

Lesson 8—In Your Own Country (Mark 6:1-30)

Following in the Way: A Study of Mark's Gospel • Robert G. Taylor

Going Home Again

We're in Mark chapter six today. We've been moving through the Gospel of Mark, and I want to ask you a question. When you go back to where you grew up, what do people still know about you that stopped being true years ago?

This is kind of a personal idea for me, because I grew up at Waterview and graduated high school here, went off to college and then off to ministry for twenty-five years, and came back. The problem with that is there are people who say, "Well, I remember when you were in high school." That can be a cringy concept. Or, "You weren't as outgoing as you are now." That's because I was younger and just going around with my friends. But things change when you go back home. What you were is not who you are now. As the poet said, you can never go home again, and there's a lot of truth to that.

Jesus is going to go back home today. The simple idea we're going to look at is the conundrum of faith: why doesn't everybody believe? Why doesn't everybody follow Jesus?

The Conundrum of Faith

We think believing ought to be the right thing. It happened for us, and it seems so simple. I knew a guy one time who said, "I don't understand why people just don't get it. They've got a Bible; they can read it." In fact, that was his evangelism program for the church: give them a Bible, they can read it, and they can do what they need to do. I don't know—that's pretty naive. If you ask people who read the Bible whether they understand it, do they? Do we always understand it?

Here's our difficulty. If you're raised in the church like I was, you didn't have to consider a lot of things. It was fed to you, you accepted it, and it was part of your upbringing. So we assume that's the way it is for most other people as well, and we struggle with why so many people seem resistant or just don't care. There are a couple of answers, and we'll look at them quickly.

First: Not Everybody Is Able

First of all, not everybody is able to believe, because some people don't know enough. After all, Paul said, "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." You have to hear something in order to believe it and follow it, and there are a lot of people in our world today who don't have a knowledge of a lot of things.

When I started in ministry fifty years ago, there was a premise we all used in the Church of Christ, and it shaped most of our evangelism programs: people already own a Bible, they've read it, they believe in God, and they kind of believe in Jesus. So all we've got to do is fill in their gaps. In the last forty years, that has swapped completely. I've studied with people who have no earthly idea what the Bible is, what it says, or what's in it. I studied with a guy one time whose family had never owned a Bible and had never gone to a church. You don't start with the Gospel of Mark when that happens. You have to go a long way back. A lot of times it isn't that people can't believe; they're just not able to yet. They haven't gotten there on their journey.

Second: Not Everybody Wants To

The second answer is that not all want to, either. We want people to believe so badly we'll do almost anything. It's easy to say, "If they're not going to believe, I'll just hit them harder. I'll be like a jackhammer. I'm going to push and push and push, and one day I'm going to crack through that, and you're going to believe." That happens a lot. We resort to manipulative tactics, we try harder, and they get more resistant.

I've known preachers who did weird things. If enough people don't come down the aisle during the invitation, they'll sing six verses of "Just As I Am," and then stop and tell a dumb, emotional, manipulative story, and say, "Let's sing six more verses." If they didn't come down in the first six, what's the second six going to do? I don't understand it, but that's how we do things. We are so insistent that people believe that we will force them to, whether they like it or not.

There's an old saying that you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink. My corollary is that you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink—and you can't feed him potato chips. We tend to stop when they won't drink and kick the horse and say, "Drink!" You have to make him thirsty.

What Isaiah Heard

Jesus has quoted a passage out of Isaiah before, when he explained why he taught in parables. There are some people who can hear and some who

won't or can't, so he cloaked it in a parable—a nice story that, if you wanted to know more, he would tell you more. It comes out of the book of Isaiah, when Isaiah receives his call. I love this. God calls him to be a prophet, and the first thing he says is, “I want you to go, but nobody’s going to listen to you.” That’s very motivational, by the way. If you hire a preacher and say, “Well, good luck here, because nobody listens,” that’s not usually a good employment tool.

But that’s what God tells him: go and tell this people. They can hear all these things but never understand them; they can see, but they won’t perceive, because their hearts are calloused, their ears are dull, and their eyes are closed. If they opened their eyes, listened with their ears, and understood with their hearts, they would turn and be healed. There are all kinds of things that get in the way of doing what God wants you to do, and we’re going to explore some of those today.

The Mark 6 Sandwich

Mark 6:1–30, our lesson today, is what I call a sandwich passage. A sandwich is two pieces of bread with something stuck in the middle. The top layer is Jesus going to Nazareth, and they make a response. The bottom layer is Herod Antipas, and he too makes a response. In the middle are the disciples, and they make a different response. Nazareth and Herod make very similar ones; the disciples make a different one. We’re going to look at the sandwich in its layers.

Layer One: Nazareth

Nazareth is a little town, almost just a hamlet, southwest of the Sea of Galilee. It’s where Joseph and Mary went after they came out of Egypt. They were warned by the angel about Herod the Great, and because his son Archelaus took the throne—who was even worse than his father—they decided they wouldn’t go back to anywhere around Jerusalem. So they went to Nazareth.

Nazareth doesn’t have the greatest reputation in the world. In John chapter one, when Nathanael is told, “We have found the Messiah; he is Jesus of Nazareth,” he replies, “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” Translation: out of that little backwater town, nobody does anything good. That’s what everybody thought. It’s not the big city; it’s not important. Nazareth is where Jesus grows up.

To give you a way of looking at this, Mark starts us at Capernaum, on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. Then he goes across the sea to the region of the Gadarenes, where Jesus casts out the legion of demons and sets the

man right. He meets Jairus, who needs his daughter healed. Then we come to Nazareth, southwest of the Sea of Galilee. It's off the beaten track; it's not on the main road.

I always like going through Texas. You go through these itty-bitty little towns, and outside every one there's a sign that says "Church of Christ, six blocks this way." The sign has been faded by time, rusted by the rain, and it's totally unreadable, and somebody thinks that's going to bring people in. But they're off the main road, and nobody's paying attention. That was Nazareth.

In the Synagogue

Mark says Jesus went to his hometown with his disciples, and on the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed. They excavated Nazareth several years ago and found a synagogue site, probably built on top of the site where the synagogue stood when Jesus was here. The long main hall is where they would meet, and they had anterooms on the side.

The synagogue procedure was interesting, because they did two important things. Number one, they read Scripture. They read through the Old Testament every three years. Then they had a period of time that would scare me to death if I were in charge of that synagogue, what I call open-mic night: anybody want to say anything? Boy, is that a dangerous question. Every kook in town wants to talk. Paul used it very effectively—he raised his hand and preached sermons. Jesus did the same thing. They come to the end of the reading, and he's invited to say something. He's probably speaking on the passage of the day, which, from what we hear from the other Gospel writers, came out of Isaiah. He talks about how he is the fulfillment of that Scripture.

They were amazed. "Where does he get these things? He didn't get them here." That's what they're saying. "What is this wisdom, and what are these remarkable miracles he's been performing?" Notice they were surprised and curious. Jesus makes sense where other people don't. He doesn't speak with footnotes, which is what the rabbis did—they were laden with quotations. Jesus explains what the word of God is, very clearly.

What They Noticed: Wisdom and Miracles

They noticed two things. First, his wisdom. He could use what God was saying in a way they had never been able to understand before. Wisdom is practical. It's illuminating. It's a useful skill. He's telling them something they can use. Woe be the preacher who tells people things they don't need. I

hear sermons, more often than I used to, that I call TBU—true but useless. “Okay, I agree with you, but what am I supposed to do with it?” That’s what they were always used to hearing. Jesus gave wisdom.

Second, they noticed the miracles. He didn’t do much in Nazareth, but they had heard about Capernaum and the demons cast out there. They had heard about the demoniac across the sea in the Gadarenes, and how that man changed. They had learned about Jairus’s daughter, who had been raised. That kind of news spreads fast.

Amazed, but Offended

If they were amazed at his wisdom and his miracles, you would assume they were on the right track to believing he’s the Son of God. After all, they had known him all their lives, and that should have sealed the deal. The only problem is it didn’t. Their response was, “Isn’t this the carpenter? Isn’t this Mary’s son and the brother of James and Joseph and Judas and Simon? Aren’t his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him. He’s just like us, nothing different. We know his family. He’s very ordinary. We knew him when he was a little boy, we knew him as a carpenter, and now he’s trying to tell us this. Familiarity breeds contempt.

There’s another piece to it. Priests could not assume their duties until they were thirty, and Jesus is just now thirty years old. We might put it this way: he’s still wet behind the ears. Let him get older, and we’ll figure this out. Let me give you a practical idea from the church, because I faced it all my ministry. When you’re in your twenties and thirties, you’re not old enough or smart enough. When you’re in your forties and fifties, you’re probably pretty well settled. But when you get to your mid-fifties and sixties, you’re worthless because you’re not young enough. When you’re young, you’re too young; when you’re old, you’re not young, and therefore you can’t be good for anything. That’s a human perspective. But think about it: “We know him. This is who we know.”

It says they took offense at him. The English word “scandal” comes out of that word. It’s a net that catches a rabbit so the rabbit can’t get free. They believed Jesus could not be who he said he is because they knew who he was, not who he is. They were stuck with a preconceived notion, and so they would not let in anything that needed to come in. It’s like a filter. They couldn’t get over the ordinary. A lot of people have preconceived notions about what life should be, what religion should be, what the church should be, and once you get caught in that notion, you can’t get out of it either.

What’s interesting is that later on, his brothers would believe. Luke tells us in the book of Acts, after the resurrection, that his brothers believed, and

two of them write books in the New Testament. It's an amazing idea. But as long as that barrier was there, they weren't going to listen to anything. The problem was not what Jesus did; they couldn't see it. They knew what he did, but they couldn't see the miraculous. And that gives us a key idea: people can see the truth and not accept it. There's always that moment where people say, "I got it, but I don't want to do it."

Lest we blame everybody else, we do the same thing. We have our own prejudices, where we don't want to see. People can perceive the truth and not accept it.

"He Could Not Do Any Miracles There"

He uses that proverb: a prophet is not without honor except in his own country. You can do great things away from home, but you can't do anything here because they know you too well. Then Mark says he could not do any miracles there. What do you think it means that he could not?

It goes on to say he healed a few sick people. That's pretty miraculous. But I don't think "could not" means he lacked the power. It means that whatever he did was going to be discounted as nothing, a trick. They had already made up their minds about who he was, so anything he did to prove his identity, they were going to answer with, "I don't believe it." There are people who do that.

And people judge on appearances. Jesus didn't come from a well-to-do family; he was plain. He didn't look like that guy in *The Chosen*, I'm shocked to say. He couldn't do any miracles there because they couldn't see any miracles, and there's no point in doing miracles if people aren't going to pay attention. So he just quit. What's the point?

The second key idea is this: when people are resistant, nothing you do, nothing you show them or say to them, will change them until they do. Here's where our problem comes. We think we can make people change. We think that if we try harder and bear down more, we can make this thing happen.

You Can't Make People Change

Forty-plus years ago there was a guy running around our fellowship teaching evangelism classes. He developed a method, and I won't tell you who it was or what the method was, because you might be offended. But he developed a system where you come to the end of the Bible study, and they're getting resistant—that's true about almost every Bible study, by the way. So he got everybody real quiet in the room, and then he softly sang an

invitation song in a living room. I'm thinking, what you're doing is twisting the screws. You're using the pressure of the moment.

People have to do the changing. You can plant a seed and go off and leave it, and ten years later something will happen. But stop with planting the seed. Stop trying to pound it into them.

That's what was happening here. Jesus was amazed at their lack of faith. He shook his head: "I can go over to the Gadarenes, and a demoniac believes, and my own folks won't." Notice what he didn't do. He didn't go in and upbraid them. He didn't condemn them to hell. He didn't get up and wag his finger and say, "You folks are all going to hell for this." He was just amazed, because he didn't bulldoze people into believing.

We're in a society today, in Christendom in that broad category, where many people believe we need to force people to hear it and believe it and accept it, whether they like it or not. God doesn't worry about statistics. Like I told you last week, or the week before, he doesn't have an attendance board on the wall. He doesn't care. That's not the point. His timing is not ours, which is five lessons and a baptism—that's what ours is.

The one thing is that Jesus didn't force anybody. He didn't force us to believe. Can you imagine what happens if you're forced to believe something? How does that work out for you? I had a friend of mine—we were good friends up until this moment, when all of a sudden he got involved in a multi-level marketing situation. If you know what that's like, you sell, but then you recruit ten other people, and they sell for you and recruit ten other people, and you end up getting the profits. It's kind of a Ponzi scheme. I remember him calling me and asking, "Could we come over and visit with you?" Sure. We were young and married, and they had just gotten married too. So they came over and sat on the couch, and all of a sudden he started into this spiel. "You really need to do this. You really need to get into this because..." He started really pushing on me, and the more he pushed, the more I pushed back, to the point that we really didn't see each other much anymore. That's what happens when you start bulldozing faith. You lose your effectiveness.

So instead of getting angry and forcing people, Jesus moves on. It says he went around teaching from village to village. He didn't change his ministry; he just changed the address. "If you don't listen, I'll go someplace else." That's a good idea.

Layer Two: Herod Antipas

Herod Antipas is an interesting figure in the New Testament for many reasons. He is one of the sons of Herod the Great, who built the great

Temple in Jerusalem but was also the one who massacred the children at the time Jesus was born. When Herod the Great died, he parceled up his kingdom, and his four sons took over the pieces. Antipas was the tetrarch of Galilee.

He has some interesting problems. He's got his ear to the ground, trying to keep up with trends: are there any rivals coming up on the horizon that I need to get rid of? Politicians think about problems, not opportunities. People were talking about Jesus and making guesses about who he was. Some said, "That's John the Baptist come back to life." (As far as I know, John didn't do any miracles, but they figured that's why Jesus could—he'd been resurrected.) Others said he's Elijah, or a prophet like one of the prophets long ago, like Jeremiah or Isaiah. Herod was listening to all of this and having to figure out who he thought Jesus was.

There's a good question buried in there: Who is he? When we get to chapter eight, that gets answered. But that's the question being raised. Herod noticed the miracles. Remember, we think that if people saw miracles, they'd believe. Herod sees the miracles, and he knows what they are. But he's also driven by a guilty conscience.

A Guilty Conscience

Here's his problem. He had a wife, and Herodias was married to his brother Philip. He had a passionate affair with her, dumped his wife, she dumped Philip, and they married each other. It wasn't because they were soulmates. I've known people who committed adultery and said, "Oh, we just fell in love." Let's drop the nonsense. This was a marriage of politics. Both were ambitious, and both were going to use each other to get what they wanted.

John had a moral sense. When you see somebody in power doing the wrong thing, you are obligated, according to John, to condemn it in no uncertain terms. So John preached against Herod. But Herod had a strange relationship with John. He feared him, because the people followed him, and so he protected him. He didn't like what John said, but he knew John was right; he knew he was a righteous man. Mark says he was puzzled when he listened, but he liked to hear it. He needed to hear it.

So when he heard about Jesus, he decided John had come back to life, and he transferred what he had done with John to Jesus. That looks great on paper, but here's the problem: he executed John the Baptist after a drunken orgy in his palace, when his stepdaughter asked her mother what she should ask for, and the answer was the head of John the Baptist. Herod ruefully had to carry it out to save face.

Curious Is Not the Same as Committed

Herod is curious, but understand that curiosity and interest do not guarantee following. We want to gauge interest: “Oh, they seem very, very interested.” I’ve learned to be a bit more jaded about that idea. I’ve studied with enough people that when you get to the end and start talking about commitment, they back off right then. I’ve heard it several times: “Oh, I’m sorry, I just wanted to study the Bible. I find it fascinating.” Yeah, I know, but what are you going to do with it?

There are people I’ve studied with who go all the way through and know exactly what they need to do. They’ll tell you they don’t want to do it because their family is going to react. They have other problems, too. Just because someone is interested doesn’t mean they’re going to take the next step. That’s what is happening with Herod. He likes to listen to it. He’s fascinated by it. But he doesn’t want to do any of it. The world is filled with people like that.

The Middle of the Sandwich: The Twelve

In the middle of this is a different response, and that’s the disciples. Jesus calls the Twelve to him and sends them out two by two, and gives them authority over impure spirits. He gives them two things.

First, mutual support. He never sends anybody out alone. You always need mutual support, because if you don’t have it, you’ll burn out quickly. You need someone who, when you feel bad, will get you back up, and when they feel bad, you’ll get them back up. Two by two is what Jesus sent them out—a great pattern for us today.

Second, he gave them power for the task. “I’ll give you authority over the impure spirits.” That’s fascinating. All of a sudden you can do things you didn’t do before. Jesus invests authority in them. But the power he gave is bestowed; it doesn’t belong to them. They have only the power of Jesus that he has given. They are stewards, not owners. That’s going to be a problem when we get to Mark chapter nine, when all of a sudden it doesn’t work when it used to work, and the reason is some other things going on in their lives. But here he says, “I’m going to give you this power so you can use it to show people this message is valid.”

Travel Light

Then he gives them instructions, and these instructions kind of bother me. Don’t take anything with you. Don’t get weighed down by the things of the world. Don’t feel like you need to hold on to things you’ve always had. One of our big problems is that we tend to hold on to our ideas and our ways

when we need to jettison them. He says, "Don't hang on to all that stuff." When you get to a house, stay there. Don't look for something better. Be content with what you have.

And when a place rejects you, you shake the dust off your feet. I think there's a literal part to that: they're supposed to go outside that town and stomp their feet so the dust comes off. It says, "I don't have anything to do with you guys anymore. I'm going to leave this town behind me, every last speck of dust." I think there's another reason, too. When the message is rejected, it is easy to feel rejected, and that can bother people. If you knock the dust off your feet, you're saying, "I'm leaving it all here, and I don't have to do anything else with it."

And so they went out and drove out demons, anointed the sick with oil, and healed them. Then they came back and reported what they had done and taught. Here are men who, whatever they may have thought before, are now going and actively promoting the message, not just listening to it. They have heard, they have believed, they have moved, and they have acted. That's what belief is. You can be curious, you can be courageous, but this is what drives you.

Not all believe, and when they won't, move on. That may be the hardest thing to hear. "Well, shouldn't we try harder? Have you tried all you can?" Yeah. Move on. It won't do any good.

Where Do You Find Yourself?

When you put all this together, this is what happened at Nazareth: they were amazed but offended. So the question for us is, what about Jesus? Is he just too ordinary, or too close, or too demanding for us sometimes? Where are our blind spots, where we want things to happen the way we want them to, lined up the way our minds construct them?

Or Herod: interested but unchanged. What do we enjoy hearing without doing? You can read the Bible and not do any of it.

The third thing is the Twelve. They were sent, and they were dependent. So where is he sending you? And what are you holding on to that you need to leave behind?

You find yourself in this passage somewhere, because there are three stances toward Jesus. First, you can admire him but stand against him. A lot of people say, "Wow, that's fabulous! Jesus was a great teacher, a great moral teacher. What he had to say was so helpful." But they won't follow him. They repel him, even though they believe what they believe. Second, there's a whole group who are curious but will always keep him at arm's

length. “It’s interesting, but I’m really not interested.” You can be interested and not interested at the same time. “I like what I hear; I don’t want to do it.” There are a lot of people like that. And finally, there are people who have faith, and they stand with Jesus no matter where they go.

The question for each one of us is: which one are we? Next week we’ll move on in the Gospel of Mark. Thank you very much.

Notes on This Transcript

- Only Robert’s words are kept. Comments and questions from class members were removed; where Robert answered one, his answer was restated so it stands alone (the age-thirty question, the “could not do miracles” discussion, the horse-to-water saying, and the remark about God and statistics).
- Transcription fixes from context: “Herod Aschalus” → Archelaus; “Nathaniel” → Nathanael; “tetrarch of Galileo” → Galilee; “gatherings” → Gadarenes; “English word is scandal comes out of that word” tidied (the Greek is skandalizo, “they took offense”).
- Garbled in the audio and best guesses here: the invitation-song story (“stop psalmier and tell a dumb story”); “he was made healed. It doesn’t say he was ancient” (rendered as the demoniac believing while his own folks would not); the line about “hiring tool” is rendered “employment tool”; the opening few seconds of the recording are unintelligible and were omitted.
- Please check: “Waterview” (kept as spoken; confirm spelling and place).
- Please check: “drunken orgy” for Herod’s birthday banquet (Mark 6:21-28 says banquet); kept as Robert said it.
- Please check: Herodias’s first husband. Mark 6:17 calls him Philip; Josephus names him Herod (sometimes called Herod II). Kept as Robert said it.
- Please check: the claim that priests (and by extension teachers) could not serve until thirty. Numbers 4 sets thirty for Levite service; Luke 3:23 says Jesus was about thirty. The rabbinic “teacher at thirty” idea is traditional, not a Scripture requirement.
- Please check: “you can never go home again” is from Thomas Wolfe’s novel title; Robert said only “the poet.”
- Please check: Luke’s mention of Jesus’ brothers believing (Acts 1:14) and the two brothers who wrote New Testament books (James and Jude).
- Please check: Isaiah’s call (Isaiah 6:9-10), which Jesus quoted earlier in Mark 4:12.