

The Gospel of Mark
Charlotte First Presbyterian Church – September 7, 2025

As the church spread throughout the Roman world and the first generation of Christians began to die, there was a concern to preserve the traditions about Jesus. The faithful wanted to present to a new generation the stories that had changed their lives. These followers of Jesus wanted those who were not eyewitnesses to see what the first disciples had seen. They wanted to preserve the truth of Jesus Christ amid all the wild stories, misunderstanding, and speculation about Jesus that must have been sprouting up like mushrooms after rain. Mark was the first we know to gather the stories and traditions of Jesus and shape them into the Gospel we have today.

Who was Mark? Some identify him with John Mark who is mentioned in Acts (12:12, 25; 13:5,13) and three of the Epistles. (He may have been the young man who slipped away naked when he was grabbed at the arrest Jesus. Why else would this peculiar detail be mentioned in Mark 14:51?) We do not know for certain the identity of the author nor with precision when the Gospel was written. Most scholars date the writing of Mark to a few years before the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 A.D. (See Mark chapter 13 which is called the “Little Apocalypse”). Some scholars date the composition of Mark to a period immediately after the destruction of the temple. We do know that he wrote for a largely Gentile church, in Rome or some other urban city outside of Judea.

Scholars have argued about how creative a role Mark played in shaping the gospel. Did Mark simply put on paper the stories and teachings of Jesus that he received adding only a few editorial comments and transitions? Or did Mark play a more creative role in shaping the traditions he received into a carefully constructed and complex narrative? Unless we discover the sources Mark had at his disposal, we will never know the answer to this question. For many centuries and among many communities of faith, Mark’s Gospel did not receive the attention or appreciation that the other Gospels have received. Mark’s breathless pace, rough edges, and somewhat ordinary and inelegant Greek hid its significance. As the first gospel to be written, Mark is a great literary accomplishment. It has been said that the appearance of the Gospels represented the development of a new genre of literature. The Gospels are not histories, biographies, myths, legends, or parables in any traditional sense. The Gospels witness to the meaning of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Gospels aim not so much to relate the history of Jesus as to make Jesus Christ present and to lead the listener/reader to faith and obedience. If the Gospel is history, it is “salvation history.” If the Gospel is biography, it is the story of the Risen Lord. If the Gospel is an extended parable, it is story of the transforming presence of God in human life and the life of the world.

Mary Ann Tolbert has noted in her commentary, *Sowing the Gospel*, that the Gospel bears some significant stylistic similarities to the ancient Greek or Roman popular novel. These works were written for popular culture. Five such novels exist in complete form, plus numerous fragments of other works. This insight into the genre of Mark’s Gospel will help us better discern the literary clues Mark gave his original audience to the meaning and significance of the story. We will look more closely at these ideas as the story develops.

In our day, there has been a renewed appreciation for the Gospel of Mark. The assumption among scholars that Mark was the first Gospel to be written explains some of this fresh interest. Recent literary studies of Mark’s Gospel have also awakened us to the power of the Gospel as a great, imaginative story. Mark is an artfully constructed and compelling witness to Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke are known as the synoptic Gospels. These three gospels see Jesus from the same or similar perspective (synoptic: together – eye). The Gospel of John sees the coming of Jesus from a vastly different perspective. In composing their Gospels, Matthew and Luke had an oral or written copy of Mark's Gospel and follow Mark's account of the journey of Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem. Matthew and Luke also share a written or oral source (Q) containing the sayings of Jesus. Also, Matthew and Luke add to their Gospels other stories, parables, birth narratives, traditions, and other materials remembered from their own communities.

The first words of Mark's Gospel tell us exactly what the Gospel is about by letting us in on the secret of the identity of Jesus: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God (1:1)." Jesus is the long-awaited Jewish Messiah who will bring God's deliverance to the people living under the oppressive rule of Rome. The story itself will reveal how Jesus lives out his role as the Messiah, the deliverer of Israel. Much of the dramatic tension of the story results from the clash between the messianic expectations of the people and Jesus' own understanding of his role as the Messiah.

Mark tells us that Jesus is also the Son of God. The full meaning of these words will not be disclosed until we hear them echo from the lips of a Roman centurion who witnesses the crucifixion of Jesus. As those who hear the story unfold, we are in a privileged position. We know from the beginning the true identity of Jesus. Most of the characters in the story do not know this truth; a few will grasp it at the end of the story. As we shall see, this truth flashes out from time to time in high moments such as Jesus' baptism, the transfiguration, and the entry into Jerusalem. The demons proclaim Jesus as the Son of God and the Jewish and Roman leaders proclaim it as a bitterly ironic question. Ordinary, unnamed people who are touched by the power of Jesus' preaching, teaching, and healing point us toward the truth. Most of the time, the Jewish leaders refuse to see and believe the truth of the identity of Jesus. Astonishingly, the disciples cannot see and understand the truth. At the very beginning Mark tells his listeners/ readers the secret of the identity of Jesus. This knowledge shapes how we hear and respond to the Gospel. Mark's opening words remind us that the Gospel is not so much an ancient history as it is an event made present through the power of story: "The Gospel (good news) of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." We tend to hear those words as the good news about Jesus Christ, as if we were reading biography of Winston Churchill that would recount his remarkable life. The Gospel is not a word about Jesus; the Gospel is Jesus. The Gospel is the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The good news is a person who lived in a particular time and place in history. As we shall see in the unfolding story, through the power of God this person lives in every time and place. Through the written word of the Gospel story we encounter the living Word, Jesus Christ.

The Gospel is not just an event that happened in history two thousand years ago. The Gospel happens today whenever you and I are brought into the presence of the living Word through our encounter with the written word. In each of the four Gospels we meet Jesus, the "good news" of God. We meet him not only as a past figure, but also as a present, risen Lord. The Gospels are "Gospel," that is, "good news," only in so far as they make Jesus present to us. By entering imaginatively into the Gospel of Mark, we are awakened to the presence of Jesus, not only in the Gospel story, but also in the stories of our lives today. The Gospel of Mark is a sign that points the way to encountering and knowing Jesus today.