

Listen! Let's Go

Mark 1:29-39

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A kindergarten teacher asked the class, "What is the color of apples?" Most of the children answered red. A couple said green. But one student raised her hand and said white. The teacher tried to explain that apples could be red or green or even golden. But never white. But the student was adamant, and finally said, "Look inside."

I think that is what your pastor Chrissy has been challenging you to do. Her way of saying it is "Listen to the Gospel of Mark with new ears." I like that. Listen with new ears – look inside – and see if God will say something to you about this Good News of Jesus that you have never encountered before.

I decided to join you in this spiritual discipline. Instead of preaching a sermon that I have preached before, I have chosen to enter your worship series and listen with new ears myself. Accepting the sermon title and text that Chrissy had planned, I set out to do some holy listening before figuring out what to say. I mentioned this sermon title, "Listen! Let's Go" to my wife, who said, "Where are you going?" That is our question to consider today.

I.

Our account from Mark 1:29-39 seems to be rather straightforward, as all of Mark's Gospel is. Action, immediate action, and then more action. The story picks up where you left off last week. You were in the synagogue when Jesus encountered a man with "unclean spirits." Now Jesus and his friends leave the synagogue and go to Simon Peter's home where his mother-in-law is ill with a fever. Jesus touches her and heals the woman who begins to serve lunch. Word spreads of this miraculous healing along with the encounter in the synagogue, so by sundown on the sabbath, when people were allowed to move about more freely, a crowd shows up at Simon's house and many are healed. After this full day of miracle working, Jesus slips away in the early morning hours, while it was still dark, to find a deserted place to pray. There he is hunted down and found by Simon and the others, who say, "Everyone is searching for you." But Jesus replies, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also, for that is what I came out to do." And sure enough, "he went throughout all Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons."

There could be four sermons from this short passage in Mark. A woman is touched and healed from a fever – a large group in town who are sick or possessed by demons is healed – Jesus shows us how to get to a quiet place to pray – and then he says, "Let's go, our ministry is not here but it is out there." Four possible sermons, but I have only been invited to be here one Sunday! So, I listened to the title given to me for this week. "Let's go." So, where are we going?

Let's listen again to the story with new ears. Let's look on the inside and see what we might learn.

II.

The leading character in this passage is Jesus, of course. But, to use the language of the Academy Awards, the Best Supporting Actor would be Simon. We mainly know him as Peter, but Jesus has not given him that nickname yet, so in this passage he is called Simon. I think that he holds the key to what we might learn from these verses.

Simon likes things just the way they are, and he wants them to stay the same. Why do I say that? We know from studying all the Gospels that Peter was no shrinking violet or wall flower of the disciple band. I am guessing that we would call him an extrovert today and consider him to be an Enneagram 7 – “the Enthusiast.” He was the aggressive one, the loud one, the center of attention.

There is even evidence that he and his brother Andrew lived in the center of the town. If you travel to Capernaum today, you will be taken to the ruins of a fifth century synagogue that may have been built on top of the synagogue in Jesus' day. Then, just a few yards away, you will be shown what tradition says is Peter's house. In the fifth century, a basilica was built over what was considered “St. Peter's house.”

So, listen with new ears. Look on the inside. Simon is a new follower of Jesus. This is the first trip back to Simon's hometown with Jesus at his side. Miracles abound and crowds are flocking. After her healing, Simon is now in very good standing with his mother-in-law and that is a good thing in any culture in any period of history! Not only that, but the house of Simon is also the gathering place for the town as people come to be healed. Simon, as Jesus' new friend, is the center of attention – right where he wants to be. So, when Jesus slips off to a deserted place to find some quiet time to pray, Simon and his friends literally “hunt” him down to try to get him back to the business of healing. After all, a crowd has formed. Everyone is looking for Jesus. Simon wants everything to stay the same. He is in a comfortable, sweet spot and hopes that it will continue forever.

Jesus has other plans. “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also, for that is what I came out to do.” Let's go, Jesus says. Our ministry is not in the comfort of the crowd at home, but on the horizon where people need to hear the good news.

III.

Let's go. So, where are we going? I suggest that we stay with Simon for a bit through the Gospel of Mark. This great gospel has 16 chapters. Right “smack dab” (do you know that theological term?) in the middle of the gospel is the account of the Transfiguration. You will talk about that next Sunday. I certainly do not want to get ahead of what Chrissy might say to you, but I do want you to see a thread that runs through the entire Gospel of Mark. In the beginning of Chapter 9, the Transfiguration is the account of Jesus taking Peter, James and John up on the mountain and there Jesus was transfigured in a glorious way and Moses and Elijah also appeared with him. Then Peter, in response to this glorious moment, said “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” In other words, Peter wanted things to stay the same. Let's pitch a tent right here on the top of the mountain. In fact,

let's pitch three tents and hang out with this glorious experience. It was not to be so, because the ministry waited for them in the valley. Is that starting to sound familiar, as you listen with new ears? Please come back next week for the full story!

Simon Peter wanted things to stay the same. Jesus said, "Let's go" because our ministry is not in the glory of the mountaintop but on the margins where people need to hear the good news that God loves them.

Our story for today is early in the earthly ministry of Jesus. The Transfiguration is right in the middle of the Gospel of Mark. To complete this listening with new ears, let's go to the last chapter, Mark 16. It is the story of Easter. Jesus has been crucified and then buried. The women arrive early on Sunday morning. The stone is rolled away, the tomb is empty. An angel is there and says 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. 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."

We don't see Jesus on this Easter Sunday in the Gospel of Mark. In the longer ending we do read that he appeared – we just don't hear a story about the encounter. No appearance – but there is an invitation. "He is going ahead of you to Galilee . . . there you will see him. . . just as he told you."

Why Galilee? Not only is that where Jesus was from, but that was the place of Jesus' ministry. That is where he called his followers, performed most of his miracles, and taught the crowds. The angel was giving the message from Jesus – let's meet again where ministry happens . . . in Galilee.

Is that possibly the message of the Risen Lord to us? We don't see an appearance of Jesus on Easter Sunday or any Sunday. We are like the women in the Gospel of Mark. But we will see him in the places of ministry . . . we will find him when we follow him from wherever you are worshiping to the Galilees that are across the street and around the world. It is as we live out God's mission that we meet Jesus.

"Tell his disciples and Peter . . ." the angel said. Why is Peter singled out? I have always interpreted this on Easter in the traditional way. Peter was mentioned because he was the one who on Thursday night had denied even knowing Jesus. Three times he had failed his Lord. That is still a good reason to include Peter in a special way. But as we listen to this passage with new ears – as we look inside the full Gospel of Mark, we see that Peter is the one who always likes for things to stay the same. He gets in a good place and wants to stay there. Is it possible that is even a part of the message of Easter? As good as the idea of an empty tomb is, you can't stay here Peter. Let's go – to Galilee – to the place where ministry happens.

Simon Peter wanted things to stay the same. Jesus said, "Let's go" because our ministry is not even in the amazement of an empty tomb, but on the edges where people need to hear the good news that all are included in the beloved family of God. That is the message of Jesus to Peter in the beginning, the middle, and the end of the Gospel of Mark.

IV.

This lesson for Peter is also what Jesus wants us to hear – if we listen with new ears, if we look on the inside. Since the days of Peter, the church has always been tempted to get comfortable, or get excited, or get amazed and want to stay right there. We are just like Simon Peter. Another way to say it is that we are more interested in being fed by the comfort, glory, and amazement of Jesus than we are in feeding others. We are quick to gather in a holy huddle around Jesus, but hesitant to follow the words of Jesus when he says, “Let’s go away from here to tell others the good news.”

Are you only interested in being fed – and not very interested in feeding others? It hit me recently that I may be guilty of this in a very literal way. In my semi-retirement I am trying to learn how to cook. I have been fascinated by watching hours of Great Courses sessions in which chefs from the American Culinary Institute teach me, and show me, how to cook. I am learning a great deal – I love watching and experimenting in the kitchen. But I have still not fed any guests a meal! I was very interested in being fed with new information about cooking – but I have not done much to invite others to be fed.

Being fed – and feeding others. Both are needed. It is not either/or but both/and. We are to gather around the healing of Jesus, the glory of Jesus, the resurrection of Jesus and have our lives transformed. We do this through worship and spiritual formation, through fellowship and prayer. Remember that our text began with Jesus and his friends in the synagogue. That is where it starts for us as well. And then, we are to hear the words of Jesus who says, “Let’s go!” Listen, do you hear them? Let’s go . . . to the horizon where people need to hear about Jesus, to the margins where people need to know that Jesus loves them, and to the edges to let people know that Jesus includes them. Let’s go . . . to proclaim this message of Jesus through social justice action, advocacy ministry, global missions, community engagement, authentic evangelism, disaster relief, worship streaming, personal relationships, and on and on and on. Let’s go!

V.

This listening with new ears and looking inside brings us to the Table of the Lord. It is here that we are fed, but it is also here that we proclaim the very good news that Jesus was challenging his followers to proclaim. Do you remember the Apostle Paul’s words from 1 Corinthians 11:26, “As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes.” You proclaim . . . the Table reminds us that you are preaching the Good News today and every day by the words that you share and by the actions of your lives. At the Table we are fed – and we feed others. Listen! I think that is what Jesus wants us to hear today.

A few years ago, a nationwide poll asked, "What word or phrase would you most like to hear uttered to you, sincerely?"

Can you guess the first thing people wanted to hear? You're right: "I love you." The second was, "You are forgiven." Number three, believe it or not, was, "Supper is ready." (With thanks to James A. Harnish, "Walking With Jesus: Forgiveness," Tampa, Fla., March 22, 1998.)

How long has it been since we have heard these words spoken to us? We gather in this place today to hear these powerful words:

"I love you" -- God's unconditional love. We are all invited to the table.

"You are forgiven" -- God's unmerited grace. Not a single one of us deserves a place at this table. Our sin is forgiven and washed away, allowing us to eat.

"Supper is ready" -- God's unsurpassed invitation. Jesus is saying to us, "I want a house with a crowded table."

We need to hear these phrases. So do others. How long has it been since you have spoken these words to others?

Well, let's go to the Table to hear the words spoken to us, and then let's go from the Table to proclaim these words of good news to others.

So . . . let's go!