

# “They All Forsook Him”

a sermon by

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Text: “And they all forsook him and fled” (Mark 14:50).

There is a riddle in Mark’s gospel, which has to do with the disciples of Jesus. On the one hand, the disciples play a very positive role. The ministry of Jesus begins with the call of the disciples. Jesus goes by the Sea of Galilee where Simon and Andrew are fishing with their nets. He says to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” The same is true with James and John. They left their nets, their father, and followed Jesus.

Moreover, the disciples stayed with Jesus from Galilee, to Caesarea Philippi, and finally to Jerusalem. Peter reminds Jesus of this when he says, “We have left everything and followed you.” And they had.

## I.

But in spite of this more positive picture of the disciples, there is yet another one, which is negative in outlook. As Paul Achtemeier puts it in his book, *Mark*, “If there is any progression in the picture that Mark paints of the Gospels, it appears to be from bad to worse.”

This shift in Mark’s gospel is a shift from misunderstanding Jesus to a rejection of him. In the early chapters of Mark’s gospel, the disciples don’t seem to understand what this is about. Granted the demons recognize him as the Son of God (Mark 1: 24, 34). The crowd that surrounds him recognizes him as one with authority and responds to him in a positive way. The women who follow him also respond to him. They are faithful to the end.

The disciples, however, do not get the point. Jesus speaks to them in parables. Over and over again he explains to them in private (Mark 4:10; 7:18; 9:28), but they fail to understand what he is saying.

There is a dramatic shift that occurs in Mark's gospel as the disciples move from misunderstanding to rejection. This occurs at Caesarea Philippi. Here Peter says to Jesus, "You are the Christ." But when Jesus goes on to say that it is necessary for the Christ to suffer, Peter rebukes him and forces Jesus to say, "Get thee behind me Satan."

Then begins the massive rejection of Jesus. Judas betrays him with a kiss. Peter denies him. James and John cannot stay awake in the garden even for an hour. One of the saddest verses in all of the Gospel of Mark is contained in Chapter 14, verse 50: "They all forsook him and left."

## II.

That is really the problem with the disciples. They do not want a messiah that must suffer and die and neither do we. That is why the Gospel of Mark reminds us time and time again that following Jesus involves us in denying ourselves, taking up a cross, and following Jesus.

That is really the scandal of Christ. The disciples will follow a great miracle worker. They will follow a great teacher. They will follow a man who can heal people and feed the hungry. What they cannot take is a Jesus who turns his face to Jerusalem and invites them to do the same.

That, I think, is one of the reasons that Mark downplays the resurrection in his gospel. It is not that he does not believe. He does. Nor is it that resurrection is not important to him. It is. Rather, it is that Mark's mission is to remind his fellow Christians that following Jesus makes demands on all of us, and if that is true, we cannot understand the resurrection apart from the sufferings of Jesus.

## III.

What was true in Mark's time is true today. That is the rub about Holy Week. Most of us do well with Palm Sunday. Last Sunday we had over a thousand people in worship, and it was a great day. There is something thrilling about watching the children in our church bring forward the palms.

But Holy Week--I don't know. It calls us to a different level. It calls us to get involved and that is something that is hard for many of us to do.

Last week when Elie Wiesel was here he told a chilling story that happened to him just a couple of months ago. He was speaking in San Francisco and on his way to his room in the hotel he was suddenly confronted by a man with a gun who took him captive. It was right out in the hall near the room where Wiesel was staying. His assailant was a crazed man who apparently was one of these people today who denies that the holocaust really happened. Apparently, he wanted to hold Elie Wiesel captive until Wiesel acknowledged that the whole holocaust was made up. Wiesel screamed out in alarm, but no one answered. Finally, someone alerted security

and they were able to wrestle the gun from this assailant. Wiesel said he had not felt that kind of fear since he was a young boy in Auschwitz.

Later when the police interviewed the people in the hotel, they found three people who looked out their door and saw what was happening. All three quickly closed their doors and remained silent.

This is the riddle of the disciples in Mark's gospel and it is our dilemma as well. We are fine with Palm Sunday. We love a parade. Easter is great as well. It is celebratory.

It's Holy Week that is the problem, isn't it? We can deal with a Jesus that forgives our sins, heals our diseases, and promises us eternal life. But who wants to live through all of this conflict in Holy Week?

A number of years ago I came across a remarkable book by Hannah Arendt, entitled Eichmann in Jerusalem. The book was a portrayal of the trial of Adolph Eichmann that took place in Jerusalem in the early 1960s. Eichmann was one of the Nazis who fled Germany to Argentina, but who was finally captured by the Israelis and brought to trial. He was sentenced to death for crimes against humanity and was hanged by the Israeli government.

In describing Eichmann, Hannah Arendt spoke of what she called the "banality of evil." I remember the pictures of Eichmann on trial. He was sequestered in a bulletproof glass cell inside the courtroom and during the whole proceedings he seemed so harmless, so inane. Most of the time he spent polishing his spectacles.

Eichmann's defense was that he was really not a master killer. He was not, according to his attorneys, part of the Nazi group who planned the "final solution" for the Jews. Rather, he was portrayed more as a harmless bureaucrat. His job was to see that the trains to the death camps--Auschwitz, Buchenwald, Treblinka--ran on time. He wasn't a killer, just an ordinary person doing his job.

I wonder how much evil in the world is done because most of us sit idly by just doing our jobs. When I look at the devastation that is taking place in Dafur and the Sudan region of Africa, or even the devastation that took place in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, I wonder if a lot of this is caused by our indifference.

There is a way out. Jesus makes this clear. "He who loses his life," says Jesus, "will find it. But the one who seeks to save his life, will only lose it."

In John Baillie's classic devotional book, *A Dairy of Private Prayer*, there is a prayer that goes like this:

"Lord, when you call me to go through a deep valley, do not let me try to deceive myself into thinking that there is a way around."

Amen!

