

**Yr. B, Proper 9**  
**July 9, 2006**  
**Preached by Furman Buchanan**  
**St. Martins in the Fields**  
**1592 Words**

**Lessons:**  
**Psalm 123**  
**Ezekiel 2:1-7**  
**2 Corinthians 12:2-10**  
**Mark 6:1-6**

I am continually reminded of God's sense of humor. Prophets are not without honor except in their hometown. "Welcome Home, Furman! Now climb up in that pulpit and preach it like it is."

Today's Gospel records Jesus' return home. He has been in and around Galilee, before hearing his kin folk and boyhood friends say, "Welcome home to Nazareth, Jesus! Tell us what *you* think about this morning's Scripture reading."

So he did. And they did not like it—not even one bit. In fact, Mark puts it this way, "He *scandalized* them." We don't know what Jesus said or did in the synagogue on that Sabbath Day. All we know is that it was positively scandalous.

This makes me very uncomfortable. It should make you very uncomfortable too. There was much more to Jesus' ministry than the wildly popular episodes of healing the sick. Jesus said and did things that tripped people up. After all, that is what the word scandal means in New Testament Greek—a stumbling block that trips people up.

Now if Jesus was preaching the Good News, why was it so scandalous and offensive? People supposedly *like* to hear good news. Or do they? Let's consider an example from a little earlier in the Gospel according to Mark.

Jesus declared, "The Sabbath was made for *humankind*, and *not* humankind for the Sabbath..."<sup>1</sup> This sounds like good news to us. The idea that God designated the Sabbath for us has all sorts of positive implications. This is a great way to justify sleeping in on the weekend, and savoring a nice cup of coffee while soaking up the New York Times Sunday edition. After all, this is *my* day of rest! Jesus himself said so!

Yet, while these comfortable words of Jesus sound liberating to us, they would have been heard in *his* synagogue as heretical and blasphemous. A comment from a synagogue member who loved and respected their Bible would have sounded like this: "How dare you twist around Holy Scripture to suit your purpose—from the 10 commandments,<sup>2</sup> no less! The Bible says what it means and means what it says!" A comment from an "orthodox" member would have sounded like this: "You have taken what has been sacred in our faith for thousands of years and turned it upside down as though it didn't mean anything! You are desecrating a sacred institution!" (Sound familiar?)

Was Jesus' radical teaching about the Sabbath good news to those who were marginalized by the powerful leaders of the synagogue? Yes. Was it also a scandalous affront to traditional Jewish faith as the regular members of the congregation understood it? You better believe it!

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 2:23-28

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 20:8-11

You see, Good News is often scandalous. Its power is often rooted in subverting what has become overbearing, even when those overbearing things are also good and necessary, like the laws of the Sabbath.

For some people—generally the sleazy and dishonest—the response to Jesus’ scandalous Good News was joy. For many people—especially those who took comfort in their traditional faith—the response was often rejection and ridicule.

Listen to the ridicule from the hometown crowd in today’s lesson, “Is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” The translation—“We know who you are. You are not fooling us. Mind your own business, and go back to being what you’re supposed to be—a carpenter.”

When we get uncomfortable with a direct challenge from someone we know, our first reaction is often one of two things: either shoot the messenger or fall away and disappear. Who are *your* prophets—the people you want to ridicule or stumble away from? Just as important might be this question: Are there friends or family who treat you like a prophet?

I once heard a priest define “prophets” as people who don’t get invited back to dinner again.<sup>3</sup> There is not a long line forming of folks who want to be prophets. The pay is terrible, the rejection and ridicule from family and friends are constant, and martyrdom is always a possibility.

It is interesting to me that a significant body of the Church’s scholarship dedicated to this passage from Mark is concerned with the question of whether the Gospel was referring to true brothers and sisters, or simply step brothers and sisters.

Here we are in the midst of a very uncomfortable story about prophetic witness and the rejection of Jesus by the people who knew him best of all, and the Church totally dodges the main point of the story and says, “Let’s examine this very interesting question about whether Jesus had full, genetically linked siblings.” So we just duck the real issue and focus on fascinating distractions.

We do that too. We’ve got folks within the Church right now trying to prove that Jesus could not have genetically linked offspring through Mary Magdalene, as described in the fictional fantasy entitled *The Da Vinci Code*. There are many worthwhile things we might say or teach about Christ, but they don’t have anything to do with his DNA.

Similarly, in the Episcopal Church there are those who are very upset (or, on the other hand, enraptured) by *that new woman* who has been elected presiding bishop, and yet *she* is not the point. Her gender should be unimportant. As with Mary Magdalene, (who I remind you was the *first* disciple to proclaim the resurrection), what *is* important is an unswerving faithfulness to the scandalous Good News of God revealed in Christ!

When you are scandalized by some new teaching that challenges your traditional faith what are you going to do? Ridicule the person who challenges you? Fall away and spend Sunday morning with your coffee and the New York Times?

The call of the Gospel in this morning’s lesson offers another way. It doesn’t really get fleshed out within these few sentences, but if we stay with the story we finally get to it in the Acts of the Apostles.

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<sup>3</sup> The Rev. Lane Denson

We are given a road map on what to do when our clergy say and do things that make us angry. We are given a road map of what to do when our family and friends say and do things that make us angry.

It is good news and it is also challenging news. Love those who anger you with their prophetic witness. Stay in relationship. Hang in there with one another and listen deeply to one another. Be willing to sacrifice things that are important to you—even your brand of traditional faith—for the sake of love.

One of the valuable things I learned during these past three years is that traditional faith is not a single, pure and thin strand that is carefully extended across two thousand years. Rather, traditional faith is like walking into a big, broad, and messy spider web. It surrounds your personal beliefs and intersects with them in layers you cannot even see or understand.

So what is the key, or rather—*who* is the key to learning how to live faithfully in this story. The key is James, the brother of our Lord. He was probably one of the kin who gagged at what he heard that day in Nazareth. But he also continued to love his brother. He stayed in the relationship. He listened deeply for the sake of love. After the resurrection, James saw his brother in a new light. He recognized him as the Messiah, converted, and became the Bishop of Jerusalem—not an easy job assignment.

James worked with Peter and Paul to invite non-traditional members—i.e. Gentiles like you and me—into the faith AND at the same time preserve the unity of the faith among those who were already members. James understood better than we do what it means to be a Bishop in the way that the Anglicanism has understood the episcopacy since Queen Elizabeth was the head of the Church 500 years ago—scandalously open to everyone, a broad and comprehensive middle way, and a rigorous commitment to unity and common prayer!

James' reward for all this? Martyrdom. Our reward? The Christian faith as we have received it, full of the good and scandalous news of Christ's abundant grace and mercy.

How are you going to respond to the challenge of being a disciple of Christ when his claim on your life seems too challenging to bear? How are you going to respond to being an Episcopalian when you see and hear things that you find scandalous? How are you going to respond as a member of St. Martins when take offense at somebody or something in the life of the community?

James illustrates the way forward. He hung in there. He listened deeply. And he remained loyal to the relationship for the sake of love.

We must not take for granted the things we have been given. God is at work among us, calling us to new and challenging places in our faithfulness. If you are like me, there are aspects of these places that are very uncomfortable. Unfortunately, that is the nature of following a Lord whose only way is the way of the cross.

It is good news. It is hard news. It is also news that does not end with suffering and death. So stick around, and listen deeply to where God is calling us. There is no telling what kind of mysterious and marvelous pathway it entails.