

The Story of Mark

My name is John, though when I grew up people started calling me Mark. I am the son of Mary and Jacob, and have a younger sister Leah. My father was a Levite, working in the temple. He was much older than my mother and he died when I was about 10, but he had provided well for us and we had a house in Jerusalem and a small farm north of the city.

When I was twelve, mother took Leah and I to go hear the prophet John preaching at the Jordan river. What he said gripped the three of us and we were all baptized that day. We were expecting God's kingdom to come at any time. It would be wonderful.

Then we heard about Jesus. Our first news came through our family in Galilee. You see, my mother's oldest sister had married a man from Capernaum, a fisherman. They had several daughters and one had married a man named Peter. We heard that Jesus had called Peter and his brother Andrew to be his disciples and had then healed my aunt Rebecca from a deadly fever.

When Jesus came to Judea we went to hear him preach as well. Peter said John the baptizer had called Jesus the lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world. No one ever spoke like this Jesus.

Right after my bar mitzvah we heard that Jesus and his disciples were again down at the Jordan river. The disciples were baptizing those who believed in Jesus's message that the kingdom of God was near. Since I was now a man, I decided to join the lineup to get baptized in Jesus' name. I looked behind me and could see my mother and sister in the line for the women. When it was my turn I was baptized by Andrew, brother to my cousin's husband. I wanted to join the travellers with Jesus but then remembered that my duty was to my mother and sister now that I was of thirteen and of legal age.

Jesus and his disciples returned to Galilee and we kept in touch whenever family traveled. Because many came to Jerusalem for the festivals three times a year, and because there were several merchants among my mother's brothers, we heard about what Jesus was doing and saying quite often. I was sure that this man was the Messiah.

Then he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, a king of peace, and the whole city was in an uproar. He offended the priests and Saducees something fierce by throwing the merchants out of the temple. Then, he made them look like idiots every time they opened their mouths. A storm was brewing and even I could feel it.

It was Passover and mother made all the preparations in the room upstairs. Unless one of my mothers' brothers was in town I supposed I'd get to lead the meal this year. But then, when one of our servants returned from getting water for cooking, two men came up behind him. I recognized them immediately as men who had been with Jesus. Mother came to the door and they asked where the Passover preparations were for the Master. Mother showed them upstairs and I stood amazed - Jesus, eating the Passover in our house?

When Jesus came he looked as if he was carrying a very heavy burden. He and the twelve went up the stairs and settled into that room. Peter made sure mother and I and Leah were included. The was a child's role in Passover - to ask the question about why we celebrate at the proper time. Leah would have to do that this year. But as we entered the room upstairs we felt so out of place and shy that we excused ourselves and made our own Passover at the kitchen table with our servants.

The room upstairs felt so serious. Something was coming and everyone could feel it. When we were done they were still talking upstairs. I saw one of the disciples leave in a hurry looking

over his shoulder several times. Finally we could hear them singing a hymn and then they left, but not without Jesus and several of his disciples looking at mother and saying a sincere thanks. Jesus looked so noble and yet so sad. What was going on?

Mother and Leah and the servants were busy cleaning up so I followed behind the disciples for a bit. I heard someone mention Gethsemane. I knew where that was, but it was time for me to get back to the house. Mother was more than a bit peeved with me. Being of legal age didn't seem to matter to her. I was sent to my room and to bed. Sheesh, when would people ever treat me like a grown-up?

I couldn't sleep and my curiosity was boiling over inside. The garden at Gethsemane wasn't that far away. If I took back alleys I could get there without being seen. But mother had taken all my clothes to be washed. Well, I wrapped the sheet from my bed around me trying to look as much like a Roman toga as I could. Then I crept out of my window and through the back gate of our courtyard. I remembered to lock it behind me and hide the key.

The trip to Gethsemane went smooth as anything, and they were there all right. Jesus was over in a corner of the garden with Peter, James and John nearby. He looked like he was in agony. I watched for a while but everything was so still and the atmosphere seemed so heavy that I fell asleep.

All of a sudden I woke to shouts all around and a gang of temple guards and soldiers surrounding Jesus and James, John and Peter right in the midst of them. I moved to get a better look. Just then one of the temple guards at the edge of the group spotted me and tried to grab me. He got hold of my sheet, so I squirmed out of it and hightailed it home as quick as I could. Thankfully it was pitch black and I knew the alleys like the back of my hand or he might have caught me. I got home and scrambled into my room buck naked, only to find my mother and our housekeeper waiting for me.

She was ready to thrash me right there, bar mitzvah or no bar mitzvah, but then I covered up and told her what I'd seen and her face went white. We gathered all the servants and Leah in the room upstairs and began to pray.

The next morning it was all over the city. Pilate had sentenced Jesus to death and freed Barabas to the crowd. This was impossible, unbelievable. Mother left me in charge of the house and went out to Golgatha to lend what support she could. She came home at supper exhausted and with eyes red and swollen from crying. She told us what had happened and that Joseph of Arimathea had taken Jesus' body and put it in his tomb. Before the market closed at sundown, mother had purchased some burial spices and knew that Mary Magdalene and others had also made preparations.

That was the saddest Sabbath I have ever experienced. We walked around in a daze. Peter and Andrew stopped by for some food and a safe place to rest for a few hours, then they said they were going to find out where the others were.

The next morning mother went out to meet Mary Magdalene and the other women who had come with Jesus from Galilee and they were going to properly prepare Jesus' body for burial. Hours later mother burst through the door and shouted "He is risen" and it took us quite some time to get her coherent enough for us to get the story. Jesus tomb was empty and Mary Magdalene had seen him alive.

That afternoon Peter was at our door asking mother about something. He was only a few minutes and then he went away as if all Pilates soldiers were out looking for him. Mother had me prepare the room upstairs for a meal and about a dozen guests. And just after dark they began arriving in ones and twos, trying their best to look inconspicuous. We brought them a simple supper of bread and fish. We had served them and they were all talking in hushed tones as we were downstairs cleaning up when all of a sudden there was a shout and the sound of chairs scraping the floor and falling over.

We dashed up the stairs to see what was the matter and when we opened the door, there was Jesus. He'd just taken a bite of some of the fish we'd brought for supper. He looked at me and smiled and gave me a nod. Then he said he had a couple of things he wanted to say to his disciples in private. We got the hint and backed out, unable to close our gaping mouths.

Mother was nearly dancing by the time we got downstairs. I was ecstatic, feeling like this was too good to be true. Was I dreaming? Nope, Leah whacked me on the side of the head for stepping on her new shawl, and I knew I was awake. Wow!

The next days were a blur, and the next Sunday we hosted the disciples again, together with a few others of those who had travelled with Jesus. We served supper again, and that night ate with the whole group. And suddenly, there in the middle of the room, was Jesus. We were all on our knees in a flash, but Jesus looked around for Thomas, and extended his hand to him saying, Thomas, check it out, there are holes in my feet and hands and a wound in my side. Go ahead, touch them, and quit being such a doubter.

The next weeks were a blur of activity. We traveled north to Galilee with those who had travelled to Jerusalem with Jesus. It was an incredible time. Everyone was so overjoyed that it was hard to take anything seriously. We all gathered at the mountain Jesus had mentioned and he appeared to us all, blessed us and went up to heaven in the clouds.

He had told Peter and the other ten to go to Jerusalem and wait for what he promised them. So we went back home and this time Peter and cousin Lydia and her mother came to stay at our house. Just before Pentecost another of mother's relatives, my cousin Barnabas, came to visit from Cyprus. He had made the journey for the feast.

He heard all the news about Jesus with joy and asked many questions of Peter and Andrew. The day of Pentecost about about a hundred and twenty of us gathered at Nicodemus' house for prayer. Barnabas has sworn allegiance to Jesus by this time and was there with us. In the midst of our prayers, there was the sound of a cyclone roaring above the house and I looked around and little flames were dancing on everyone's head. All at once my chest filled and I sang out in praise to God, but I was singing in a language I didn't know!

Well, Peter preached and thousands believed and were baptized that day. Our excitement knew no bounds. We would gather for prayer in the temple and Peter and the other apostles did miracle after miracle. More and more people were committing themselves to Jesus. Even when the Jewish Council tried to silence Peter and John, God delivered them and those who followed the Jesus Way grew in numbers.

One day brother Stephen was falsely accused and tried for blasphemy against Moses and God. As the trial went on he began to preach with such power that all were moved. Then he declared that he saw Jesus at God's right hand and the council mobbed him, took him to the wall of the city, threw him down and stoned him.

From that time on the Chief Priests were out to destroy the Christians and the leader of the attack was a man named Saul. Mother, Leah and I left the house in the care of the manager of our farm and travelled to Capernaum to stay with aunt Rebecca, Peter's mother-in-law. We were there for a number of months.

Then, miraculously we heard that Saul was preaching the Way of Jesus he had tried to obliterate. My cousin Barnabas was the one who introduced him to the apostles in Jerusalem. When we heard that we made plans to return to Jerusalem. On the way home we heard that Peter had preached the Way of Jesus to the Gentiles and they had received the Holy Spirit too.

Shortly after we returned to Jerusalem, Barnabas and Saul returned from Antioch with a gift from the Gentile believers there. They had been told a famine was coming and wanted the church in Jerusalem to have the resources we would need. While they were with us, Herod arrested James, the brother of John and had him beheaded. Then he went after Peter and had him arrested too. He was plotting the same end for Peter as James had experienced. The believers met at our house to pray.

As we were petitioning God through the night there was a knock at the gate to the courtyard and Rhoda went out to see who it was. She came upstairs in a flurry saying Peter was at the gate. Everyone thought she was hallucinating or had gone nuts. The knocking continued so several of us went down and opened the gate and there stood Peter. Everyone started talking at once but Peter motioned for all of us to shut up and soon we were all listening expectantly.

He told us how God has rescued him from the prison and told us to tell James, Jesus' brother and the rest of the believers. Then he left and made himself scarce. It wasn't long into the morning that Herod's soldiers were at the gate, knocking as if to break it down. They searched the house and coming up empty-handed left us alone. Good thing they were in a hurry or who knows what they would have done.

Saul and Barnabas were anxious to return to Antioch and continue their ministry there. Barnabas came by one day and invited me to come along. At first I was hesitant, I didn't know how mother and Leah would fare without me there. But mother said she had almost finished the marriage arrangements for Leah and that she would be find depending on the Lord. She told me to do the Lord's will first before anything.

So with anticipation and some fear I travelled with Saul and Barnabas to Antioch. While we were travelling Saul, whose other name was Paul, taught me much about the Way of Jesus. Barnabas was an incredible encourager but Paul was clearly the teacher. Both were men of prayer and I just soaked it all up.

I was the errand-boy for both of them and tried to do my share any way I could. They didn't waste any time on the way north and would often spend a day praying and fasting as we walked. I was famished most of the time.

After we had settled in at Antioch, things began to fall into some sort of routine. Barnabas and Paul would meet with the other leaders of the church to pray, Paul would spend a good part of the day preaching and teaching while Barnabas and I went round to the homes of believers to encourage and see what people needed. In the evening we would meet for prayer and then hit the sack. It was like that for many days.

Then Barnabas came back from a prayer meeting almost glowing. It seems the group had appointed him and Paul to go travelling to bring the Good News of Jesus to new places and peoples. Barnabas wanted me to go along. Well, I felt a lot more comfortable with my cousin than here in a strange city, so I agreed readily.

We got packed up and sailed to the island of Cyprus. It was my first sea voyage and I didn't do so well. We arrived at Salamis, a city near Barnabas' farm where he had a house. We stayed there a number of days, teaching in all the synagogues of the city. We had many incredible experiences on Cyprus and many came to believe and follow the Way including the proconsul of the island. Then we sailed for Perge in Pamphylia. I did better this time on the water, but I was getting worried about my mother and Leah. Would she get married while I was gone? Was I shirking my duties to my mother? These things kept nagging me even when we landed in Perge.

I talked it over with Barnabas and then we went to see Paul. He was none too impressed. I felt awful, but I just couldn't go on not knowing about mother and Leah. Barnabas gave me the money for my trip home, sailing from Perge to Caesarea. The third trip by boat wasn't too bad and I arrived none the worse for wear even though it was twice as long as the one before.

I travelled from Caesarea to Jerusalem with a group of merchants heading that way, one of whom had known my father. I was overjoyed to see mother and Leah again. Leah was getting to be quite the young lady.

That was spring and Leah's wedding was in the fall. There was much rejoicing. James, the Lord's brother, was the leader of the church in Jerusalem and most of the apostles had scattered to share the Good News. Thankfully about the middle of the winter Peter came back to Jerusalem and stayed with us. I had an insatiable appetite for the stories about Jesus and all that he taught. Peter never got tired of telling them. Just when I thought I had all of them memorized word for word Peter would come up with another one and I was just as thrilled as with the first story he told.

Then we had word that Paul and Barnabas were coming back to Jerusalem for a meeting with the Apostles, James, and the leaders of the church in Jerusalem. The big question was whether the Gentiles had to be circumcised to share in the worship of the Messiah. People were divided on the issue and it looked to be a huge debate. At the big meeting everyone had a say and then Peter stood up and spoke about the day God led him to share the Gospel with the Gentiles. He declared that they had been saved by grace, just like they, the Jews, had been and that the burden of the law should not be placed on them. Then Paul and Barnabas shared all that God had done through them and people were amazed. Finally James spoke up and settled the matter - no circumcision needed. They wrote a letter confirming their decision to the church in Antioch and all the other Gentile churches.

When it came time for them to deliver the letter the leaders in Jerusalem sent a delegation with them which included me. During the two years back in Jerusalem I had been working on the farm learning all the jobs so that, hopefully, one day I could manage the place. I wasn't the scrawny kid that went with Barnabas and Paul before. I was so excited to see my friends in Antioch again. We stayed there for some time before the church sent the delegation home to Jerusalem with their blessing.

But I didn't go. I felt God was calling me to stay here, why I didn't know, but I had learned to listen when I was directed that way. So I stayed behind and sent a letter to mother and Leah with those who were returning. I continued to minister with Barnabas to the poor among us and teach the children the way of the Lord. Barnabas was always encouraging someone to use their gifts for Jesus. He could see what potential people had and had a way of moving them to engage in ministry for Jesus. He certainly had done that for me.

Then Barnabas came and told me that he and Paul were planning another trip to visit the churches they had started. He wanted me to travel with them. I was thrilled to have a second chance. But there was considerable resistance from Paul. In the end, Barnabas felt so strongly about including me that he split with Paul, took me and went to Cyprus to encourage the believers there.

I learned so much from Barnabas. His kindness, his way of encouraging others and his generosity of spirit was inspiring. I tried my best to imitate him and walk in full obedience to Jesus. It turned out that I was a bit of a story-teller, and so Barnabas was the lead teacher and I told the stories I had learned from Peter. We stayed on the island many months and then took a boat to Caesarea on our way to Jerusalem. In Caesarea we stayed at the house of Cornelius, the first Gentile to follow the Way of Jesus. He spoke of his first encounter with Peter and the visits they had had since then.

In Jerusalem I renewed my friendship with Peter. Barnabas had his eye on another young disciple to mentor and I was happy, knowing how much I had received from his encouragement and care. As I was waiting on the Lord for direction Peter talked with me and invited me to accompany him and his wife on their next journey. They were going to sail to Ephesus, visit the churches in that area, and then travel up the coast the Troas and then

Bithynia and Pontus along the Euxine Sea of that country - I think you know it as the Black Sea.

We travelled in that area for some time, establishing churches all the way to Odessa in the east. Then we returned to Jerusalem. I travelled with Peter two more times and also spent some time writing down Peter's memories of Jesus.

About 15 years after that first missionary journey with Paul and Barnabas I heard that Paul was in prison in Caesarea Philippi. He had been there for about a year and he asked for Peter to come visit him. His closest associates, Timothy and Titus, were both off delivering letters to some of the churches. We went to see him and spent some time there encouraging him in the Lord. Afterwards, when Peter and his wife were going to go to Rome, I stayed with Paul a while longer.

I went to Antioch again and was encouraged by the vibrancy of the church there. Eventually I went to encourage some of the churches in the places Peter and I went on our first trip. After a while I made my way back to Ephesus and found Timothy in charge there. Paul had sent him there to deal with a situation while in prison in Rome again. Then Timothy got a letter from Paul asking him to come and to bring me with him. Paul sounded quite lonely.

We found a ship going over to Corinth, took the overland rode to Cenchræ, and sailed across to Italy. It took us a while to get to the city and then we had another hassle just getting in to see him. But he seemed encouraged by our coming. He's the one who urged me to put my written stories from Peter into a book.

I stayed in Rome for some time doing just that and sharing the good news with all who would listen. Then Peter came to the capital as well and the believers there were tremendously encouraged. I was with Peter when he wrote back to the churches we had visited those years before.

But as the church grew it attracted the attention of the authorities who were committed to the old gods of Rome. The Emperor Nero seemed to be getting more and more erratic. In 64 there was this huge fire in Rome, and Nero blamed the Christians for setting the fire. Many of the Christians went into hiding. They arrested Peter, tried Paul and beheaded him, and then crucified Peter upside down in spite. Many of us fled Rome and sought safety in other parts of the empire.

With their deaths I was all the more determined to ensure the stories Peter had told about the Lord were preserved and would draw many others to the Way of Jesus. So I compiled them into a book and had copes made by brothers who were scribes.

I was so glad Barnabas had a vision for seeing potential leaders and even giving them a second chance to prove themselves. It wasn't just me that benefitted from that, I hoped many others would as well through the book I wrote.