

## **The Madness of Faith: *Mark 5:1-20***

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Plymouth Park, Good News, October 28, 2007

This is a good story for the Sunday before Halloween. I promise I did not plan this, it just happened this way. Our story this morning sounds like a page from a Steven King novel or a scene from the latest thriller movie. Jesus and his disciples have just weathered a deathly storm. Now they are on the other side of the sea, a foreign land with fears unknown, and their welcoming party is a demon-possessed man howling at the tops of his lungs, bruising and cutting himself.

For years, the people of Gerasa had gone to sleep at night hearing his moans in the distance. Every so often, some brave soul would attempt to sneak into the graveyard at night to bind this man in chains. Some chickened out the moment they looked into the man's dark, hollow eyes. Others were able to bind him, but the chains only lasted a few short moments. Summoning up demonic strength, the man would wrench the chains in two, like he was breaking a chain made of paper, not of metal.

The people of Gerasa lived in fear. Hearing him in the distance, they never knew when he might leave the graveyard and come into town. Were their daughters and sons safe from this mad man? Could they afford to keep their homes unlocked? Town guards kept post every night, making sure the mad man never came near.

Some may wonder why they didn't just kill him? Perhaps they tried a time or two, but failed. His demonic strength may have made him invincible. Maybe he had killed first those who set out to kill him. For some, I think, they didn't kill him because they knew him. They knew who he was before the demons took over. They were his neighbors and friends and family. They grew up with him, remembered him running through the streets as a child, filled with child-like excitement and wonder. They knew what we do not know: his name. Maybe it was Thomas, or Julius, or Alexander.

But for so many people, he was no longer that sweet boy who grew up in Gerasa. He was the howl that haunted their dreams, the terrifying monster that kept them in at night. He was no longer who he once was, no longer a man—he was now infested by demons, renamed by the demons called Legion.

What could you do with someone like Legion? All they could hope to do was keep him in the graveyard, while they stayed out. They couldn't overcome their fears, but they did their best to contain them. Had there been maximum-security prisons in Gerasa, they would have locked him up. But there wasn't, so they did the best they could do, keeping their fears at bay, they locked out the thing that terrified their souls.

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We've become good at hiding from the things that we fear. We lock ourselves inside our homes and gated communities, keeping far away from those terrifying things that wait for us out there. Whenever possible, we will lock up those whom we fear. Our prisons are overcrowded, filled with terrifying people. When we hear of prisons releasing even the smallest of offenders, we cringe. We don't want those kinds of people loose on our streets. You never know what they might do.

Watch the evening news and you can pick from a variety of things to fear. School shootings. Burglaries. Prowlers. Terrorists. Bombs. Anthrax. Disease-carrying mosquitoes. Poisoned Halloween candy. Bird Flu. Toys covered with lead paint. And there's a new fear coming out every day.

We drive through certain parts of the neighborhood and our car doors are immediately locked, our eyes locked forward, fearing those walking on the street. We see certain kinds of people on the airplane with us, and we ask the flight attendant to have them removed, fearing they could be terrorists.

We are a world gone mad with fear.

And in the midst of our madness, Jesus shows up. What are the chances that Jesus and his disciples would land their boat right at this graveyard? Surely there were plenty of other places they could have docked their storm-tossed boat. Safer harbors where the disciples could get out and relax after their terrifying ordeal at sea.

No, they land at the Geresene graveyard, home to a mad man filled with demons. After Jesus led his disciples right through a storm, you've got to wonder if this chance meeting with the demon-possessed man is no accident at all. Perhaps this is where Jesus was headed all along.

When the mad man sees Jesus, he immediately runs from the tombs to the shore yelling and screaming, bowing down before Jesus.

When the disciples first lay their eyes on him, I imagine a few of them wish they were still on the boat in the middle of the storm. The madness of nature is some times preferable to a human being who has gone completely mad. There's something about looking into the eyes of a man who has lost his soul that terrifies us to death. Imagine encountering a Freddy, or Jason, or Michael Meyers in the flesh, real life, not some Hollywood Halloween Horror show. This was Legion, and he was standing in the flesh, right in front of them. If they wanted to make it home alive, they better run for their lives.

Yet when Jesus sees the man, he doesn't crouch in fear, as everyone else does. He stands up a little straighter, looks the mad man in the eyes, and yells, "Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!"

Like a scene from the Exorcist, the demons inside the man begin to speak through the lips of the man, their voices deep and hallow: “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?”

And when Jesus asks the demon’s name, they know their fate is sealed. They know the one who stands before them is more powerful than even the most powerful demon. They try to bargain with Jesus, begging him not to send them out of the country. Instead, they ask, “Send us into that herd of pigs.”

Jesus consents, the demons rush into the pigs, the pigs go crazy and rush over the into the sea, and they are drowned.

The man once possessed by demons, who lived in a graveyard, bruising and cutting himself, howling in the night—this mad man is finally set free by the power of Jesus.

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You would expect the people of Gerasa to throw a party for the mad man now set free. You would expect there to be fireworks and champagne and music and dancing—a party like no other party, for this man was driven mad by demons, but now he has been set free! It’s time to celebrate!

But no one celebrates. There is no party. The men who were tending the herd of pigs, now floating in the sea, rushed into the city to deliver the news, not that the mad man once called Legion had been freed, but that the mad man Jesus had cost them their entire herd, their source of income.

The town rushes to the cemetery to see it with their own eyes. Sure enough, there in the sea are floating pigs, and there in the graveyard, sitting on a rock is Jesus and the man once possessed by Legion, now in his right mind, bathed, clothed and freshly shaven.

They didn’t rush to hug him, welcoming him back. They didn’t thank Jesus for doing what no one else could do, finally healing this man and ending their fear. Instead, faced with the man set free, Mark tells us, “They were afraid.” They were afraid! Jesus healed the man, and this is what made them afraid! And they begged Jesus to leave their neighborhood.

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While they were scared of world with a mad man on the loose, there were even more scared of a world with Jesus on the looser, Jesus who was stronger than the demons. They could live with the mad man howling in the distance, but they couldn’t live with Jesus on the loose. They had seen demonic power before, but they had never seen a power greater than the demons, and they were afraid.

Life was easier before Jesus came into town. Before Jesus arrived, there was status quo. Sure there was a mad man, but they had learn to live with their fear. They had found ways to keep the mad man at a safe distance.

The mad man became a scapegoat for the people. On him they could heap their sins. So long as he was around, they didn't have to face their own inadequacies and brokenness. So long as he was around, they didn't have to name what was really tearing a part their souls. So long as the mad man was on the loose, they could feel better about themselves, better about their problems. At least I'm not like him, they would think.

Now Jesus has taken their mad man away and broken the façade behind which they hid. Now they had to face their fears head on, because what they would soon discover is that what they really feared was not the mad man possessed by demons, howling in the night, but what they truly feared was their own demons hidden deep inside their soul.

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It should make us stop and wonder about our own fears. As we watch the evening news, being reminded every night of all there is to fear in the world, we should stop and wonder if what we really fear is not out there somewhere, but is somewhere in here, deep within us.

What would we do if there were no longer any terrorists on which to blame our fears?

What would we do if the poor were no more and we could no longer blame them for bring our communities down?

What would we do without bird flu, and anthrax attacks, and bomb scares? What would we do if the people we fear the most were suddenly healed by Jesus? Would we throw a party? Would we welcome them into our homes and care for them? Or would we ask Jesus to leave our neighborhood?

The Reverend Otis Moss, an African-American pastor, once preached on our passage. He had this to say:

*I see a black and white parallel here. As long as we were struggling in the cotton fields of Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi with our cotton sacks across our shoulders and to our sides, picking cotton and having our fingers burning from stinging cotton worms that would hid under the cotton leaves; as long as we were barefoot, actually and symbolically, laughing when we were not tickled... America was satisfied.... But one day America saw us marching to the voting booth, sitting down at lunch counters, and all of America became afraid.*

As the Reverend Moss points out, American society had learned to live with their fear of the supposed "mad black man." We had learned how to manage the horrors of slavery and inequality. We could live with it, because it kept us from truly living with ourselves—with whom we really are inside.

But once Rosa Parks refused to sit in the back of the buss. Once young boys and girls marched bravely into schools that didn't want them there. Once Martin Luther King led a peaceful march in Selma, AL, while angry people threw rocks at them—then our own madness was exposed. Then we could no longer hide behind segregation—then we had to face our own fear and prejudice and hatred.

It's much easier to keep our mad men at a distance. But once they are healed, then we have to face who we really are. Then we have to be responsible for the horrible things we did to them in the name of safety.

The people of Gerasa were not ready for this. They were not ready for someone like Jesus who could heal someone like Legion. This power was too much for them to bear, and so they asked Jesus to leave their neighborhood.

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Do we want Jesus to leave our neighborhood?

As a church we pray for our community. We pray for those who are suffering, pray for the children around us. We pray for the lost, the addicts, the alcoholics, the abused, and the abusers. We pray for Jesus to come into our neighborhood and heal the brokenness, feed the hungry, bring sanity to the mad men and women.

We pray...but are we really ready for Jesus to answer our prayers? What would happen if Jesus really answered our prayers? If he really healed the demons all around us? Are we ready for this? Are we ready for the sins of our society to be exposed before us, as those tossed to the margins are made whole? Are we ready for our own racism and hatred and prejudices to be exposed?

Are we ready to admit that it's not only the mad men and women out there that are in need of healing, but it is also us? That we too have demons within us, and we also need Jesus to set us free?

If we are willing...then something amazing can happen in our neighborhood. When we invite Jesus to stay, not leave, our neighborhood, it can be painful. He will dig up stuff we'd rather not be dug up. He will expose things we hoped to keep hidden. But more than all of that...he will heal us. Truly heal us.

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Jesus has some good news for us today. But as we've seen already in our journey through Mark, Jesus' good news has two sides to it. For those who know they are lost and on the edges of society, it is truly good news. But for those who have built their lives on the backs of others, those who mask their own demons by focusing on the demons of others—to folks like this, Jesus' message may not be good news.

For Jesus' good news is good news of healing. Jesus can caste out your demons! But too many of us have grown to love our demons. We've made

friends out of our demons, built lives out of our demons. Our demons have brought us fortune and success. If Jesus casts them out, who would we be?

I tell you who we would be. We would be truly free.

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There is a lot of madness in our world. There's a lot to be scared of. But we serve a God who is more powerful than the demons, greater than all that we may fear. Perhaps the greatest madness of all is the madness of faith—faith that believes that in spite of all that there is wrong with the world, Jesus is truly at work in the world, restoring the broken, rebuilding what has been torn down, casting out demons, healing the sick, bringing home the lost.

It's sometimes easier to live with the world as it is. To get used to the pain and demons all around us. After all, how could it ever be any different?

But Jesus has good news for us today. The way the world is, is not the way it has to be. He has called us to imagine a new world. A world where people of all races and nationalities come together and worship as one body. A world where no one is needy or hungry. A world where those thrown into the ditches of society, locked away in chains, are now set free.

It sounds mad, doesn't it? Well it is. It's the madness of faith. May we catch this madness as we join with Jesus who is more powerful than the demons.

The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent. Believe the good news.