

Mark 2:1–12 (NIV)

A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home.² They gathered in such large numbers that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them.³ Some men came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them.⁴ Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on.⁵ When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, “Son, your sins are forgiven.”

⁶Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves,⁷ “Why does this fellow talk like that? He’s blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?”

⁸Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, “Why are you thinking these things?⁹ Which is easier: to say to this paralyzed man, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up, take your mat and walk?’¹⁰ But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.” So he said to the man,¹¹ “I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.”¹² He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this!”

Going Viral? The Good News?

Some things I just don’t get and probably never will. Five minutes ago I went to YouTube and looked at the most popular videos of the day. Staring at me was an older gentleman playing a trombone. He had attached a camera to the slide and made it face it himself. So every time he moved the trombone slide his face receded or advanced in the frame. He posted the video on Jan 4 and three days later it had 833, 809 views. That’s right – almost a million people had viewed this video in the space of three days. It had gone viral. Why? . . . Then I scrolled down the YouTube page a bit more. There was a one-minute video of the world’s shortest escalator – 4.6 million views. Why? (I’ve got to stop asking why.)

“Going viral” is now part of our culture. The urban dictionary definition:

“go viral” - used in reference to Internet content which can be passed through electronic mail and social networking sites (Facebook, etc.): an image, video, or link that spreads rapidly through a population by being frequently shared with a number of individuals has 'gone viral'.

Sharing is the key. No one went looking for the trombone video (who would?); they were taken there by their internet “friends.” It is relationships, thin though they may be, that result in something going viral.

And so it was with Jesus. In Mark 2:1, we learn that “when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home¹.” From whom had they heard this? Their friends and neighbors, of course. And people came in droves. They didn’t have the internet, but Jesus still went viral.² And Capernaum was ground zero for the phenomenon.

Coming to Jesus

Capernaum is on the Sea of Galilee’s northern shore. It was the hometown of Peter and became Jesus’ “headquarters” during his public ministry. You can visit Capernaum

¹ Because Capernaum served as Jesus’ headquarters during his ministry in Galilee, Mark calls the town Jesus’ home.

² Indeed, as you read through the gospels you see that Jesus often tries to tamp down this viral phenomenon as he tries to maintain some control over the course of his ministry.

today. The Franciscans have built a modern church over the ruins of Peter's house. Nearby are the ruins of a new and improved synagogue that was built several centuries after the time of Christ, the result of a capital campaign I'm sure. The new synagogue was built on the foundation of the synagogue in which Jesus preached. The original foundation is still visible.

Once, during one of Jesus' many stays in Capernaum, Jesus' home was packed to overflowing with so many people that you couldn't have even gotten through the front door. This seemed to pose an insurmountable problem for anyone who wanted to get to Jesus but hadn't been able to enter the house before the crowds gathered. Insurmountable, that is, unless you have the right kind of friends. Committed friends. Going-above-and-beyond friends.

One paralyzed man from the area had such friends. When they saw the overcrowding, surely the friends were tempted to simply turn away and try again another time. After all, what could they do? They wanted to help their stricken friend, but they couldn't walk through walls. Or could they?!

I wonder who first had the idea to lower the paralyzed man through a hole cut in the ceiling. Good grief; it must have sounded crazy. "Cut a hole in the roof? Are you mad? Jesus is down there. It's his house!" Yet somehow, the idea took hold among this circle of friends. And they did it. Climbed up on the roof, hauling the crippled man with them. They dug through the dirt piled on the house's roof and made an opening through which they lowered their friend right in front of Jesus.

Who does such a thing? Would I do such a thing? Talk about thinking outside of the box and then actually doing it. They saw an opportunity for their friend to be rescued; one that might never come his way again. And they loved him. And they risked. And he was saved. But the man, and his friends, got more than they had expected.

Eyewitnesses and the Gospel of Mark

What are the gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection? Are they oral traditions about Jesus that had been passed around for decades before being written down? To put it another way, was there a lengthy period of anonymous transmission of these stories between the events and the writing of the gospels? Certainly, most New Testament scholarship of the last century has been grounded on just such assumptions.

In a compelling, carefully researched, and well-received recent book, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, Professor Richard Bauckham of St. Andrews University proposes that this assumption of the anonymous passing of oral stories about Jesus is simply incorrect. Rather, the gospels are the testimony, the eyewitness testimony, of the disciples who lived and walked with Jesus. Mark's gospel is a case in point.

Papias was the bishop of Hierapolis, a city not far from Laodicea and Colossae, in the early second-century. Though Papias was what we might call a third-generation Christian, we must remember that generations overlap. For example, though the D-Day landings were more than 60 years ago, my son, Robby, 17 and born in 1990, could sit down with many veterans and hear their stories, their eyewitness testimony, about the invasion of Europe. Sixty years from now, Robby could still tell the stories that he had gotten first hand from the participants themselves.

By comparison, 90AD (later than the dates usually assigned to the writing of Matthew, Mark, and Luke) was only sixty years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. There were certainly some of Jesus' original disciples still alive at the time, as there were many more disciples than just the twelve.

continued in the page three textbox

Healing

It's a safe bet that the friends were focused only on the man's paralysis. That's what needed fixing, after all. But the man got more than freedom from his paralysis, he got freedom from his bondage to sin. When the man was set down on the floor of the

room, Jesus told him that his sins had been forgiven,³ not that his paralysis had been healed.

And who is Jesus looking at as he makes his pronouncement of salvation? Not the paralyzed man, but his friends. Mark tells us that “Jesus saw *their* faith” We are never told exactly what the paralyzed man thought of Jesus. Perhaps there is nothing but desperation on his mind and in his heart. As for the friends, however, we are told all we need to know. Jesus saw their faith, their trust, in this carpenter from Nazareth. And their friend was not only healed of his paralysis, but healed also of his sin.

It is important to grasp the significance and the shock in what Jesus told the paralytic. Sins are offenses committed against God; thus, for the Jews, it was only the LORD God, who could forgive sins. Further, the Jews had a perfectly fine system for managing sin forgiveness and that was the temple, not some dusty house in Capernaum. In his commentary on Mark, Alan Culpepper helps us to understand Jesus’ offense.

Jesus’ declaration, “Son, your sins are forgiven” (2:5), can be taken either as a divine passive, meaning “God has forgiven your sins,” or as a statement on his own authority, meaning “I forgive your sins.” The divine passive was often used to avoid a direct reference to the divine name (see 2:20; 3:28; 4:12, 25; etc.). Only God can forgive sins (Exodus 34:6-7; Isa 43:25; 44:22), but God’s prophets at times announced forgiveness: “Nathan said to David, ‘Now the LORD has put away your sin; you shall not die’” (2 Sam 12:13). Even if Jesus used the divine passive, the scribes recognize the authority implied in his statement.

By the time of the New Testament, blasphemy was construed not only as cursing God but as any “violation of the power and majesty of God.” The scribes heard Jesus’ use of the divine passive as either a claim to be able to pronounce the forgiveness of sins or to speak for God. Either way, for them, Jesus was usurping a divine prerogative. According to levitical law, anyone who blasphemes is to be stoned to death (Lev 24:15-16); rabbinic law specified that blasphemy required that one pronounced “the Name itself” and that the offense was confirmed by witnesses (m. Sanhedrin 7.5). The scribes’ question, “Who?” advances one of the Gospel’s main themes by focusing on the issue of Jesus’ identity.

So, as the paralyzed man lay on the floor and the befuddled friends peered down through the hole in the roof, some of the religious authorities (in this case, some scribes) jumped on Jesus about his claim to be forgiving the man’s sins. Didn’t Jesus understand that he was claiming to exercise a power reserved to God?

Of course Jesus understood. He knew exactly what he was doing. But he also knew that anyone could utter the words, “Your sins are forgiven,” even if they were understood to be blasphemous. So, in order that everyone would see that he was not just saying the words but had been given the authority by God to forgive sins, Jesus told the paralytic to get up and walk. It had to be a delayed yet welcome relief for the man and his friends.

I wonder what was running through the once-paralyzed man’s head as he walked outside the house to meet up with his friends who had climbed down from the roof. Was he thinking about the fact that he was WALKING!? Was he thinking about what his friends had done for him? THROUGH THE ROOF! Was he thinking about the man he had just met? All he had wanted was to walk again but he had gotten far more than that. To what sort of life would he return? What sort of man was returning?

The thing about “going viral” is that no one can hope to contain or control it. Word just spreads. If people came in droves before the healing of the paralytic, imagine how they came after, if only to see this man who claimed the authority of God.

³ In their world, afflictions, such as paralysis were seen as God’s punishment for the committing of sins, adding to the burden carried by the injured and the disabled.

Eyewitnesses and the Gospel of Mark (*cont. from the page two textbox*)

Papias wrote a five-volume account of what Jesus said¹ and did in the early second-century, perhaps 110AD or so. In it, Papias speaks of an earlier time when he was busy collecting the oral reports of Jesus' life and work. This was about 80AD, roughly the time of the writing of Matthew and Luke, but perhaps 15 years or more after the writing of Mark's gospel.

Papias, who was personally acquainted with the prophesying daughters of Philip the evangelist (see Acts 8 & 21:8-9), wrote that he sought to hear "those who remember the commandments given by the Lord to the faith and proceeding from truth itself." As often as he could, Papias spoke with those who had learned directly from disciples who had since died. He also was able to speak directly with those who were learning from two of Jesus' disciples who were still living at the time: John the Elder (not the John of the gospels) and Aristion. Given the emphasis in the ancient world on the value of eyewitness accounts and perspectives, none of Papias' work is surprising. He is trying to get as close to the original disciples of Jesus as time and geography will allow him. Eusebius, the early church historian and no fan of Papias', even claims that Papias actually met with both John the Elder and Aristion.

The point of all this is that in the writings of these early Christians we can learn a great deal about the writing of the gospels. They knew the importance of getting things right. Like Luke, and as expected by the standards of the time, Papias sought to get as close to the actual eyewitnesses as he possibly could, for it is this eyewitness testimony that would be valued most highly by his readers. Papias valued "the living and surviving voice" over what he could find in books or other written materials." For the ancients, it was better to spend time with a teacher than to read it in a book.

Papias, like others of those early centuries, record that Mark was the interpreter of Peter. Papias asserts that Mark did a good job of writing down Peter's narratives about Jesus but not so good a job of turning them into a cohesive and artistic whole. Many scholars put the writing of Mark's gospel in the mid-60's AD and Richard Bauckham makes a strong case for Peter's participation in the writing of the gospel. Further, Bauckham suggests that this Mark is the "John Mark" of Acts and the "Mark" of Paul's letters, a prominent Christian in the early movement who was so well-known he didn't need any other identifier.

Thus, for Papias, Mark's approach is, as Bauckham puts it, "praiseworthy because he puts readers into direct touch with Peter's oral teaching" about Jesus. Mark's gospel is the unadorned presentation of stories about Jesus, lacking any long blocks of Jesus' teaching. It is an action-oriented gospel, perhaps reflecting Peter's own personality. You might even try hearing Peter's voice as you read today's story from Mark's gospel.

1. Regrettably, Papias' entire work hasn't survived the centuries. We have portions of it, some of which is quoted in the work of others.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Read the story from Mark closely. What is said or implied about the paralyzed man's faith?

Bear in mind that this man would be a bit of an outcast in the community, as the ancient Jews, along with all ancient peoples (and many still today), believed that such an affliction was brought on by something that the man had done wrong – i.e., the paralysis was like a billboard announcing "SINNER" to everyone who saw him.

2. What is said or implied about the friends' faith? What do you think motivated them to go to such lengths for their paralyzed friend?

3. How far would you go for an ill friend? How far would you go for a friend who is physically well but does not know Jesus?

- What would hold you back from introducing a friend to Jesus? Do you think that we go as far as we could?
- Is St. Andrew an inviting congregation? Passively (we're welcoming when they get here) or actively (we go out and invite them in)?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

There are five controversy stories packed into chapter 2 and the beginning of chapter 3.

Each story is brief, but consider what these stories are telling you about Jesus.

Monday, Mark 2:12 Jesus has the authority to forgive sins.	Tuesday, Mark 2:13-17 Jesus has the authority to eat with outcasts.
Wednesday, Mark 2:18-22 Jesus has the authority to dispense with fasting.	Thursday, Mark 2:23-28 Jesus has authority over the Sabbath.
Friday, Mark 3:1-5 Authority to do a good work on the Sabbath.	Weekly Joys and Concerns

