

Sermon for Sunday, August 25, 1974, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor  
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### COMEBACK DISCIPLE OF THE YEAR

Acts 13:1-14

Text: "And John left them and returned to Jerusalem." Acts 13:13b

It's football season again and every year they have some player who is making a comeback and every year they select a comeback player of the year, so I thought today I would talk about the comeback disciple of the year and I want to talk about the young man we read of this morning--his Jewish name was John and his Roman name was Mark. For that reason he was often called John Mark. All of the biblical evidence indicates that this John Mark was the author of the Gospel according to Mark. This morning I would like to share with you several pictures of John Mark, each at different periods in his life. As we look at the growth and development of this young man I think we will learn several important lessons.

The first picture we have of Mark is in the gospel that he wrote. There we discover that he was the son of a leading Christian woman in Jerusalem named Mary. It was at Mark's home that the early Church met for prayer and once, when Peter was miraculously released from prison, it was to this home that he went. In all probability it was at the home of John Mark that the last supper of Jesus and his 12 apostles was held. You will remember that in the Gospel of Mark a unique little story is included that is in none of the other gospels. According to Mark, when Jesus is arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane the disciples all flee. However, Mark records how a young man follows as Jesus is led away by the soldiers. But one of the men sees the boy and makes a grab for him. The agile lad leaps out of danger, but in the process leaves his garment in the hand of the soldier and escapes naked into the night. (Young people who are streaking these days may think they are pioneers, but young John Mark proceeded them by some 2,000 years!)

Tradition has it that Judas left the upper room to betray Jesus and returned there with the soldiers to arrest him. However, they discovered that Jesus had gone to Gethsemane and started for the Garden to arrest him. Young Mark, having heard the commotion at the door, slipped out of bed to warn Jesus and thus was present in the Garden when Jesus was arrested.

John Mark was probably raised in a well-to-do home. It was large enough to serve as a gathering place for the first Christians and we are told that there were servants in the home. We know also that he was the nephew of Barnabas who was also a man of means. It was Barnabas you remember who, in the early days of the Christian community sold a field and brought the money to the church for the support of the people. And Uncle Barnabas was a central figure in the life of the early church. His real name was Joseph, but the Christians called him "Barnabas", which meant "Son of Exhortation." Apparently he was a most effective preacher and they gave him the name Barnabas because of it. And it was probably because of his preaching ability that they chose him to be one of the first two missionaries to be sent out to other countries.

So, the first picture we have of John Mark is a young man very close to the first group of Christians, one who probably knew Jesus personally, and who was raised in a well-to-do Christian home. The next picture we have of John Mark is perhaps some 13 years later, about 46 A.D. He is a young man now. Paul and Barnabas are in the city of Antioch and John Mark is with them. There in Antioch--the place where

followers of Jesus were first called Christians--as the disciples prayed and fasted and worshipped together, the Holy Spirit moved upon them and Paul and Barnabas were chosen and set aside to become the first missionaries.

As Paul and Barnabas start out on their first, historic journey to Asia Minor, John Mark is permitted to go with them. Their first stop is at the Island of Cyprus which is so much in the news right now. There God used them in a wonderful way and even the Roman ruler of the Island was converted under their preaching. However, when they reached the mainland of Asia Minor at the city of Perga in the state of Pamphylia, the Bible tells us that John Mark turns back. He goes home.

Now, the Bible doesn't tell us why he quit. Perga was in a low, swampy area and there was a lot of mosquitoes and malaria there and it could have been that. The Jews were already beginning to put up resistance and to persecute these Christians and perhaps it was because of that that John Mark turned back. Whatever the reason, Mark left Paul and Barnabas.

Three years later, in about 49 A.D., Paul and Barnabas are back in Antioch and are ready to start on their second missionary journey. The Bible tells us that a violent disagreement takes place between Paul and Barnabas as to whether they should take Mark with them on their second journey. As a consequence of this disagreement, the missionary team splits up. Paul takes with him a Christian named Silas (and that's why in the old spiritual we sing "It was good for Paul and Silas, and it's good enough for me."). Uncle Barnabas takes his nephew John Mark and sails for the island of Cyprus while Paul and Silas take the overland route to Asia Minor through Syria and Cilicia on a journey that is to last for three years. So, the second picture we have of John Mark is that of a young man who blows hot and cold about foreign missions and whose conduct is responsible for breaking up the greatest missionary team in the history of the world. Whatever his reasons for turning back that day their ship bumped the dock at Perga had failed to satisfy St. Paul and they were alienated from one another.

The third picture we have of John Mark are two brief flashes that occur some 10 to 15 years later, perhaps around the time 61 or 62 A.D. John Mark has reached middle age now. A letter is being written from the city of Rome. The writer is Paul himself and he is probably writing from prison. Very shortly he is to be executed for his faith. He is writing to a young man named Timothy and as he brings the letter to a close, he writes, "Take Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministering." Somehow, in the intervening years, Paul has been reconciled to John Mark and has found him to be useful in the service of Jesus. As he faces his last great crisis, he wants Mark there beside him. The second brief flash we have of Mark is in the closing first letter of Peter that he writes from Rome. Peter, too, is soon to suffer crucifixion at the hands of the Roman government and as he writes from Rome we discover that with him is John Mark whom Peter refers to as "my son."

So, as a Christian and a servant of Jesus, John Mark has made a comeback. From the ranks of the failures and quitters, from the ranks of the fearful and timid, from the ranks of those who snap under pressure and who fail in the face of adversity, John Mark had made a comeback--so much so that Paul and Peter, two of the greatest Christian leaders of them all, want him beside them as they face the last and greatest crisis of all, execution at the hands of the Romans.

What were the factors at work in Mark's life, what were the things in his heart, that

enabled him to rise above his failure? What were the features of his character that permitted him to conquer a great failure and make a comeback as a Christian? From what the Bible tells us about John Mark let me suggest at least three principle things that permitted him to rise above failure and disgrace and go on to serve the Lord with success. You see, his failure could have destroyed him. I know people who have some sin in their lives that simply destroyed them spiritually. They are never able to get over their sin, to rise above their failure. But something was at work in Mark's life that saved him from that. Something that permitted him to go on from failure and disgrace to distinguished service--something that permitted him to make a comeback.

Let me suggest that the first reason Mark made a comeback was because he had an inner capacity for growth. The fact that he turned back in the face of adversity didn't mean that he did not love Jesus or that he wasn't a Christian. It simply meant that he was not mature in his faith. He was not yet strong in the Lord. And when we--or fellow Christians--commit sins or make mistakes or fail to live up to what Christians should be, it does not mean we are not really Christians or that we don't love Jesus. It simply means that we are not yet fully mature in the Lord.

You know, St. Paul wasn't wrong often, but he was wrong about Mark. He wrote him off. He didn't want him on his second missionary journey. But he had to eat his words and in the end he longed for Mark to be with him. Don't write off people when they sin. Don't write off young people when they make mistakes. They may have a spiritual capacity for growth that will, in years to come, lead them to great spiritual accomplishments. I am told that chrysanthemums will not blossom properly unless they have a period of natural darkness each day. The mum flowers best from darkness. People can be like that. After a person has had trouble, we have sometimes said of them, "That experience caused him to grow up." Thomas Dreier once wrote, "Days of darkness may be fitting us to make better use of our days of sunlight." I have a friend whom I love very deeply who made a mistake that caused him great shame and humiliation. Yet, out of the dark night of his failure there has blossomed a Christian character and a commitment to Jesus that is unique and precious. Mark made a comeback from the dark night of failure because he really loved Jesus and he had a capacity to grow.

The second reason John Mark made a comeback was because somebody believed in him and was willing to trust him and love him. As much as I admire St. Paul, I must admire Barnabas more because he dared to give a young man a second chance; he dared to risk his love on someone who had failed. If John Mark had not had someone to believe in him and give him a second chance I suspect the Gospel of Mark would never have been written; Paul would never have sent for him to come to Rome, Peter would never have spoken of him as his beloved son. But when someone believed in him and dared to give him a second chance, Mark was to become one of the great leaders of the early church and was to have the privilege of writing one of the books of the Bible about the life of Jesus.

I think we can learn a great lesson from that. There are many today who need someone to believe in them, to trust them, to give them a second chance. No one has been helped by being kicked when they are down. Condemnation and judgmental criticism can destroy, but compassion and faith can lift up a fallen person and help him make a comeback. I think of St. Peter denying Jesus the night before the crucifixion. The Bible tells us Peter went out and wept over his failure. But Jesus loved him and forgave him and in the power of that love, Peter overcame his failure and rose to the heights of greatness.

There are some of you this morning who are living with spiritual failure. For some of you, it is eating out your heart, it is destroying your life. I want to say to you, Jesus forgives you; Jesus loves you. He offers you another chance and in his love you can make a comeback from failure. You can rise above your sin because there is someone who believes in you.

The third reason John Mark was able to make a comeback was because of his background. He was raised in a home where Jesus was a welcomed guest. He was raised in a home where there was prayer. He was raised in a home where a mother was deeply committed to Jesus and where God was honored. He had that training, that background to fall back on. I want to say to you parents, the kind of home you provide for your children will pay off in years to come. Mark did fail, yes, but he had the background, the spiritual heritage, that enabled him to overcome his failure. Will our children have that sort of heritage? Are you giving your children that kind of spiritual environment that will stand them in good stead when the time of testing comes?

Several years ago an oil exploration team was working in the Sahara Desert. There, almost intact, they discovered a World War II Air Force Bomber. On the fuselage they could still read the name, "Lady Be Good." Thus ended one of the mysteries of World War II for the bomber had taken off for a mission in North Africa and had never been heard from again. But now a second mystery emerged for the bomber was 400 miles past its destination. Strangely enough, its instruments were found to be working still and they were accurate. Apparently the plane had gotten into a high altitude current of air that doubled her speed without the crew being aware of it. When the crew reached their destination in half the time they expected they assumed their instruments were wrong and flew on to their death. The Lady Be Good and her crew perished because the men didn't believe their instruments.

John Mark got off course in life but his home had given him some spiritual instruments that he believed in and trusted. And because he did, he was able to get back on course. He made a comeback. Are our homes--is your home--giving spiritual instruments that children will trust and believe in, that will get them safely to their destination? When they are off course and headed for destruction, do they have spiritual guidelines from us they can trust and believe in or will they simply fly on towards death?

John Mark was comeback disciple of the year because he had an inner capacity for growth, for maturity and because he had somebody who believed in him, who was willing to give him a second chance. Because he had some spiritual instruments that he could trust, and God grant that the children of this church will find in their homes, spiritual instruments that they can trust and believe in and that they will not fly to their destruction.