

**Unbound**  
**The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC**  
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*Mark 5:1-20*

The disciples have had a difficult time of it lately. The day before, Jesus had preached for an entire day (and it was a long one!). Later that night they were restless, with a big storm rocking their houseboat in the middle of the night. Finally, with calmer seas, the darkness gave way to daybreak as they arrived on the other side of the lake in Gentile Country.

I know what I'd be thinking if I was with them when that boat pulled ashore. Get me some coffee, for heaven's sake, and maybe some breakfast... you know, that quiet restful meal that somehow tastes better in the aftermath of a crisis. I would feel grateful to be alive, that the dawn has risen, and the sky is rippled with pink and golden and stillness.

And yet, it seems like we won't have that perfect peace for very long.

Mark tells us that Immediately, as Jesus stepped out of the boat, a man with an Unclean Spirit came suddenly towards them. Matthew and Luke both recount this event as well. Matthew remembers two men but doesn't tell us anything about the second. Luke adds that the man "*for a long time had worn no clothes.*" All three gospels make the special point that, 'he came from the tombs.'

So here we are, just plain, simple fisherman who decided to follow this Jesus guy. Over the night, we've just nearly died. We're hungry, and our muscles are stiff from a fitful sleep. And as we thankfully step on to dry ground, a crazy, crazy man, completely naked, comes racing down from the tombs.

You don't really want to be here in gentile country anyway. That's when you notice there are foul, unclean, smelly pigs everywhere and so on top of being hungry, and worn out, (and frankly, kind of afraid), you're calculating in the back of your mind how long it will take to ritually purify yourself once you get back home... But the straw that breaks the camel's back is this man running maniacally towards you, covered with a stench of death.

Naked, crazy, living in a cemetery—and not like cemeteries where we might go and walk around and do chalk rubbings of cool, revolutionary war era gravestones—no this is a cemetery of open tombs hewn out of the side of a hill, tombs you could walk into where bodies were laid out to decompose and then all the bits gathered up and put in a box. He lives there.

And he's crazy. Mark says that he had been previously bound. Over and over again the community had tried to restrain him. What kind of person do you try to restrain? One who is out of control, who is dangerous. You restrain someone who is ruining everything, hurting people, hurting himself – it's may be the kindest thing you can do.

There's an indication that he has been becoming more and more violent and out of control because they used to restrain him, but they no longer can.

Demons caused all kinds of problems in the first century when Jesus walked this earth. They broke through human physical and mental defenses. Like thieves in the night they stole in and inhabited the human psyche. Then they drained all the human strength and personality they could find.

They were hostile, malignant, spiritual parasites who took away the most precious thing a person has – him or herself. And in its place, they left a twisted, sick, wreaking ball of fury.

Some of the demon possessed went crazy, others went violently and gravely ill. Some died. It is no wonder, then, that the exorcists of Jesus' day were in such high demand! It seems there was a bull market on madness. That is one of the reasons Jesus is so popular in the gospel of Mark. He is an exorcist extraordinaire. Jesus wields exorcism like a soldier wields a sword. According to Mark, it is a weapon Jesus shared with his disciples and maybe that's the point. The power to exorcise evil is the power Jesus gave to the entire church – which makes all of us, exorcists here.

Think of that man living in the burial caves. Evil, in whatever form and by whatever means, was destroying him, robbing him of his precious humanity.

Can we say the same of evil and its effects in our world and in our time?

Our United Church of Christ Statement of Faith says *"You call us into your church, to resist the powers of evil"* Not the power of evil, but the powers... it's plural! Jesus asked the man who came out of the caves his name, and he replied: *"My name is 'Legion' there are so many of us!"* And so it is with us.

We are beset by evil powers in many shapes and forms and sizes: pride and envy and greed, prejudice and bitterness and jealousy, corruption and oppression and abuse, apathy and self-indulgence and vengeance, divisive and oppressive powers that pervade our human spirits, divisive and oppressive powers that pervade our human institutions.

And it is precisely this evil in its many different forms, that we are called to resist. *"You call us into your church, to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be your servants in the service of others, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil"* Proclaiming good news

and resisting evil go together! Resisting evil is good news, because it is a means by which people are set free from oppression and poverty and hatred and self-hatred and strife and isolation and fear.

The good news, the gospel, offers people a way out, a power that can and will set them free. When Jesus met that man on the other side of the lake and set him free from the evil spirits that tormented him, was he resisting evil or proclaiming the gospel? Both! We cannot proclaim the gospel without resisting evil. It's like the two great commandments: *Love the Lord God with all your heart and mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.* They go together. They must go together.

If we say we love God, but do not love our neighbor, we prove ourselves to be liars. And in the same way, if we proclaim good news, but stand idly by in the face of injustice or poverty or discrimination or cruelty or dishonesty, our words are empty and worthless and powerless.

That's what they did with that man living among the tombs. As long as he was out there in the caves, away from town, out of sight, out of mind, as long as he didn't bother them, who cares? Who cares? Jesus did, because Jesus came to bring the good news of peace to all humanity, and Jesus understood that meant resisting evil when it shows its face.

But, let's be fair. What could the townspeople have done for that man, even if they wanted to? They lacked the capacity, they didn't have the power, to heal him, to set him free. Right?

Well, here's the thing. You do! You, the members of Christ's church, you, the members of Christ's body, are Christ's heart and hands and feet today. You carry in your bodies his message and his spirit. You are called to do what he did: *to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil.*

We are unbound. Free to do our best to serve the Lord, facing evil, but doing it Jesus' way, standing firmly on the side of people, all people.

*You call us into your church, to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be your servants in the service of others, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil ...* Would it be better, would it be easier, would we be more comfortable, if we just left out that last phrase?

Can you tell me that you can look out at this world in which we live and not see evil? Can you tell me that you can look even into your own backyard, or even into your own soul, and not see the marks of evil there too?

When policy and indifference mean that some children go hungry while others have more than enough -- in Sudan or Haiti or Romania or even in our own country -- is that merely unfortunate? Or is it evil?

When a woman is physically abused is that just a shame, the result of bad choices or a bad conscience or bad upbringing, or is it evil?

When teenagers tease and mock and ridicule and ostracize a kid who doesn't quite fit in or at least doesn't quite fit their idea of fitting in, is that just kids being kids? Or is it evil?

When you curse somebody out or spread gossip or lies or say what comes to your mind without thinking just to cause hurt, is that just losing your cool? Or is it evil?

When a class of human beings is singled out for discrimination and abuse -- because of race, religion, gender, sexual preference, economic status -- is that merely a social problem? Or is it evil?

When wars -- just or unjust, fought for whatever reason, good or otherwise - claim tens and hundreds and thousands of thousands of innocent lives and wreak havoc on economies and environments and social institutions, is that merely the price to be paid for survival and security and freedom? Or is it, in some way, the fallout of the pervasive evil among us?

Yes - the idea of resisting evil is complicated, isn't it? So what are we to do? We know there is real evil in this world and we want to take the Lord's side in standing against it, but how do we heed God's call to resist the powers of evil without becoming part of the problem ourselves?

There are so many folks in our community living like dead people, howling in the hills, so to speak, and cutting themselves on the stones. There are so many people, young and old, searching for an identity, for something to live for, something to believe in, someone to love them, something to become.

Maybe you are even one of "those people" this morning!

Jesus shows us the way to compassion by believing always in what we can become. So on this annual meeting Sunday, I wonder, what will we become this year as we seek to be Christ to our community? What transformations will take place in our lives, as a community and as a Church as we allow Jesus to drive out our demons of despair and division, of anger and fear?

For the man of the Garasenes, his healing continued and his transformation became more and more complete as he told others through words and especially actions "*how much God had done for him.*" May this be so, as well, for you and for me. Amen.