

Mark 4:35-5:20

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Date: 08 September 2019

Preacher: Rupert Hunt-Taylor

[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning, friends. If I'm hard to hear, then do tell me. If I'm mumbling, I'll try and speak louder. Do feel free to come forward if you want to. And let me thank you for sharing your pastor with Edinburgh North Church this morning and for welcoming me here. He will come back, I promise.

But it's a great thing for our church family to see others who share their convictions about the Bible and their love for the gospel. And I know they'll be praying for all of you this morning and wanting me to send their love.

Well, do please keep Mark's gospel open at chapter four. Be a great help if you could follow as we go. And let's bow our heads, shall we, and ask our father's help. Our Lord and God who said, I am the way and the truth and the life.

We pray you'd forbid us to stray from you who are the way or to distrust you who are the truth. Or to rest in any other thing than you, our life.

Teach us now by your Holy Spirit what to do and who to believe and where to find our rest. For your own namesake, we ask it, Lord. Amen. Well, it's pitch black.

[1 : 1 1] You've woken utterly disorientated in darkness that is thick and heavy and alarming. And so you stumble along the wall, desperately trying to feel for a switch, a table, anything familiar.

And then all of a sudden, a flash of light. A car drives past the window. The moon peeks out from behind the clouds. And for a second, the whole room is lit up.

Just long enough to help you find your bearings. Something like that seems to happen every time these disciples get into a boat in Mark's gospel.

Each time that happens, Mark is telling us that they are blind and confused and hard-hearted. And then all of a sudden, they're given a flash of light. This is the first time it happens that way.

And one of the most startling passages, I think, in the whole gospel. Because just for a second, it's as if the wall between two worlds begins to break down.

[2 : 1 3] The physical world and the spiritual world. To give us this brief, breathtaking glimpse of Jesus Christ in all his majesty and might and terrifying glory.

One writer describes what the disciples saw this day as like a world suddenly lit up by a flash of lightning. For a split second, they see things as they truly are.

Not just who Jesus is, but what he's come to do with his extraordinary power. This storm is actually the first of four miracles that Mark puts together over chapters four and five.

And all of them share a big message. This Jesus is the sovereign God of heaven and earth. Come in power to deliver his people from darkness and desperation and death itself.

Even in the most desperate situations, Jesus Christ is mighty to save. That's the big message. Mark's Jesus is a big, awe-inspiring, frankly terrifying Jesus.

[3 : 25] And if we're still in the dark, clinging on to a twee Jesus who's comfortable to have around for a rainy day, well, it's time for Mark to open our eyes.

In these two miracles, it's a theme of darkness that comes out on top. First, the stilling of the storm. And then a man's rescue from a whole legion of demons. And together, they tell the story of Jesus' triumph over the world of evil.

This is the day that darkness dared defy him, only to be put firmly back in its box. They belong together, these two miracles.

So we're going to look at them like that. And I want us to learn three very important truths. And then take stock about what it means to see Jesus, the way he's lit up for us here.

And truth number one is something that Mark is not in any way trying to hide. This world is full of genuine terror.

[4 : 33] People sometimes say terrible things about this passage, don't they? I'm sure you've heard the sermons. Real faith melts away life's worries. Real faith calms a troubled heart.

With Jesus in the boat, you can smile at the storm. Have you heard the sermons? Mark is never that trite. Because often, life's storms are real. And they are scary.

In fact, there's a big fear that stalks us right the way through this big section of the gospel. Lurking behind all four miracles is a big fear. The one we cannot pretend away no matter how much we try.

Every one of these miracles faces us with the prospect of death. First, there's this little flotilla of boats on a lake, a huge lake.

And we know that half the people in these boats are tough, experienced fishermen. And yet they're hit by something so unexpected, so terrifying, that they end up genuinely worried.

[5 : 39] This is it. Teacher, don't you care if we drown? Then they meet a man whose life is reduced to rags and chains and self-harm.

And what does Mark repeat for us? Look at your Bibles. What does he repeat three times? He's living out among the tombs. He's already in the grave.

Unclean, unwanted, good as dead. Read on in your own time the next two miracles. And it's the same story. A woman who for 12 years has lived a living death.

And a 12-year-old girl who by the time Jesus arrives is already starting to go cold. Death, death, death, death all over the section.

And friends, we are not meant to smile at a storm like that. They've got more in common, these miracles. Every time people are utterly powerless in the face of something huge and terrifying and uncompromising.

[6 : 46] Every one of them gives us a picture of sheer desperation. Eventually, life is going to throw every one of us a problem we simply cannot fix.

Parents whose aging we can only watch powerless. Children whose sorrows and struggles and souls we can only pray about.

Think of this man in the tombs. He's completely isolated. Feared by the villagers.

Laughed at by the kids who dare each other to go and have a look in the graveyard. Hated even by himself. Day and night, verse 5. He's torturing his own body.

In fact, he's giving us an eerie picture of how Jesus will end up when this book comes to its climax. Isolated.

[7 : 45] Naked. Unclean. Skin lashed. Flesh torn. The reason Christ had to become all that is that the people he came to rescue are living it.

But you aren't meant to smile at those storms. So life is full of genuine fear and anxiety and trouble. And you can't make them go away just by believing really hard in Jesus.

And not only that, I'm afraid the truth gets worse before it gets better. Because number two, this world is full of genuine darkness. Mark isn't just telling us here about a series of unfortunate events.

No, he's representing both of these very deliberately as attacks on Jesus' kingdom. The sea is one of those great famous pieces of Bible imagery running through the Old Testament.

It's not really a thing. The sea in the Bible is more like an army. A force. It represents those forces of darkness and chaos and rebellion.

[8 : 55] The sea is that force which constantly pushes back against the boundaries its creator has set. Every tide, every wave is like a little challenge to God's rule.

It's why in the Psalms and in Job, the sea is where those terrifying mythical creatures lurk. The monsters who only God contain. And now Jesus takes his new people, his 12 disciples, this new Israel he's just called into existence.

And he leads them straight through the middle of that sea. Now, if you've been tuned into Mark, he's been training his readers to keep the prophet Isaiah in the back of their minds.

And particularly Isaiah's big rescue story. Isaiah's promise of a new exodus, a new rescue. Right from chapter one, the beginning of the book, he's presented Jesus as the climax to Isaiah's rescue story.

This is God stepping into history to lead his people out of captivity, out of the wilderness, back through the sea, just like the first time.

[10 : 13] But the sea is not willing to give them up without a fight. Those powers of darkness here, they sense their chance to destroy Christ and his entire kingdom, just one little flotilla of boats.

And so they throw their worst to him. And there's something similar going on with the possessed man. Verse one of chapter five is a very significant moment in this book.

Jesus has crossed the lake into Gentile land. It's why they're keeping pigs, isn't it? So if you like, what we're seeing here is his first raid into enemy territory, extending the borders of his kingdom, even beyond stubborn Israel.

And once again, the enemy is not willing to give up his claim. And so he has a whole legion of demons sent rushing at Christ.

I don't think it's an accident that Mark uses such a militarized name. Just like the Roman legion claimed the promised land. So Satan's legion claims its people.

[11 : 22] You see, this world is full of real spiritual darkness. So full that the enemy claims every one of us sitting in this room, body and soul.

He thinks we belong to him. And by rights, we should, shouldn't we? We're rebels. We're unclean, just like the man in the tombs, contaminated by sin, unfit for God's presence, condemned to die.

But if we get beyond the twee versions of this story that we're so used to hearing, if we face up to the terror and the darkness properly, then what we're about to see becomes so much more thrilling.

Yes, there are fears in every human life. We cannot pretend a way. The darkness haunting this world is very real. But thirdly, this world's king puts terror and darkness in its box.

Jesus Christ, the Jesus of Mark's gospel is so spine chillingly powerful that he rules over even the darkest forces arrayed against him.

[12 : 38] Notice his utter indifference to the panic while storms are swirling around the boats. It's a classic bit of eyewitness detail, isn't it? He's fast asleep on a cushion. Now, we know already that this is the sovereign God of heaven and earth, the one who made the sea and the dry land.

Nothing lays a finger on him without his permission. We know that. But the disciples don't know it. To them, verse 38, him sleeping there, it seems like he hardly cares about them.

Of course, what that only shows us is that they don't really believe who is with them in the boat. It's why it's their faith that Jesus challenges in verse 40.

He means their faith in who he is. And they should know it by now, shouldn't they? If they'd listen to John the Baptist right at the start of the book, they'd know that this is exactly why Jesus came.

He's the Exodus king, the one to lead the rescue mission, Isaiah's divine rescuing warrior. And they'd know perfectly well that when God rescued his people back in Egypt, this was exactly how he did it.

[13 : 51] He brought them through the sea safe and sound. Several times, that is exactly how Isaiah describes the new rescue mission that was to come, the one Jesus would lead.

In fact, Mark's alluding to one of those passages really strongly here. We read it earlier on, didn't we, as our call to worship. Isaiah 43, thus says the Lord, he who formed you, O Israel, fear not, for I have redeemed you.

I've called you by name. You're mine. When you pass through the waters, I'll be with you. The waves will not overcome you. I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

Well, here is God's new Israel, 12 men called by name, called to belong to him. And now verse 36, Mark tells us twice that Jesus is with them and into the water they go.

Even the people closest to Jesus, though, his new 12, they have hard hearts and blind eyes. That's the sting, isn't it, of his why are you so afraid question?

[15 : 04] They are in a boat with the God they ought to know by now is here to deliver them. While the enemy makes his attack. And in case we are in any doubt that this is a spiritual battle, Mark is painting for us.

Jesus' actions make it perfectly clear. He doesn't command the wind and the waves. He doesn't switch them off as if there were some impersonal force of nature. No.

Verse 39, look, he rebukes them. It's a word Mark uses in two types of situation. He rebukes people, Jesus, when he's casting out demons.

And he rebukes his disciples when they're opposing his mission. You don't rebuke bad weather, do you? This is the sovereign God of heaven and earth staring down the enemy and shouting, who dares defy my rule?

And just like that, verse 39, Mark uses the same word for the silence as he does for the storm.

[16 : 13] There was a great squall up in verse 37. And if you look at a literal translation, it's replaced with a great silence, a terrifying silence. Think of Aslan the lion and his mighty roar, except that Jesus doesn't even need to raise his voice.

Just a word and creation quakes. It's like a living portrait of that parable of the mustard seed. Jesus starts as small and unimpressive as it gets.

A frail human being curled up on a pillow. And with just the power of a word from his mouth, suddenly we recognize him as bigger than anything in creation.

Bigger than our biggest fears. And it's the same story again with Legion, isn't it? Jesus doesn't even have to get close, verse 6. Legion sees him from a distance and immediately he crumbles.

He crumbles, runs up the white flag and begs like a coward. So Jesus sends him straight back where he belongs, into a herd of unclean pigs and over the cliff and down into the deep.

[17 : 25] Evil put back in its box. Or to quote the way, one very technical commentary sums up the whole thing. Oink, splash. Here is a God who rules even the terror and the darkness.

And notice that it's only when people see him clearly that the real terror begins to creep into these stories. What's the big surprise both times? It's that people are more afraid after Jesus rescues them than they were before.

Did you notice it? Verse 41. Jesus stills the storm and then they're scared. In fact, the text says it twice. They were terrified with a great terror.

Before they were anxious. It's a different word. Jesus uses in verse 40. Why are you so timid? Now they're terrified. Who on earth have we got in this boat?

Down in verse 15. It's the same again. The villagers have tried for years to control that poor man in the tombs. Did you count how many times we were told that? Verses three and four.

[18 : 33] No one could bind him. Even with a chain. He's often been chained hand and foot. He tore the chains. He broke the irons. No one could subdue him. Here is a man living a subhuman existence with superhuman strength.

A prisoner of Satan, the strong man. And yet with a word, Jesus binds him and casts him into the abyss. And verse 15.

When people see that, they're terrified as to what it must mean. Two more miracles to come in this section and it'll be the same story.

There is terror and amazement every time, but not terror at the events. Terror at the one who can control the events. For a brief moment, that darkness is lit up.

And people see Jesus Christ for who he really is. Well, what I'd love to do for the rest of our time is to let every one of us recognize why we need a big, scary picture of who Jesus is and what he's like.

[19 : 48] It matters because how we think of him is going to shape very profoundly what we expect to get out of the Christian life. How you think about Jesus is the most practical application we could ever take from a Bible passage.

And this one forces us, I think, to question our assumptions. A lot of us go through life with a tame version of Jesus tucked away in our back pockets.

And although it's true that as Christians, we never need to fear God's punishment, his anger. There is something terrifying or inspiring about this character that Mark is trying to show us.

So what difference does it make to see him as he really is? Well, firstly, a tame Jesus is a God who might well still the storms of life.

It's what we want out of him, isn't it? We want a tame Jesus to be there when we need him and not be too much nuisance when we don't. That's a Jesus the locals in verse 14 would have been quite happy with, a Jesus who hadn't just cost them their livelihoods.

[21 : 07] But you see, the Jesus Mark's showing us doesn't seem too bothered about making our lives plain sailing. He's got a bigger agenda. He might well cost us a few pigs.

In fact, it's only being with this Jesus, being close to him that got his disciples into trouble, isn't it? Do you think those forces of darkness would have kicked up a fuss about a boatload of ordinary fishermen?

No, it's following Jesus that put them under attack. Still, that rescued man, he is desperate to stay with Jesus. He wants to be close.

He wants to get back in the boat when they sail away. And Mark's telling us that is the right attitude. But Jesus has another agenda for him, a much more difficult, much more costly one.

So far, all over Israel, wherever he's been, Jesus has been silencing people who might witness to his identity, let on who he is.

[22 : 07] It's been part of his judgment over Israel's hard hearts. And suddenly in verse 19, it's the exact opposite. Jesus has an agenda of grace and inclusion for these Gentiles that is far bigger than any one person.

He's not bothered about giving us an easy life. I don't know about you, but my religious study lessons when I was at school were pretty terrible.

I think this is the only Bible passage I remember ever looking at in class. And the reason I remember it is that we were all so outraged that Jesus could be this cruel to 2,000 little piggies.

And for the entire hour of that lesson, I remember the teacher floundering and fudging and trying to make it sound better. And it's only now I realize what a massive irony that was.

Because if you're feeling the same way, if you're outraged about the poor piglets, well, I'm afraid Mark has played you like a fiddle. That is exactly the reaction of all the wrong people in this story, isn't it?

[23 : 28] To the villages, at the end of the day, pigs mattered more than people. Jesus does a wonderful, amazing thing. And they respond with terror and fury.

Because they will not get on board with his agenda. They want a tame Jesus who will make their problems melt away. Whereas Mark is showing us someone very different.

And friends, that is good news. Because while a tame Jesus might well calm the storms of life, only a terrifying Jesus could carry you through the storm of death.

And that is what Mark is interested in. Every so often I do an evangelistic event with students or church groups where they memorize Mark's gospel and then perform the whole thing in about 90 minutes.

And it's very simple. No props or costumes or cheese. It's just a text of Mark. And the way the stilling of the storm is done is somehow incredibly powerful.

[24 : 33] I only know of one person who was converted immediately while she watched the Mark drama. And it happened right there in the silence after the storm. She saw what Mark claimed about Jesus and realized right then that if it was true, it was utterly terrifying.

It meant that this man possessed an order of power and might and awe that just can't be ignored. And she had to belong to him. That's what Mark is saying, isn't it?

Jesus is bigger than the darkest fears you have. So fear him. And the storm gets put into perspective.

Friends, we need that sort of Jesus, don't we? When our whole nation is losing its head and afraid of the future, don't we need a God who's scarier than Brexit?

Whose call and his cost for your life is not remotely affected by it. It's deal or no deal. Who will never, ever be up for election.

[25 : 45] Whose triumph is never in doubt. When you're grieving, don't you need to know there's a Jesus bigger and scarier even than death?

I spent the week talking for the first time with my dad about end of life care. When will be time to withdraw treatment? That is a scary decision.

I wish he knew there was a Jesus far scarier than death. A Jesus like that means that death does not get to lay a finger on someone he loves.

He's called them by name to belong to his kingdom for all time and all eternity. And who dare defy him?

Behold your God, says Mark. The Exodus king, the creator of heaven and earth, come in power to deliver his people. Open your eyes and see him as he is.

[26 : 52] Because as long as you live in this world, you will face things you simply cannot pretend away. But here is a God you can trust to carry you through.

Either the darkness and the fear will swallow us up, or we run to a Jesus so enormous and majestic that even death trembles before him.

Let's bow our heads. Father God, we pray in your mercy that you would help us see your son and king for who he truly is.

Help us to love and fear him in a way that puts all other fears in their place. We thank you, Lord, that already he has triumphed over darkness and death through the cross, that no power of hell or scheme of man could ever separate us from his love.

So we pray that with a big view of Jesus, our king, you would help us this week to walk in faith. We ask it, Lord, for his namesake.

[28 : 10] Amen. Amen.