

Heal my Soul!
Sermon to Markus 5
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May the mercy of our Lord Jesus and his healing powers be with you. Amen.

The story from Markus 5 is as disturbing as many a thing from our time, dear congregation. The evil is not going to just disappear. It has to be negotiated with. Today, we will see an example of Jesus' liberating diplomacy. We will see how he embraces and heals a human's ill soul.

But first things first. Listen to what Markus has to tell Christendom. It is quite a long story. The evil, this story is about, cannot be simply flicked away.

“They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes. And when Jesus had stepped out of the boat, immediately there met him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit. He lived among the tombs. And no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain, for he had often been bound with shackles and chains, but he wrenched the chains apart, and he broke the shackles in pieces. No one had the strength to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always crying out and cutting himself with stones. And when he saw Jesus from afar, he ran and fell down before him. And crying out with a loud voice, he said, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me.” For he was saying to him, “Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!” And Jesus asked him, “What is your name?” He replied, “My name is Legion, for we are many.” And he begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. Now a great herd of pigs was feeding there on the hillside, and they begged him, saying, “Send us to the pigs; let us enter them.” So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the pigs; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea and drowned in the sea. The herdsmen fled and told it in the city and in the country. And people came to see what it was that had happened. And they came to Jesus and saw the demon-possessed man, the one who had had the legion, sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, and they were afraid. And those who had seen it described to them what had happened to the demon-possessed man and to the pigs. And they began to beg Jesus to depart from their region. As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed with demons begged him that he might be with him. And he did not permit him but said to him, “Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.” And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him, and everyone marveled.”

We like to shrink back. The darkness, the archaic, the mythical is fascinating. The aura of death and destruction is attractive. The child murderer Magnus Gäffgen or the “Cannibal of Rotenburg” get headlines in the media for days and weeks. Anders Behring Breivik became a notorious mass murderer beyond the borders of Norway, who does not fit the simplified picture of a spree killer everybody has in mind. The evil haunts us because it is enigmatic, because it is eerie. It is incomprehensible and it is inexplicable. Recently, there were headlines about two coldblooded murderers of a pregnant young woman living in our region, in Salzgitter.

What is going on in the mind of these people?

Jesus and his disciples crossed the sea. It turned out to be a tumultuous, a dangerous journey to the other side. There may come a week that is similar to this journey for us. “Let us cross”, “Go in peace”. And then there is the rough sea. There is fierceness between Sunday and Sunday. Eventful days, unexpected incidents – that troubles us. Not every weekend is a homecoming. Not on every Sunday do we arrive in a safe haven.

That is the beginning of Mark 5: They came – after a rough journey full of fears and wonders, with foaming anxiety and moving preservation – they came to the other side with Jesus.

And step on – metaphorically speaking – unknown terrain. And, as we immediately get to know – disconcerting terrain. They entered a region with an urgent case of threat. When Jesus had stepped out of the boat, immediately there met him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit. He lived among the tombs. And no one could bind him anymore. Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always crying out and cutting himself with stones.

There are humans who unrestrainedly destroy wither themselves or others. They commit evil deeds, voluntarily and fully conscious of them. They are not ill, they are legally sane. That does not fit our scheme. They are an eerie enigma for their environment. There are people in our town, our country who are not held back by their upbringing or their inhibitions any more. They do not feel any social control. Nothing helps: No piece of good advice, no threat of punishment. They scare us, they anger us, they make us feel anxious. We do not understand why self-protection and benevolence are so weak.

She stays in a destructive relationship. She goes back to him after her escape to the domestic assault centre. Back to the violence, back to the suffering. Back to her misfortune. What is wrong with us people? Our present has a lot of destructiveness, a lot of self-destructiveness. The suicide attacker – maybe he is a symptom of our

confusing, self-destructive time? So much foolishness. So much evil that we are not able to understand. So many sick-making, aggrieving things. Today's date symbolizes a world which turns itself into a tomb. A world that is crying out and cutting itself with more than just stones. 11th September. This date still gapes like a crater in the course of the year, even after 15 years. The *Ground Zero* in our calendar. 9/11. Those two numbers that became a symbol for the abysmal evil. Dangerously fascinating and infecting. Hate gives birth to hate. One obsessed Gerasener seldom stays alone. One is almost inclined to say that Matthew's version of this story fits our present even better. In his story, there are two men who dash against Jesus and his disciple. It says, "They were so violent that no one could pass that way". One keeps away. One suppresses and excludes. One declares those people's environments as a mental no-go-area. One adjudicates them to be monsters. This process of excluding is part of our social reality. It is part of a working neighborhood. It is part of the political game one encounters again and again while electoral campaigns.

This also happens in families, even in our own soul. Rejection. Obscure, difficult and destructive things are banned from our conversations and thinking. Everybody has his own "area of Gerasener" on his mental map. A menacing other shore whereto one does not like to cross.

But the encounter is inevitable. The gospel provides access to this area that already is part of our lives. Christian discipleship is about not closing your eyes in front of the all-too-human things.

This gesture already is part of the message. Jesus sets foot on that area where nobody else dares to stay. Jesus faces the things that nobody else dares to say or speak about. He dares to have a dialogue with the evil. It arises an eerie debate. It arises an argument. The confused, dazed, ill human lets his interior speak. He got estranged from himself because he was not able find ear or heart anywhere else. He speaks like a different person. The soul becomes a demon if nobody listens. When nobody answers. Nobody ever asked him. Nobody had got time. He wandered between the tombs. All alone, left to his own devices. His heart as dead as the fields. They tried to bind him. Tried to prevent the worst. One always knew that there is nothing that helps in acute distress. Therefore, it is better to tranquilize him, to commit him to an institution, to lock him in. That is not a cure. No improvement. You just prevent the extreme from happening.

Well, Jesus appears and treats him differently. He handles us differently. The gospels tell Him into our human hardship. The New Testament has got words like nutshells, words like little boats that bring Christ to our hearts. Without violence, without shackles and chains – in short: He conquers the crazed men without force. He conquers him by starting a conversation. Jesus wins by talking. And by letting speak.

“Sine vis sed verbo.” An old protestant guideline, almost forgotten. Without power, but words.

Have you ever read the Psalms? In one of them, God strikes up a conversation with us and lets us speak extensively. He lets us say everything that is within us. “My feet had almost stumbled. For I was envious. When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart. I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you.”

How many silent screams, how many monologues have those old church walls listened to? How many wild thoughts rage within the humans who light solitarily a few candles. Who stay here because here is finally enough room for all that. There is just not enough air in the pedestrian precinct, in the confined city flats. There is no vastness, no openness, no time for debates. You need heights and widths for spilling your heart out and the certainty: I will be heard.

Christ, with his disciples, in his church. Where humans with their sore souls wander. In exhausting monologues, when you are not able to feel, just feel. “I am here for you.” And He listens. He asks, “What is your name?” Naming, what is worrying you. Finding words – that is the first step on the way to recovery. Naming what is inside of you. To have and to make up pictures, comparisons and stories that express what is up with me. Children who encountered war draw their traumas out of their souls. Sublime failures and terminally ill people write down their life experiences, even if only their children and grandchildren will read it. Who is endowed with lyrics, draws his pain with words.

We are questioned: “Who are you?” What is wrong with you? What’s going on in your inner world?

Here is the answer: “My name is Legion, for we are many.” In the times of the New Testament it was interpreted as obsession, today it seems to me like the great confusion of a traumatized human being. “Legion.” Roman soldiers appear in my imagination. The army of occupation invades the country. Misanthropic mercenaries tackle the population. They humiliated. They showed their superiority. It happens today as in all times gone by. Once ago in the prisons of the SED, still today in Guantanamo.

Legion they were, a lot, who hit him, raped him, humiliated him. They brutally pulled down his defensive walls with their brute force and psychic ingenuity. Trauma. They are inside him since. In his dreams, in his thoughts, in his heart. And he cannot get rid of them. Yesterday’s humiliation becomes an evil force and poisons his thoughts. He is tossed from here to there. She is hurting herself. A human is trapped inside the tomb of humiliation.

Not everybody, but some of us, also have a legion inside them. Bullying at school. Blackmailing on the way home. A nasty encounter during college. Menace, threat of violence. A burglary. A colleague's mockery and intrigues. Encroaching behavior, encountered ruthlessness. All that leaves traces. It stays inside you. The memories are like bonds. Your inner freedom is gone. Lord, that is too much for me. Way too much. "My punishment is too great to bear."

Jesus asks and He lets the evil speak. No gadfly is driven out without being named, captured and caught beforehand. You can name it when speaking to God. The worst, the most unpleasant, the most confusing. Let it go. Then it can let go of you. To the pigs. To the dirt. To the abyss.

Whereto can I carry my evil? Whereto can I cast it? How can I get it out of me?

To the cross. To Christ.

To that place where Roman legionaries were active again. They had an atrociously good time torturing him. With a beating, with mockery and with the crown of thorns. They wanted to destroy him, even before he breathes his last breath. Dehumanize him while he was still living. He endured. And he bore. He takes away. The cross became a symbol for the trauma that humans inflict on each other. And for God who Himself takes it from us. Relocated it to Him. Je suis Charlie? Je suis Bruxelles? Je suis München oder Würzburg? May be. But more and importantly: Je suis Jésus. What happened to him, happened for me. He suffered and negotiated for my topics. To the cross, that is where I can bring everything. To this place, to Him, that is where I can think and throw and put everything that is making me wild, sick and sad. Jesus' cross is suited for my evil. That is where it should go.

I look at the cross during every church service, in every church. And I let go of everything that is subduing me, that is making me mute and dumb.

It will be overcome. It will lose its power. Jesus is the winner over my evil.

They reappear at the end of the Gospels. One last time Roman mercenaries. Everything that is bringing pain and harm survives stubbornly. Again and again, I sigh inwardly. You cannot get rid off it. Mercenaries are guarding Jesus' grave. They are supposed to determine his defeat and ensure that he has and is lost.

And suddenly, they themselves "became as dead men". No human is almighty. That already is a consolation, a weak one, but nevertheless. Nobody is without wound. Everybody has got weak moments and at least one tender spot.

And then that: Christ has risen. Truthfully risen. He overcame everything. He went through everything. He went beyond everything. He left death and the death bringers behind, below him. He knows the traumas, wears the wounds eternally on his skin. Eternal understanding. Eternal solidarity. He has risen. Jesus is the winner over my evil. Healer of my wounds. Lord over my demons. Listen to his word! “All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.” Already on earth. On the rough sea, when there are powerful waves inside of me and all around me. At that moment, the peace of God and the healing power of Jesus Christ will be there. His victory may retain our hearts on the way to the next Sunday.

Amen.