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ARC 4 · STORIES ABOUT JESUS, 31–40

The Power and the Mercy

Ten stories about Jesus, fully prepped.

THE TEN STORIES

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> A few days before your table meets, learn the story the way hosts have always learned stories: **Recite, Retell, Recall**.

RECITE

Read it out loud to yourself a few times during the week.

RETELL

Say it in your own words with the text nearby to check yourself.

RECALL

Tell it with the text closed. That is it.

OR READ IT FIRST

Cannot get it cold? Read it aloud, close the book, tell it anyway — and ask the table to catch what you drop.

Twenty minutes across a week. Nobody is asking you to memorize a script — the five Cs are all you need to hold in your head, and every story here comes with them already worked out.

The sample telling is training wheels, not a script. It is told, never read — reading aloud makes a classroom, telling makes a table.

STORY 31 · THE POWER AND THE MERCY

Through the Roof

Read it first: Mark 2:1–12

THE FIVE CS

CONTEXT

Jesus is back home in Capernaum, and word gets out. The house fills past capacity — people jammed inside and packed around the door — while he teaches.

CHARACTERS

A paralyzed man on a mat. Four friends carrying him. The crowd blocking the door. The religious scholars sitting inside, keeping score. Jesus.

CONFLICT

There is no way in. The friends can't get their man anywhere near Jesus — so they climb onto the roof, dig through it, and lower him down on ropes, mat and all, into the middle of the room.

CLIMAX

Mark's exact hinge: *seeing their faith* — the friends' faith — Jesus says to the paralyzed man, "My child, your sins are forgiven." The scholars silently charge blasphemy; Jesus answers the unspoken thought and heals the man's legs to prove what they can't see about his sins.

CHANGE

The man stands, picks up his own mat, and walks out through the stunned crowd. Two healings happened — the visible one existing to certify the invisible one. And the door into both was four friends who refused to accept "no way in."

A SAMPLE TELLING

Jesus came home to Capernaum, and the town found out. The house packed out — people wedged shoulder to shoulder inside, and a crowd sealed around the door so thick that nobody else was getting in. And Jesus was teaching them.

Down the street come five men. Four of them are carrying the fifth on a mat, one corner each, because he's paralyzed — he can't come to Jesus, so his friends are bringing him. And they arrive at the house and hit the wall of backs. No way in. Not a chance.

Now, here's where most stories end: *we tried.* They carried him all this way; the door was blocked; what can you do?

These four look up.

Houses there had flat roofs with external stairs — packed earth and thatch over beams. So they haul their friend, mat and all, up onto the roof, work out roughly where Jesus is standing beneath them… and start digging. Through somebody's roof. Mark says it plainly: they made an opening. Imagine being inside — the teaching interrupted by scraping, then falling dust, then daylight, then a *hole*, widening — and then a man on a mat descending on ropes into the middle of the room, right in front of Jesus.

And here is the line the whole story turns on. Mark says: *Seeing their faith* — their faith, the four on the roof, sweaty and grinning through the hole — Jesus said to the paralyzed man, "My child, your sins are forgiven."

Stop on both halves of that. First: the faith Jesus responds to isn't the sick man's — the story never mentions his faith at all. It's his friends'. This is the first story in the gospels where a community *carries* someone to Jesus, and their faith opens the door for him. Some seasons you're a corner-carrier. Some seasons you're the man on the mat, and your friends' faith holds when yours can't. Both are in this story on purpose.

Second: Jesus leads with forgiveness — the healing nobody asked for. The scholars in the room hear it and think, silently, *blasphemy — only God can forgive sins*. And Jesus, knowing their thoughts, takes their logic and walks it back at them: which is easier to *say* — your sins are forgiven, or stand up and walk? Anyone can claim the invisible. "So I will prove to you that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." He turns to the man: "Stand up, pick up your mat, and go home."

And he does. Stands, rolls up the bed he was carried in on, and walks out through a crowd that has to part to let him — while everyone praises God, saying they've never seen anything like this.

Look once more at the four on the roof, because they're the reason this story leads this arc: they are what a table is. A few people who love someone enough to carry

him, who treat "no way in" as a construction problem, and whose faith Jesus counts on behalf of the friend who couldn't walk himself there.

THE FOUR QUESTIONS, TUNED

01 What stood out to you?

02 What does this show us about Jesus — what he sees, and which healing he puts first?

03 Where are you in this story right now — carrying a corner, or on the mat? And who carries you?

04 So what are we going to do about it?

> **AN ACT**
>
> Pick up a corner this week — as a table if you can. Name one person who can't get themselves to help right now (illness, depression, crisis, age) and carry them one concrete step toward it: the ride, the appointment made, the meal, the sitting-with. Roof optional; refusal to accept "no way in" required.

STORY 32 · THE POWER AND THE MERCY

The Withered Hand on the Sabbath

Read it first: Mark 3:1–6

THE FIVE CS

CONTEXT

Sabbath, in the synagogue. Jesus's Sabbath conduct is already a flashpoint, and his opponents are done debating — Mark says they watched him closely, hoping he'd heal, *so they could accuse him*.

CHARACTERS

A man with a deformed hand. The watchers, using the man as bait. Jesus. The congregation, caught between.

CONFLICT

The trap: heal on the Sabbath and stand accused of working; don't, and the man stays broken. Jesus refuses the frame — he calls the man to the front, in the open, and puts the question to the room: does the law permit good deeds on the Sabbath, or evil? Saving life, or destroying it?

CLIMAX

Silence — nobody will answer. And Mark records something rare: Jesus looked around at them *angrily*, deeply saddened by their hard hearts. Then: "Hold out your hand." Restored.

CHANGE

The man goes home whole. And the watchers go out and immediately begin plotting to kill Jesus — with the Herodians, their political enemies, because hatred makes fast friends. The story lays it bare: when compassion and compliance collide, Jesus doesn't hesitate — and religion that would rather keep a rule than restore a man is the thing that makes him angry.

A SAMPLE TELLING

It's the Sabbath, and Jesus is in the synagogue. And so is a man with a withered, deformed hand — and so are the watchers.

Mark tells us their posture straight out: Jesus's enemies watched him closely. Not to learn. *Hoping* he would heal the man, "so they could accuse him of working on the Sabbath." Sit with how upside down that is: they're hoping for a miracle — as

evidence for the prosecution. The man with the hand isn't a person to them at all. He's bait.

Jesus sees the whole board. And he could sidestep it so easily — find the man afterward, heal him privately, no incident. Instead he does the opposite of quiet: "Come and stand in front of everyone." Front and center. Whatever happens next is happening in the open, because Jesus is about to make the hidden question public.

Then he asks it, straight at the watchers: "Does the law permit good deeds on the Sabbath, or is it a day for doing evil? Is this a day to save life or to destroy it?"

Notice he doesn't ask, "am I allowed to heal?" He raises the stakes to where they actually live: on God's day, in God's house, a man stands here broken and I can mend him — is mending him good or evil? Because there's no neutral. Choosing not to do the good you can do isn't nothing; it's a choice with a victim.

And the room goes silent. Nobody will answer. The scholars won't say "evil" — absurd. They won't say "good" — it concedes everything. So they hold their tongues and their rule.

Then comes a sentence Mark almost never writes. Jesus *looked around at them angrily* — and, in the same breath, was *deeply saddened by their hard hearts*. Mark barely ever shows us Jesus angry, so when he does, pay attention to the trigger. Not the sinners. Not the crowds. Not even the trap. What angers Jesus is religion so calcified that it will stand in God's own house, look at a broken man, and prefer the rule to the restoration. Anger and grief together — because he's furious at what their hearts have become, and heartbroken about the same thing.

Then, to the man: "Hold out your hand." He holds it out — and it's restored. Whole. Notice, wryly: Jesus never even *did* anything you could call work. No touch, no mud, no lifting. He said five words and God did the rest. The trap snapped shut on air.

And the ending, which Mark refuses to soften: the watchers walk straight out of the synagogue — on the Sabbath, mind you — and begin plotting to *kill him*, teaming up with the Herodians, their sworn political enemies. Apparently plotting murder didn't violate their Sabbath. Healing did.

That's the story. A man went home with two working hands, and the religious went home with a murder plan, and the question Jesus asked the silent room is still standing there, addressed to every rule we've ever hidden behind: is this a day to save life? Every day is that day. Compassion doesn't check the calendar.

THE FOUR QUESTIONS, TUNED

01 What stood out to you?

02 What does this show us about Jesus — what makes him angry, and what he does about it in the open?

03 Where are you in this story — the man waiting to be called forward, or honestly, sometimes the silent room? What rule, habit, or "not my place" do you hide behind when good needs doing?

04 So what are we going to do about it?

> **AN ACT**
>
> Do the inconvenient good this week — the one you've been not-doing because it's awkward, off-schedule, not your role, or might cost you standing with somebody. Do it in the open. Five words and a restored hand: it usually takes less than we've built it up to be.

STORY 33 · THE POWER AND THE MERCY

The Storm

Read it first: Mark 4:35–41

THE FIVE CS

CONTEXT

Evening, after a full day of teaching by the lake. Jesus says, "Let's cross to the other side," and they set out — leaving the crowd behind, taking him *just as he was* in the boat.

CHARACTERS

Jesus, asleep on a cushion in the stern. The disciples — at least four of them professional fishermen who know this lake and know real danger when they're in it. The storm.

CONFLICT

A fierce squall drops onto the lake — the geography there breeds them — waves breaking into the boat, the boat filling. The professionals are out of moves. And Jesus is asleep.

CLIMAX

They wake him with the rawest prayer in the gospels: "Teacher, don't you *care* that we're going to drown?" He gets up, speaks to the storm — "Silence! Be still!" — and the wind stops and the water goes glass-calm.

CHANGE

Then he asks them the questions: why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith? And Mark gives us the truth: they were *more* terrified after the calm than during the storm — "Who is this man, that even the wind and waves obey him?" The storm was scary. The person in their boat was bigger.

A SAMPLE TELLING

It had been a long day of teaching by the lake, and as evening came, Jesus said, "Let's cross over to the other side." So they left the crowd on the shore and set out — Mark says they took him along "just as he was," bone-tired, no going home first. Other boats came too.

And Jesus fell asleep. In the stern, on a cushion — Mark remembers the cushion, the way eyewitnesses do. Exhausted, rocked by the water, out cold.

Then the lake did what that lake does. The Sea of Galilee sits in a bowl seven hundred feet below sea level with mountain gorges funneling down at it, and storms drop onto it out of nowhere — fishermen there knew and feared them. A fierce squall hits: wind screaming, waves breaking *into* the boat, the boat filling faster than they can bail.

Now hold this: at least four men in that boat — Peter, Andrew, James, John — were professional fishermen. This lake was their office. These are not nervous landlubbers; when *they* conclude the boat is going down, the boat is going down. They have run out of skill. And through all of it — the pitching, the shouting, the water rising around the cushion — Jesus sleeps.

So they wake him. And I love the gospel writers for keeping the wording, because it is not a tidy prayer. It's this: "Teacher — don't you *care* that we're going to drown?"

Don't you care. Every person at this table has prayed that prayer, or swallowed it. It's got panic in it, and accusation, and hurt — the theology's a mess and the faith is hanging by a thread, and it is completely honest. And notice what Jesus does with it: he doesn't correct the tone. He doesn't say "come back when you can ask nicely." He gets up.

And he speaks — not to the disciples, to the *storm*: "Silence! Be still!" Three words, the way you'd hush a dog. And the wind stops. Not eases — stops. And the water drops to a dead calm, that eerie glass-flat stillness, so fast it must have been more frightening than the waves. Wind takes hours to die; this took a sentence.

Then, in the ringing quiet, Jesus turns to them: "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" Gentle and pointed at once — he *had* said, back on the shore, "let's cross to the other side." Not "let's sail out and sink halfway." They had his word for the far shore the whole time; the storm was loud enough to make them forget whose boat it was.

And here's the ending Mark refuses to clean up: the disciples were terrified — the Greek says they feared a great fear — *after* the calm. During the storm they were scared. After it, they were awed to the bone, asking each other: "Who *is* this man? Even the wind and waves obey him!"

Which is the real question of the story, and it's a better one than "will Jesus fix my storm." Storms end differently — sometimes stilled, sometimes just survived, and this arc's honesty means saying so at this table. But the question the disciples carried off that boat holds either way: who is this, asleep in my boat, in my storm — and what does it mean that the storm knows his voice? And this too, small and enormous: the rawest, angriest, worst-worded prayer in the gospels — *don't you care*? — got answered. He can handle yours.

THE FOUR QUESTIONS, TUNED

01 What stood out to you?

02 What does this show us about Jesus — asleep in the storm, and what happens when he stands up?

03 Where are you in this story — what's the storm, and what's the "don't you care?" you've been swallowing instead of praying?

04 So what are we going to do about it?

> **AN ACT**
>
> Pray the honest prayer this week — the messy, accusing, terrified one you've been cleaning up before it reaches God. Out loud, at least once, exactly as it actually is. And if someone at this table is mid-storm right now: the rest of you are the other boats — stay close all week, and check in.

STORY 34 · THE POWER AND THE MERCY

Legion

Read it first: Mark 5:1–20

THE FIVE CS

CONTEXT

Jesus lands on the far side of the lake — Gentile territory, the region of the Gerasenes; pig herds on the hills tell you whose land this is. This is the shore they crossed the storm to reach.

CHARACTERS

A man who lives among the tombs — naked, screaming night and day, cutting himself with stones, snapping every chain the town has tried. The town, which has given up on everything but chains. A herd of two thousand pigs. Jesus.

CONFLICT

The man runs to Jesus and the torment speaks: *What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?* Jesus asks his name — the first person in the story to ask him anything — and the answer is the diagnosis of everything: *Legion, for we are many.*

CLIMAX

The spirits beg to enter the pigs; Jesus permits it; two thousand pigs stampede down the bank into the lake. The herdsmen run, the town comes out — and finds the untamable man *sitting there, fully clothed, and perfectly sane*. And the town, faced with that, is afraid — and begs Jesus to leave.

CHANGE

The healed man begs to come with Jesus. And Jesus — who tells almost everyone else to keep quiet — says no: *go home to your family, and tell them everything the Lord has done for you, and how merciful he has been*. He goes, and tells it through the Ten Towns, and everyone is amazed. The man nobody could hold becomes the first person Jesus ever sent.

A SAMPLE TELLING

The boat from the storm lands on the far shore — Gentile country, you can tell by the pig herds on the hills — and before Jesus is barely off the beach, a man comes running from the tombs.

Hear who this man had become, because Mark makes us look: he lived in the burial caves, among the dead, because the living had no place for him. Night and day he screamed among the tombs and on the hills, and cut himself with sharp stones. The town had tried everything it knew, which by the end was only chains — and he'd snapped every set; no one was strong enough to hold him. So they'd stopped trying. He was the man outside town that everyone knew about and no one knew.

And this wreck of a man runs at Jesus — and the torment inside him speaks first, shrieking: "Why are you interfering with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?"

And Jesus asks him a question. Such a small thing, and it levels me every time: "What is your name?"

Think about it. The town called him the demoniac, the danger, the thing in the tombs. Chains don't ask your name. Jesus does — the first person in the story, maybe in years, to address him as a *someone*. And the answer that comes back is the whole tragedy in one line: "My name is Legion, for we are many." A legion was six thousand Roman soldiers. He's saying: I'm occupied territory. There are so many things in me, I've lost track of where I went.

The spirits beg not to be sent away, and plead to enter the great herd of pigs on the hillside. Jesus permits it — and two thousand pigs stampede down the steep bank into the lake. Whatever else that means, it made one thing visible to a whole region: what had been living in that man, and that it was gone.

The herdsmen run for town. The town pours out to see. And here is the picture they find, worth framing: the man who howled in the tombs — *sitting* at Jesus's feet, *fully clothed*, and *perfectly sane*. Mark's three details are the whole restoration: stillness where there was frenzy, dignity where there was nakedness, a clear mind where there was a legion. Restored to himself.

And the town's reaction? They're *afraid* — and they beg Jesus to go away. Chew on that. They'd learned to live with the screaming; a healed man and two thousand drowned pigs was change at a price they didn't order. Sometimes people prefer a manageable brokenness to an expensive healing. Jesus doesn't argue. He gets back in the boat.

And the man begs to come with him — of course he does; the town chained him, why stay? But Jesus, who tells nearly everyone else *don't spread the word*, tells this man the opposite: "No — go home to your family, and tell them everything the Lord has done for you, and how merciful he has been."

Go home. To the people who knew him at his worst. Be the walking evidence. And he does — through the whole region of the Ten Towns, telling what Jesus did for him, and everyone who hears it is amazed.

The man nobody could hold, from the town that asked Jesus to leave, becomes the first missionary in the gospel of Mark. Not trained. Not credentialed. Sent — with the only sermon he had: *look what he did for me*. It's still the only sermon any of us actually needs.

THE FOUR QUESTIONS, TUNED

01 What stood out to you?

02 What does this show us about Jesus — crossing the lake for one man, asking his name, and how merciful he has been?

03 Where are you in this story — and what would "sitting, clothed, in your right mind" look like in the loudest part of your life? Who knew you at your worst who might need to hear what's changed?

04 So what are we going to do about it?

> **AN ACT**
>
> Tell your Ten Towns story this week — one person, one honest telling of something God (or grace, or this table) has done in you, in "look what happened for me" words, not preaching words. And as a table: is there someone your community treats as the man in the tombs — managed, avoided, chained off? Learn their name. That's how his healing started.

STORY 35 · THE POWER AND THE MERCY

The Woman Who Touched His Robe

Read it first: Mark 5:24–34

THE FIVE CS

CONTEXT

Jesus is on his way to an emergency — Jairus's dying daughter (the next story) — with a huge crowd pressing in on every side. This story happens *inside* that one, as an interruption.

CHARACTERS

A woman who has bled for twelve years — which under the law made her ceremonially unclean, and made everyone she touched unclean: twelve years untouchable. She has spent everything on doctors and only gotten worse. The oblivious crowd. Jesus, mid-errand.

CONFLICT

She can't ask publicly — her condition is shameful, and her touch technically contaminates. So she plans the smallest possible miracle: come up behind him in the crush, touch just the fringe of his robe, and slip away healed with nobody ever knowing.

CLIMAX

The plan works — she touches, the bleeding stops, she can feel it. And then Jesus stops the whole procession: "Who touched my robe?" The disciples think it's absurd — *everyone's* touching you. He keeps looking. And she comes, trembling, falls at his feet, and tells him the whole truth in front of everyone.

CHANGE

The word he chooses is the healing on top of the healing: "*Daughter*, your faith has made you well. Go in peace. Your suffering is over." Twelve years untouchable, and the first word of her new life is a family word, spoken publicly. He wouldn't let her be healed anonymously — because he wasn't only healing her body. He was giving her back her place among people.

A SAMPLE TELLING

This story happens inside another one. Jesus is rushing through a crowd toward a dying little girl — that's next week's story — and the crowd is a crush, pressing him on every side. And somewhere in that crush is a woman with a plan.

Here's her twelve years, quickly, because you need the weight of them: she has been bleeding — constantly — for twelve years. And under the law of that world, her condition made her ceremonially unclean, which meant everyone and everything she touched became unclean too. Twelve years of no embrace, no shared bench, no synagogue, no touch. She'd spent every coin she had on doctors, Mark says, and suffered plenty under their care, and only gotten worse. Broke, ashamed, and untouchable — for twelve years. Some of the people at your table will know exactly how long a chronic thing can make the years.

She's heard about Jesus. And she can't ask him — asking means announcing her condition to a crowd, means admitting her unclean self has been pressing through all these bodies. So she builds the humblest plan in the gospels: *if I can just touch his robe, I will be healed.* Not his hand. Not a conversation. The fringe of his clothes, from behind, in the crush — one stolen touch, and then vanish, healed, with nobody ever knowing she was there.

And it works. She fights through, reaches, touches the edge of his robe — and immediately the bleeding stops. Mark says she *felt* it in her body: healed. Twelve years, over, in a fingertip. Now just melt back into the crowd and —

Jesus stops. The whole urgent procession, the dying-girl emergency, everything — stops. "Who touched my robe?"

The disciples nearly laugh at him. "Look at this crowd pressing around you — and you ask who *touched* you?" Everyone was touching him. But Jesus keeps scanning the faces, because he knows the difference the crowd doesn't: a hundred people had bumped him. One had reached for him.

And she knows she's caught. She could still slip away — he doesn't know which face. Instead, trembling, she comes and falls at his feet and tells him the whole truth — all of it, the twelve years, the doctors, the plan, the touch — out loud, in front of everyone. The thing she engineered the entire plan to avoid.

And Jesus gives her the reason he stopped. One word first, and it's everything: "*Daughter.*"

Daughter. It's the only time in the gospels Jesus calls a woman that. Twelve years of *unclean, stay back, don't touch* — and the first public word of her new life is a family word. "Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace. Your suffering is over."

See what he refused to allow: an anonymous healing. She'd have gone home with a working body and the same hidden shame, still flinching from crowds, still untouchable in her own mind. So he stopped everything and drew her out — not to embarrass her, but because the body was only half of it. He healed her in public because she'd been shamed in public. He gave her back her *place*: seen, named, blessed, restored to the family in front of the same crowd she used to hide from.

Nobody gets healed anonymously with Jesus. Being cured and being called daughter are two different gifts, and he insists on giving both.

THE FOUR QUESTIONS, TUNED

01 What stood out to you?

02 What does this show us about Jesus — why he stopped, and the word he chose?

03 Where are you in this story — reaching in secret for help you don't want to need out loud? What's the "whole truth" that's hard to tell even here?

04 So what are we going to do about it?

> **AN ACT**
>
> Two directions — pick yours. If you've been managing something alone for a long time: tell one safe person the whole truth of it this week — this table counts. Or be the stop-everything person: someone in your week will reach for you in a small, deniable way (the "I'm fine," the half-said thing) — stop, turn around, and give them your full attention like the crowd isn't there.

STORY 36 · THE POWER AND THE MERCY

Jairus's Daughter

Read it first: Mark 5:21–24, 35–43

THE FIVE CS

CONTEXT

Jesus lands back on the home shore to a waiting crowd — and a synagogue leader named Jairus pushes through it and falls at his feet.

CHARACTERS

Jairus — a religious official, a man of standing, reduced to begging: *my little daughter is dying*. The crowd. The interrupting woman (previous story). The messengers with the worst news. The mourners. A twelve-year-old girl. Her parents. Jesus, with Peter, James, and John.

CONFLICT

Jesus goes with Jairus — and gets stopped by the bleeding woman. During the delay, messengers arrive: *your daughter is dead. There's no use troubling the Teacher now*. The emergency becomes a funeral mid-journey.

CLIMAX

Jesus overhears the news and speaks straight into Jairus's collapsing world: *Don't be afraid. Just have faith*. At the house — mourners wailing, then laughing at him for saying she's asleep — he puts everyone out, takes the parents and three disciples in, takes the girl's hand, and says, in her own language, *Talitha koum* — little girl, get up.

CHANGE

She stands up and walks around the room — she's twelve, Mark notes at last, the same number as the woman's years of bleeding — and everyone is overwhelmed. And then two utterly Jesus instructions: tell no one — and *give her something to eat*. Awe, and then a snack. God raises the dead and then remembers the child is hungry.

A SAMPLE TELLING

The boat lands back on the home shore, and the crowd is already waiting. And out of it comes a man named Jairus — and everyone would have known him: leader of the local synagogue, a man of position, the sort of man who does not fall on his face in public.

He falls at Jesus's feet. "My little daughter is dying," he pleads. "Please come and lay your hands on her; heal her so she can live." No position left, no dignity spared. Just a father. Whatever the religious establishment thought of Jesus, this synagogue official has a dying twelve-year-old, and theology has a way of simplifying at a hospital bedside.

Jesus goes with him. Immediately. And the whole crowd surges along —

— and then comes the interruption. If your table heard last week's story, this is where it happens: the woman, the twelve years, the touch, the "*Daughter.*" Beautiful, unhurried — and every minute of it, Jairus is standing there while his little girl runs out of minutes. Feel that with him. Jesus stopped for someone else's twelve years while his twelve-year-old was dying.

And before the woman's story even finishes, the messengers arrive from Jairus's house with the sentence no parent survives hearing: "Your daughter is dead. There's no use troubling the Teacher now."

There's no use. The kindest cruelty in the Bible — it's over, stop hoping, come home.

But Jesus overhears. Mark's word is that he *ignored* their message — heard it and refused it — and turned to Jairus and spoke into the exact second the man's world was caving in: "Don't be afraid. Just have faith." He doesn't explain the delay. He doesn't promise the outcome in words. He just asks Jairus to keep walking with him — now with nothing left to walk on but the person beside him.

They reach the house and it's already a funeral: weeping, wailing, the mourners in full voice. Jesus asks, "Why all this commotion? The child isn't dead; she's only asleep." And the mourning flips instantly to l*aughter* — they laughed at him, Mark says, because they knew dead when they saw it. The same crowd, wailing to mocking in one line. Grief-noise and scorn-noise, and Jesus puts all of it outside.

Then it's quiet. Just the mother, the father, Peter, James, John — and the girl. And Jesus takes her hand — take note: touching a dead body made you unclean, and he takes her hand the way he let the bleeding woman touch him; he keeps absorbing what was supposed to contaminate him and reversing the flow — and he says two

words in Aramaic, her own home language, and Mark preserves the actual sound of them because Peter never forgot it: *"Talitha koum."*

Little girl. Get up.

And she does. Stands right up and walks around the room — she was twelve years old, Mark finally tells us, twelve years alive against the woman's twelve years bleeding, two daughters healed on one afternoon. Her parents are overwhelmed — the word is closer to *beside themselves*.

And then the ending I would not trade for anything. Jesus gives two instructions. First: don't spread this around — no spectacle, this was for the family, not the crowd. And second: *"Give her something to eat."*

She's been dead. Heaven's power has just filled the room. And Jesus looks at this newly-alive little girl and thinks of the thing her stunned parents haven't: she's a twelve-year-old, and she's hungry. God incarnate raises the dead — and then remembers the snack. The power and the mercy, the whole arc, in one bedroom: mighty enough to call a child back across death, and attentive enough to feed her lunch.

THE FOUR QUESTIONS, TUNED

01 What stood out to you?

02 What does this show us about Jesus — his response to "there's no use," and the smallness of his attention?

03 Where are you in this story — is there a place in your life where the messengers have already said "there's no use," and what would "don't be afraid, just have faith" mean there this week?

04 So what are we going to do about it?

> **AN ACT**
>
> Do the "give her something to eat" act this week: for someone in your life who's just come through something enormous — grief, surgery, crisis, collapse — do the small physical mercy everyone else is too overwhelmed to think of. The meal, the errand, the school pickup, the load of laundry. Resurrection-scale love shows up carrying a plate.

STORY 37 · THE POWER AND THE MERCY

Walking on Water

Read it first: Matthew 14:22–33

THE FIVE CS

CONTEXT

Straight after feeding the five thousand. Jesus *makes* the disciples get in the boat and go ahead while he dismisses the crowd — and then finally gets the solitude he'd been seeking: alone on the mountain to pray, into the night.

CHARACTERS

The disciples, rowing against a contrary wind, far from land, in the darkest hours. Jesus, coming to them across the water around three in the morning. And Peter.

CONFLICT

They see a figure walking on the sea and scream — *it's a ghost!* Jesus calls through the wind: take courage, I am here. And Peter answers with the strangest, boldest prayer: Lord, if it's really you, tell me to come to you on the water.

CLIMAX

"Come." Peter climbs over the side and walks on the water toward Jesus — actually walks — until he looks at the wind and waves, terror returns, and he starts to sink: "Lord, save me!" *Immediately* Jesus reaches out and grabs him.

CHANGE

"You of little faith — why did you doubt?" — said while holding him. They climb into the boat together, the wind stops, and the boat worships: *you really are the Son of God.* The story keeps Peter's sinking on purpose, forever: the one who got out of the boat is the one who got caught.

A SAMPLE TELLING

Right after feeding the five thousand, Jesus does something abrupt: he *insists* the disciples get in the boat and cross ahead without him. He sends the crowd home. And then, at last — remember, he'd been trying to rest since before the loaves — he climbs the mountain alone to pray. Night falls with him up there and the disciples out on the water.

And the lake turns on them again. A strong wind against the bow, heavy waves, and they're far from land, rowing and getting nowhere, hour after hour. Matthew puts

the time at around three in the morning — the fourth watch, the hour when strength and hope run out together. They've been fighting that wind most of the night.

And then, across the water, through the dark and the spray — a figure. Walking. On the sea.

They scream. Honestly, fair enough: "It's a ghost!" Whatever categories they had, "friend strolling on the storm" wasn't one of them. And through the wind comes the voice: "Take courage. I am here. Don't be afraid."

Now here's where the story becomes Peter's — and where it earns its place in this canon. Because Peter calls back the strangest sentence: "Lord, if it's really you, tell me to come to *you*, walking on the water."

Not "make the wind stop." Not "get in the boat and prove it." Peter's test of whether it's really Jesus is whether Jesus will call him *out* into the impossible. Somewhere in that impulsive heart is a piece of perfect theology: if it's really him, then out there with him is safer than in here without him.

And Jesus says one word: "Come."

And Peter climbs over the side of the boat — feel the other eleven watching — and puts his weight on the water. And it holds. He *walks on the water* toward Jesus. A fisherman, on the surface of the sea he'd worked his whole life, walking. For a few impossible steps, there are two people in history walking on water, and one of them is a man exactly like the people at your table.

Then Peter does the thing we all do: he looks at the wind. Takes his eyes off the one who called him and audits the conditions instead — the waves, the dark, the obvious madness of his position — and the moment the storm becomes bigger in his vision than Jesus, he starts to sink. And he cries out the shortest prayer in the Bible, three words, the best prayer ever prayed: "Lord, save me!"

And Matthew gives us the word that is the whole gospel in adverb form: *immediately.* Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and grabbed him. No pause to let the lesson sink in with the sinker. No "let's talk about what went wrong here" while Peter gulps water. The hand comes first, instantly — the rebuke, such as it is, comes *while*

holding him: "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" And notice: little faith. Not none. Little faith walked on water for several steps and got caught the moment it failed. That's apparently enough to work with.

They climb into the boat together, and the wind just — stops. And the boat's worth of men who stayed dry worship him: "You really are the Son of God!"

One last thing, and it's why the church that told this story for decades never edited Peter's sinking out: eleven men stayed in the boat and stayed dry and have no story. One man got out, walked, doubted, sank, and got caught — and his soggy, imperfect attempt has fed courage to twenty centuries. A movement that keeps its founders' failures in the founding stories is a movement where nobody has to pretend. You will look at the wind. You will sink. The hand is *immediate*. Get out of the boat.

THE FOUR QUESTIONS, TUNED

01 What stood out to you?

02 What does this show us about Jesus — the call to come, and the immediacy of the hand?

03 Where are you in this story — gripping the boat, mid-walk, or sinking and embarrassed to yell? What's the wind you keep looking at?

04 So what are we going to do about it?

> **AN ACT**
>
> One out-of-the-boat step this week — the thing you'd attempt if you trusted the catch more than you fear the sinking. Name it at the table before you leave (naming is half the climbing over the side), do it, and report back — including if you sank. Sinking reports are honored here; they're the founder's own genre.

STORY 38 · THE POWER AND THE MERCY

The Ten Lepers

Read it first: Luke 17:11–19

THE FIVE CS

CONTEXT

Jesus is traveling toward Jerusalem along the border between Galilee and Samaria — borderland, which explains the mixed company in this story. Entering a village, he's met by ten men with leprosy, standing at the mandated distance.

CHARACTERS

Ten lepers — misery has integrated what religion couldn't; at least one is a Samaritan living alongside Jews, because outcasts can't afford prejudice. Jesus. The priests, offstage. And the one who comes back.

CONFLICT

They cry out from far off — *Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!* — and Jesus heals them in the strangest way in the gospels: he doesn't. Not on the spot. He says only, *go show yourselves to the priests* — the law's protocol for someone already cleansed. The healing will happen mid-obedience, or not at all.

CLIMAX

As they went, they were cleansed. Ten healed bodies on the road to the priests — and one of them stops, turns around, and comes back shouting praise, falling at Jesus's feet, thanking him. And Luke lands the detail like a hammer: *he was a Samaritan.*

CHANGE

Jesus asks the questions that hang in the air over every blessing since: Didn't I heal ten men? Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give glory to God except this foreigner? And to the one at his feet: *Stand up and go. Your faith has made you well* — a bigger word than "cleansed." Ten got healed. One got whole. Gratitude was the difference.

A SAMPLE TELLING

Jesus is walking the borderland between Galilee and Samaria — the seam between two peoples who despised each other — heading for Jerusalem. And as he enters a village, ten men with leprosy meet him, standing at a distance, because the law required it. Leprosy meant total exile: outside the town, away from family, required to keep back and announce your own uncleanness. These ten lived out there together

— and notice the company: Jews and at least one Samaritan, sharing exile. On the healthy side of the line, those two didn't mix. Out here, misery had already torn down the wall religion kept up. Outcasts can't afford prejudice.

They cry out across the distance: "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"

And Jesus heals them in the strangest way in all the gospels: he doesn't. Not there. No touch, no word of power, no visible change. He calls back one sentence: "Go show yourselves to the priests."

Understand what that meant. Under the law, a priest's inspection was the *last* step — the certification that declared an already-healed leper clean and readmitted him to family, worship, and life. Jesus is sending ten still-leprous men to get certified for a healing that hasn't happened. The instruction only makes sense if you leave now, diseased, trusting it'll be true by the time you arrive.

And they go. All ten — give them that; ten sets of feet moving on nothing but his word. And Luke tucks the miracle into a subordinate clause, mid-stride: *as they went, they were cleansed.* Somewhere on that road, between the crying out and the arriving, skin cleared. Ten men suddenly staring at their own hands.

Now — nine keep going. And be fair to the nine: they're doing *exactly what Jesus said.* Priests, certification, then home to wives and children they haven't touched in years. Nobody disobeyed. They just… proceeded. Received the gift and went on to the paperwork and the life it reopened.

One stops. Turns around. And comes back down the road *shouting* — praising God at full volume — and throws himself at Jesus's feet, thanking him and thanking him. And then Luke lands his detail like a hammer: *this man was a Samaritan*. The double outcast. The one with the least theological reason to expect anything from a Jewish healer is the only one who came back to the source.

And Jesus asks three questions that hang in the air over every blessed life since: "Didn't I heal ten men? Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give glory to God except this foreigner?" There's real ache in it. Ten healings went out; one thank-you came back; the return rate on grace was ten percent, and the one was the outsider. Again.

Then, to the man at his feet: "Stand up and go. Your faith has made you *well*." Mark the word — it's bigger than "cleansed." All ten got clean skin. This one, kneeling in the road in his gratitude, got *whole* — the healing completed on the inside. The nine received a miracle. The tenth received the Giver.

That's the story's quiet arithmetic, and it's aimed at all of us who've been the nine: gratitude isn't the polite receipt for grace. It's the second half of the healing — the part that turns a fixed body into a whole person. The nine weren't ungrateful monsters. They were busy, obedient, and gone. Coming back is the whole difference.

THE FOUR QUESTIONS, TUNED

01 What stood out to you?

02 What does this show us — about how Jesus gives, and what the coming-back adds that the healing alone didn't?

03 Where are you in this story — honestly: what's a healing, rescue, or grace in your life that you took and *proceeded* with, nine-style, without ever coming back?

04 So what are we going to do about it?

> **AN ACT**
>
> Come back down the road this week. Two thank-yous, delivered in person or in your own handwriting: one to God — specific, out loud, for a named grace you've been living on without acknowledging — and one to a human being who was part of it and never got thanked. Shouting optional. Stopping and turning around is the act.

STORY 39 · THE POWER AND THE MERCY

Bartimaeus

Read it first: Mark 10:46–52

THE FIVE CS

CONTEXT

Jericho, on the road to Jerusalem — this is the last healing in Mark's gospel, days before the cross, with a huge crowd walking with Jesus.

CHARACTERS

Bartimaeus — blind, a beggar, parked on the roadside where the traffic was, one of the few healed people the gospels name. The crowd, who tell him to be quiet. Jesus.

CONFLICT

Bartimaeus hears it's Jesus of Nazareth passing and starts shouting: *Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!* The crowd — many of them, Mark says — tell him to shut up. He shouts louder.

CLIMAX

Jesus stops. And tells the crowd — the same crowd that was shushing him — *tell him to come here*. Then the question that gives the beggar back his personhood: *What do you want me to do for you?*

CHANGE

"Rabbi, I want to see!" — "Go, for your faith has healed you." Instantly he can see — and note his direction: Jesus said *go*, and Bartimaeus *follows him down the road* instead. The road to Jerusalem. The last healed man in Mark becomes a follower on the way to the cross, and the crowd that silenced him becomes the crowd he walks in.

A SAMPLE TELLING

Jericho, and the road out of it toward Jerusalem — Jesus's last stop before the week of the cross, though only he knows that. A big crowd is moving with him. And parked on the roadside, right where the foot traffic is thickest, sits a blind beggar. Mark does something rare here: he gives us the man's name. Bartimaeus. Most of the healed in the gospels are anonymous — "a leper," "a paralyzed man." This one had a name the early church still knew. Remember that; the whole story is about him being *somebody*.

Bartimaeus hears the commotion and asks what's happening, and someone says: Jesus of Nazareth is passing by. And Bartimaeus — who can't see the crowd's faces but has clearly heard the stories — starts shouting. Not asking. Shouting: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

And the crowd tells him to be quiet. *Many* of them, Mark says — this wasn't one grump; it was the general verdict of the procession. Don't bother the teacher. Know your place. Beggars are roadside furniture; furniture doesn't shout.

Here's the first thing to love about Bartimaeus: the shushing works on him like fuel. He shouts *louder* — "Son of David, have mercy on me!" He has exactly one shot at the mercy of God walking past his patch of dirt, and he is not going to miss it to spare the crowd's comfort. There's a whole theology of prayer in that: desperate beats dignified.

And Jesus stops. The procession to Jerusalem — halted by a beggar's voice. And notice the small, pointed thing he does: he doesn't call Bartimaeus himself. He tells the *crowd* — the same crowd that was shushing him — "Tell him to come here." He makes the silencers into the messengers. And the crowd flips instantly, the way crowds do: "Cheer up! Come on, he's calling you!"

Bartimaeus throws aside his coat — a blind beggar's coat was his shop, his blanket, the thing his coins landed on; he leaves it in the dust — jumps up, and comes to Jesus.

And then Jesus asks him a question that, on its face, is absurd: "What do you want me to do for you?"

The man is blind. Everyone can see what he needs. But stop and feel what that question does. Bartimaeus has spent his life being a *category* — the blind beggar, decided-for, talked-over, told to hush. Nobody asks a category what it wants. Jesus looks at him and hands him back the dignity of his own desire: *you tell me. You're the authority on your own need.* It's the same question Jesus had just asked James and John a few verses earlier when they came angling for thrones — the ambitious got the question and flunked it. The beggar gets the same question and answers it perfectly:

"Rabbi — I want to see!"

"Go," Jesus says. "Your faith has healed you." And instantly the man could see.

But watch his feet, because they're the ending. Jesus said *go* — you're free, back to your life. And Bartimaeus doesn't go. Mark's last line: *he followed Jesus down the road.* And that road goes to Jerusalem — to the palms, the temple, the cross. The last person Jesus heals in Mark's gospel takes his brand-new eyes and spends their first days watching what love was about to do. The man the crowd silenced walks off *inside* the crowd, following.

The dignity came before the sight: first he was asked, then he was healed. Keep that order. It's the arc's whole thesis in one roadside stop.

THE FOUR QUESTIONS, TUNED

01 What stood out to you?

02 What does this show us about Jesus — the stopping, and the question he asks a man everyone else decided for?

03 Where are you in this story — shouting through the shushing, or honestly, sometimes in the crowd doing the shushing? And if Jesus asked you tonight, "What do you want me to do for you?" — what's your real answer?

04 So what are we going to do about it?

> **AN ACT**
>
> Ask the Bartimaeus question this week — to a real person your world tends to decide for instead of asking: the person on the corner, the aging parent, the struggling friend everyone has plans for. "What do you want — what would actually help you?" Then honor the answer. Dignity first; help second. That's his order.

STORY 40 · THE POWER AND THE MERCY

Lazarus

Read it first: John 11:1–44

THE FIVE CS

CONTEXT

Lazarus of Bethany — brother of Mary and Martha, one of the few people the gospels say plainly that Jesus *loved* — falls deathly ill. The sisters send word: *Lord, your dear friend is sick*. And Jesus, inexplicably, stays where he is two more days. By the time he comes, Lazarus has been in the tomb four days — past every hope, even folk hope.

CHARACTERS

Martha, who runs out to meet Jesus with her grief and her theology. Mary, who stays home until called, then falls at his feet with the identical sentence. The mourning community. Lazarus, four days dead. Jesus, who loves all three of them.

CONFLICT

Both sisters, separately, say the same words to his face: *Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.* The accusation inside the faith. And Jesus answers each sister differently — Martha gets the declaration (*I am the resurrection and the life*), Mary gets his tears.

CLIMAX

At the tomb — angry at death itself, deeply troubled — Jesus weeps. Then: *Roll the stone aside*. Martha objects — the smell, four days. *Didn't I tell you that you would see God's glory if you believe*? He prays aloud, and shouts: *Lazarus, come out!* And the dead man comes out, wrapped in graveclothes.

CHANGE

Unwrap him and let him go — the community's hands finish what the voice began. Many believe; the authorities, in John's telling, begin planning Jesus's death in earnest from this day. Raising his friend costs Jesus his life, and he knew it walking in. The shortest verse in the Bible sits at the center of the longest sign: Jesus wept. Both are true at every graveside since.

A SAMPLE TELLING

There was a family in Bethany that Jesus loved — John says it flat out: Jesus loved Martha, and her sister Mary, and their brother Lazarus. Their home was one of the few places he could just *be*. And word comes to Jesus from the sisters, a message with

the confidence of friendship in it: "Lord, your dear friend is very sick." They don't even ask him to come. They know he'll come.

He doesn't. John writes the hardest sentence in the story right here: Jesus loved them — *so* he stayed where he was two more days. Sit in that "so," because the sisters had to live in it. The delay wasn't neglect; John insists it was purposeful, for a glory nobody could see yet. But nobody in Bethany knew that. All they knew was: we sent for him, he didn't come, and our brother died.

By the time Jesus arrives, Lazarus has been in the tomb *four days* — past even the folk belief that a soul lingered near the body three days. Four days means gone. Finished. The house is full of mourners.

Martha hears he's coming and goes out to meet him on the road — of course she does; Martha moves. And she says to his face the sentence she's been carrying: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Hear everything in it: faith (*you could have*) and wound (*you weren't here*) fused together. It's the sentence every griever knows some version of. And she can't stop her faith from adding: "Even now, whatever you ask of God, God will give you."

And Jesus gives Martha what Martha's soul runs on — truth to stand on: "Your brother will rise again." She answers with good theology, held at arm's length: "Yes — at the resurrection, at the last day." And Jesus takes the doctrine and turns it into a person, present tense, standing on her road: "I *am* the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying. Do you believe this, Martha?" And Martha — grieving, wounded, magnificent — gives the fullest confession in John's gospel: "Yes, Lord. I have always believed you are the Messiah, the Son of God."

Then Mary comes, falls at his feet weeping, and says the *identical sentence*: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Same words. And watch: Jesus doesn't give Mary the theology lecture. Martha needed truth; Mary needs presence. He sees her weeping, and the mourners weeping, and John says a deep anger welled up within him — anger, the text really says that; standing at the wreckage death makes of people he loved, Jesus is *furious at death itself* — and he was deeply troubled. "Where have you put him?" "Lord, come and see."

Then the shortest verse in the Bible, and the deepest: *Jesus wept*.

Stop there. He knows what he's about to do. He knows Lazarus will be at dinner next week. And he stands at his friend's grave and cries anyway — real tears, enough that the mourners say, "See how much he loved him." Whatever else this story gives us, it gives us this: God does not skip the grief on the way to the glory. The tears are not a failure of faith in the resurrection. The Resurrection himself cried them.

Then: "Roll the stone aside." Martha — practical to the end, even now — objects: "Lord, he's been dead four days. The smell will be terrible." And Jesus: "Didn't I tell you that you would see God's glory if you believe?" They roll it. He prays out loud — for the crowd's sake, he says, so they'll know who sent him — and then he shouts into the tomb:

"Lazarus — come out!"

And the dead man came out. Still bound hand and foot in graveclothes, face wrapped in the headcloth, hobbling into the daylight. And Jesus's last word in the scene is an instruction to everybody standing there frozen: "Unwrap him, and let him go." Even here, the community gets hands-on work — the voice raises the dead; the friends unwind the wrappings.

One more thing, because the story insists on it: this miracle had a price, and Jesus knew the tag before he walked in. From that day on, John says, the authorities began plotting in earnest to kill him. Raising Lazarus is what finally set the cross in motion. He gave his friend back his life at the cost of his own — which means "Jesus wept" and "Lazarus, come out" are both true, and so is this: he'd already decided our graves were worth his.

THE FOUR QUESTIONS, TUNED

01 What stood out to you?

02 What does this show us about Jesus — the tears and the shout, and that he brought both to one graveside?

03 Where are you in this story — carrying an "if you had been here," waiting in a four-days place, or standing near someone else's tomb? What would it mean that he weeps there *before* anything changes?

04 So what are we going to do about it?

AN ACT

Be an unwrapper this week. Someone near your table is coming out of a dark place — grief, illness, failure, a long four-days season — still tangled in the graveclothes of it: isolation, shame, logistics, the casseroles that stopped coming. The voice that calls people back to life is God's work; the unwrapping is explicitly ours. Pick one person and unwind one wrapping: show up, sit with them at the grave if that's where they still are, and don't rush their timeline. Jesus didn't rush his own tears.

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