

Sermon for Sunday, August 31, 1980, 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

The Bible tells us his Jewish name was John and his Roman name was Mark. For that reason he was sometimes called John Mark. Most scholars believe he is the author of the second book of the New Testament, the Gospel of Mark. His name appears a number of times in the Bible. The first time he is a young boy in about 33 A.D. The last time he is middle-aged in somewhere around 65 A.D. Let's look for a moment at these snapshots of John Mark that the Bible gives us.

John first appears in the Gospel he wrote. There we discover he was the son of a leading Christian woman in Jerusalem named Mary. It was at John 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 disciples 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 soldiers 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 as he escapes into the night.

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 members. Also, his Uncle Barnabas was a leading figure in 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 of Barnabas because of it. It was this preaching ability that caused Barnabas to be chosen later on as one of the first missionaries to be sent out along with Paul.

So the first snapshot 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 home. The next picture we have of John Mark is perhaps 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. And 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 these two start out on their first historic journey to Asia Minor, the Bible tells us that John Mark is permitted to go with them. Their first stop is at the Island of Cyprus and there God used them in a wonderful way. Even the Roman ruler of the Island was converted under their preaching. However, when they reach 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 because of that. Or, it could have been because he was afraid. Already the Jews were responding to these Christians with persecution. But for whatever reason, John Mark quit. He went back home.

The next picture we have of John Mark is about three years later, around 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 because Barnabas wants to take John Mark with them again. Because of this disagreement, the team splits. Barnabas takes Mark and goes to the Island of Cyprus. Paul gets a new partner--a man named Silas--and takes the overland route to Asia Minor, going through Syria and Cilicia on a journey that is to take three years. Incidentally many of us grew up singing an old spiritual, "It was good for Paul and Silas, and it's good enough for me." Were it not for John Mark, we might have been singing, "It was good for Paul and Barney". So in this picture of John Mark we discover he is the source of a disagreement that leads to the breakup of Paul and Barnabas. Paul didn't think much of John Mark.

The fourth picture we have of John Mark occurs some 10 to 15 years later, perhaps around 60 A.D. By now he is middle-aged. 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 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 as he faces his last, great crisis, he wants Mark with him.

There is one final snapshot of John Mark. Several years later the Apostle Peter is in Rome, too. Paul is probably dead now and Peter is soon to be executed also, asking to be crucified head down because he does not feel worthy to be crucified in the same way his master was. In his letter Peter refers to John Mark and speaks of him with great affection and appreciation, calling him, "my son."

So, in the end, from the ranks of the failures and quitters, John Mark had made a comeback. So much so that two of the greatest leaders of the Christian faith want him by their sides in times of great adversity. What was there in his heart and in his life that led to this turn around? What was at work in his life that permitted him to rise above failure and disgrace so that he could make a comeback as a follower of Jesus?

Let me suggest several things at work in John Mark's life that enabled him to make a comeback. First, he was raised in a home where Jesus was a welcomed guest. He was raised in a home where a mother was deeply committed, where people prayed, where God was honored. He had a spiritual heritage that he could 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. Yes, John Mark did fall, but he had a spiritual heritage, he had inner resources, to fall back on and which enabled him to overcome his failure.

Will our children and our grandchildren have that kind of spiritual environment that will stand them in good stead when the time of testing comes? Some years ago an oil exploration team working in the Sahara Desert made a startling find. They discovered a World War II Air Force bomber, still intact. 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 home field. When examined the instruments were found still to be working 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 they reached their home field 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.

A lot of young people today are perishing spiritually because they don't have any instruments they can trust. They are not being given any internal values, any spiritual heritage that will guide them safely home and they are going to perish in the spiritual deserts of our world today. I plead with you parents, give your children, your young people, a rich spiritual heritage. Bring them to Sunday School, teach them in the home, pray with them and guide them. There may be failures in their lives, but like John Mark, they can make a comeback if they have some instruments, some guidance they can trust.

A second reason John Mark made a comeback from failure was because he never quit growing as a Christian. At first he was not very strong in the Lord. So when the going got rough, he failed. But although he failed, he never quit. I see a lot of people fail in the Christian life. I've certainly had my share of failures. Frequently, I see people make a decision for Jesus and try to follow him. But living the Christian life is not always easy. Being what God wants us to be can be very difficult. And often--because they fail--I see people drop out of the church and quit trying to be God's person. Has that ever happened to you? Have you ever failed at being a Christian? And the reason we fail is because we quit growing. We quit praying, we quit reading the Bible, we quit worshipping regularly, we quit fellowshiping with other Christians. When that happens sin takes over our lives.

How much are you growing spiritually? Are you any stronger now than you were a year ago? Do you pray any more or study God's word any more today than you did last year? If not, you are in serious spiritual danger. John Mark had failures--as we all do--but he could rise above his failures because he was growing spiritually.

A third reason John Mark made a comeback was because somebody believed in him. As much as I admire St. Paul, I must admire Barnabas more. He dared to give a person a second chance. He dared to risk his love on someone who had failed. Had Barnabas not done that, perhaps we would never have had a Gospel of Mark. Paul would never have sent for John Mark to come to him in his time of need. Peter would never have spoken lovingly of him as "my son". But when someone believed in him, forgave him, and gave him a second chance, John Mark became one of the great leaders of the early church.

Do you dare to risk your love on someone who has failed? I see many of our young people make serious mistakes as they are growing up. What they need most of all is someone to believe in them and give them a second chance. I see marriages fail because a partner sins and fails and the other is not willing to risk a second chance. We are all so unforgiving, so unloving. So often what a person needs is for someone to trust him, someone to believe in him and to give him a second chance.

Isn't that what you need? There are many of us this morning who have failures in our lives, who have some sin that is eating our hearts out. But I want you to know this: there is someone who loves you, who cares for you, who believes in you and wants to give you a second chance. That someone is Jesus. He loves you so much that he went to the cross to die for your sins. He believes in you so much that he wants to put his Holy Spirit in your heart to help you overcome your failures and to help you live a better life.

Yes, because he lives, we can face tomorrow. We can face tomorrow because he believes in us, he forgives us, and we can make a comeback from our failures. Whoever you are, whatever you may have done, whatever need you may have you can face tomorrow because Jesus loves you. He not only forgives us but he comes to walk with us, to be our friend and companion. That's what I need. Don't you need it, too?