christian Church is on the same journey. It started with confused, frightened disciples who did not know what to make of the empty tomb – and that is the way Mark told the story. The last words of the Gospel of Mark are "<sup>5</sup>As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. <sup>6</sup>But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. <sup>7</sup>But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." <sup>8</sup>So

they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” (Mark 16:5-8) Mark writes nothing further. That is not much of an ending, but Mark is not interested in letting us pretend that our journey of faith is ended.

Mark wanted people to know Jesus – so he wrote what he knew. The *first* words Jesus says in the gospel are: “The time is **now**. The kingdom of God is **now**. Do something about it. Repent and believe in the good news.”

The energy and immediacy are still in the message after two thousand years. Jesus striding out of the desert and saying, “Repent. Believe.” Mark did not promise that someday we would reach a *place* called “The kingdom of God”; he announced that we are, today, *living* according to “the rule of God”.

The Church has grown in the last two thousand years. We have been led by wise teachers and developed profound doctrines. We have given ourselves helpful reminders (including assigning special days to people like Saint Mark). I pray that the Church - and each of us as members of the Church - will continue to develop and grow in our learning and understanding. But I do not think anyone’s **relationship with God** ever gets beyond Jesus walking into our lives and calling for us to renew our lives and believe in him.

Our faith will continue to mature and bless us with wisdom and serenity as long as we draw breath. But we will never be more a part of God’s kingdom than when we first hear Jesus’ declaration that he has come into our lives.