



Roanoke, Virginia
September 21, 2025

“Living Church”

Mark 1:21-39

Acts 17: 24-28

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Mark 1:21-39. ²¹ They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. ²² They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes. ²³ Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴ and he cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” ²⁵ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be quiet and come out of him!” ²⁶ And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷ They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” ²⁸ At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

²⁹ As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. ³⁰ Now Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. ³¹ He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

³² That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed by demons. ³³ And the whole city was gathered around the door. ³⁴ And he cured many who were sick with various diseases and cast out many demons, and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.



³⁵ In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. ³⁶ And Simon and his companions hunted for him. ³⁷ When they found him, they said to him, “Everyone is searching for you.” ³⁸ He answered, “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also, for that is what I came out to do.” ³⁹ And he went throughout all Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Acts 17:24-28. ²⁴ “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. ²⁵ And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. ²⁶ From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. ²⁷ God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. ²⁸ ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’

The Gospel of Mark is famous for the word “immediately.” That’s because in Mark, everything happens so quickly. There’s no story of Jesus’ birth, no shepherds or angels or Magi. Immediately, right off the bat, John the Baptist is preparing the way, Jesus is baptized, and he launches right into his ministry.

You can feel the urgency. The nets are still drying on the lakeshore, and Jesus is already on the move—visiting synagogues, casting out demons, and healing Simon’s mother-in-law. By the end of chapter one, the crowds are pressing in on him from every direction. His fame is spreading like wildfire.

Immediately, Jesus is on the move. From the start, he’s showing us what it means to be God enfleshed. He doesn’t settle in. He doesn’t build a headquarters. He doesn’t cozy up to the powers that be. He doesn’t even seek his own safety in popularity.

Jesus is on the move, bringing good news, setting people free from what ails them, and embodying a new kind of teaching, a new kind of authority.

The people in Capernaum were used to the old ways of leadership. In the synagogues, the scribes were the trained, educated professionals entrusted with specific responsibilities: record keeping, handling of correspondence, maintenance of archives, and scholarship. The authority of Jesus, however, is different. His authority came from somewhere else. Jesus wasn’t repeating the religious status quo. He was the Good News. His presence disrupted, even provoked. As one commentator notes, this was “the difference between charisma and custodianship.”ⁱ



Mark notes that from the start, the unclean spirit sees him clearly. “I know who you are—the Holy One of God.” The first one to recognize Jesus isn’t a scribe or even one of his disciples, it’s a demon. The demonic is the first to recognize the threat Jesus poses to the powers that be.

We might ask, what makes the unclean spirits of this world tremble today? Because let’s be clear, that demon didn’t panic over Jesus’ theology or church doctrine. It reacted to Jesus’ presence – a presence that couldn’t be manipulated or managed, a presence that challenged the systems and spirits of the age.

In the late 1960’s, on a visit to Soviet Leningrad, the economist E. F. Schumacher consulted a map to figure out where he was. Comparing the map to where he stood at a street corner, he was perplexed. He could see a few enormous churches around him in the city, but there was no trace of most of them on his map. Finally, an interpreter came to help him. He told Schumacher, “We don’t show living churches on our maps.” Contradicting him, Schumacher pointed to a church on the map that was very clearly marked. “This is a museum,” the man replied, “not what we call a ‘living church.’ It is only the ‘living churches’ we don’t show.”ⁱⁱ

“It is the living churches we don’t show.” It’s a rather powerful statement when you think about it, right? Living churches weren’t on the map because they aren’t monuments to the past. Living churches are dynamic and on the move, like Jesus and the early church. It’s almost as though that interpreter could have said instead, “The living church isn’t on the map because it doesn’t belong to the empire; it belongs to the kingdom of God.”

In Acts 17, the apostle Paul preaches in Athens to people who don’t know the God of Israel. He points to their statue to the unknown God and declares that this is the one he’s been called to tell them about. This unknown god is in fact the “God who made the world and everything in it—who does not live in temples built by human hands.” His God is not confined to buildings or institutions, not even to ideologies. “In him we live and move and have our being,” Paul quotes.

Idolatry was common in the ancient world. In the Old Testament, we read about how God’s people in the desert created a golden calf to worship. Israel was surrounded with other cultures and religions who worshiped multiple gods and made altars and idols to venerate. Time and again in Scripture, we hear God tell God’s people not to be like the Gentiles who worship false gods and empty idols. The warning may sound outdated and old fashioned, but we still see the human impulse behind them—the attempt to control the uncontrollable. (We’d do well today to remember it never goes well with our idols.)



Thankfully, the Gospel cuts through all of that.

It reminds us that God is near, but not tame. God is close but not confined. And Jesus Christ is still on the move.

Friends, we are called to be a living church. We, as a community, as Christ's Body, are called to be a community that brings Christ's kingdom here and now. And not just as a collective, but I believe also as individuals, Christ's Body with its many parts. We are called to be his hands and feet. Like little outposts of grace, we are little moving sanctuaries of Christ's presence, scattered throughout our neighborhoods, our schools, our workplaces.

Jesus didn't stay in one place, building monuments to his power. He moved—immediately—toward the hurting, the searching, the silenced, the sick. He disrupted the systems that held people captive. He cast out the unclean spirits that robbed people of their voice, their dignity, and their freedom. And when they tried to hold him back, when the disciples said, “Everyone is searching for you,” Jesus said, “Let us go on.”

In his book *Simply Christian*, British theologian and bishop N.T. Wright puts it this way, “We’re called here and now to be instruments of God’s new creation which has already been launched in Jesus and of which Jesus’ followers are supposed to be—its agents.”^{xiii} Wright believes that we are wired, deep down, with a longing for a world made right. We are dissatisfied with the rhetoric of hate and greed and violence because God made us that way. And every time we pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven,” we’re not just saying words, we are naming our hope. We are declaring our purpose. We are stepping into our calling.

As Wright goes on to say, the church is not meant to be a waiting room for heaven. It is meant to be the Body of Christ, alive in the world, living, moving, loving, healing, challenging, and proclaiming.

So, are we willing to be on the move like this? Into a messy world that desperately needs Christ's healing and hope?

Being the living church isn't always easy. It's much simpler to stand still, to keep our faith private and our hands clean. It's easier to follow a version of Jesus who loves who we love, blesses our own personal politics, and confirms our biases. It is easier to cling to a gospel of power than to walk the way of love.

But being the living church resists making God in our own image. It remembers that instead, God humbled God's self, taking the form of a servant, born into humility, dying on the cross. It



remembers that Jesus came not to control or even condemn, but to redeem and love with abundance and steadfastness. In a season when faith is often mistaken for ideology or coopted for social or political gain, being the living church can become a kind of holy resistance.

You are the living church when you forgive in a culture of vengeance. You are the living church when you speak truth in the face of lies. You are the living church when you love your neighbor more than your comfort. You are the living church when you sow compassion in a world that rewards cruelty. You are the living church when you refuse to bow to fear and choose hope and generosity instead.

This is what it means to pray and live “Thy kingdom come.” May we follow Christ even when it leads us beyond the maps. May we be the living church in a world that needs it now more than ever.

Because the world doesn’t need more monuments or more comfortable religion. It needs the living Body of Christ, moving with compassion, grounded in truth, and centered on love. That’s the kind of church the empire doesn’t put on the map, but that’s the kind of church God uses to change the world. Not a building, but a people, in whom Christ lives and moves and has his being.

So, as we stand at the start of another week, may we go from this place as the living church—unmapped and rooted in the love of Christ Jesus. Not monuments, but bearers of a living hope, a church that moves with compassion, walks in justice, and lives with grace. Like Jesus, may we have the courage to rise in the dark, listen for God’s direction, and say again and again, “Let us go on.”

ⁱ C. Clifton Black, *Mark* (Abingdon New Testament Commentaries. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011), 72.

ⁱⁱ E. F. Schumacher, *A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1977), p. 1.

ⁱⁱⁱ N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 2006), 225.

