**Ascension Sermon for\\\ 4-2-2017**

**James the Younger, the Forgotten Follower**

Text: Mark 15:40-41

He’s called James the younger in today’s Bible translations. In the Greek of Mark’s gospel it is literally James “the little.” Some say the name is to be taken literally, that this James must have been a little fellow, one whose nickname was “shorty.” Most likely, however, he is called James the younger to distinguish him from the other James among the disciples. James the younger was the second disciple named James among the original 12. His father’s name was Alphaeus. His mother’s name was Mary. She was one of the Marys who stood at the foot of Jesus cross on Good Friday and then went to the tomb on Easter morning. Those are the facts at our disposal. This is all we know from the Bible. Moreover there is very little tradition or legend about James the Younger. So I’ve got a bit of challenge before me today to give you a scriptural sermon about someone the Bible tells us nothing about. But listen carefully -- it can be done.

Today we consider James The Younger -- The Forgotten Follower. We will consider first **WHAT WE DON’T KNOW,** then think about **WHAT UNKNOWNS HAVE ACCOMPLISHED,** and finally ask **WHAT ABOUT HIS FATHER?**

1. **WHAT WE DON’T KNOW**

There were at least three men by the name of James who were close to Jesus. James, son of Zebedee; James the Younger, and later on, James who is called “the Lord’s brother.” We heard about the first James a few weeks ago. He was one of the inner circle of Jesus’ disciples. The third James, the one called “the Lord’s brother,” is the one who wrote the New Testament book of James. This James was a blood relative of Jesus. The most likely meaning of the words is that he was Jesus’ half-brother, a younger son born to Joseph and Mary. This James became a leader in the early church in Jerusalem.

The remaining James is our study for today. As is good Lutheran practice, we will limit ourselves to the facts given us in the Bible. That means that we know almost nothing at all about James the Younger.

Does that trouble you? Does it disturb you to discover that the Bible doesn’t answer all our questions, doesn’t tell us everything that we would like to know? Some people have become hung up over this point and lost their faith. “There are too many unanswered questions,” they complain, “too many things I don’t understand.”

Think how often the 12 disciples were baffled and perplexed. Living with Jesus, enjoying the most intimate fellowship with the Son of God, every day they saw things and heard things they just didn’t understand. Usually Jesus taught them patiently, but sometimes he simply said: “Wait. At the right time you’ll understand.” We all have unanswered questions. Many of them are trivial like: What did Jesus look like? Why did Judas betray Jesus? What did James the Younger do? Some are more profound: Why didn’t the Jews who saw Jesus’ miracles believe? How can it be that, if we’re saved, it’s all God’s doing; if we’re lost, that’s entirely our own fault? If God wants all to be saved, why doesn’t he use his power and force everyone to believe? Then there are the dangerous questions, the ones that make us doubt the goodness and wisdom of God: Why does God let tragedies come? Why doesn’t he answer my prayer? Why did he take my spouse or my child away from me?

One of the most intelligent Christians who ever lived was an adult convert by the name of Paul, a highly educated man, a student of the great philosopher Gamaliel. There were many things, however, he didn’t understand. But Christ had come to him and called him to faith. Paul was sure of his salvation, and that was all that really mattered. In the midst of severe persecution, Paul wrote to Timothy: “I know whom I have believed, (I have believed in our Savior Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel) and I am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day.”(2 Tim 1:12) -- I am confident that God will bring me through whatever he allows to come into my path until I stand safely in Heaven. To the Romans, Paul writes: “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.” Did you hear that? Paul knew the one thing that is essential. He knows the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In the next verse he defines what that is: “In the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last.” The Gospel is the Good News that Jesus came to rescue us by being our substitute. He was righteous in our place, and he died on the cross to pay for all our sins. That righteousness is ours through faith.

Someone has written: “The trouble with many people today is that they have not found a God big enough for modern needs.” They look upon God as a “Grand Old Man” who was a power in his day, but cannot be expected to cope with the complexities and problems of life today! Aren’t we thinking along such lines if we think that somehow we should be able to know what he knows and understand all he does? Someone gave me a wall plaque. It says: “Lord, your ocean is so big, and my boat so small.” Or perhaps you’ve heard of the small child working diligently -- carrying pailful after pailful of water -- in hopes of emptying the sea into the hole in the sand he has dug. The Lord tells us simply: “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”(Is 55:8).

Sure there are unanswered questions. But Paul knew that someday his questions would be answered, and he was willing to wait. It was Paul who said: “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully” (I Cor 13:12). Why this confidence? Why this beautiful, humble childlike trust? He wasn’t in the Upper Room on the night before Jesus died. But years later he spoke with those who had been there. And they told him what Jesus had said. Jesus was about to make his journey to the cross, they said. He knew his death would grieve us bitterly. And this is what he said to us: “Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy. In that day you will no longer ask me anything”(Jn 16:22-23). When we see Jesus face to face in Heaven, we will have no questions -- we will know and understand fully. In the meantime, what we don’t know won’t hurt us, as long as we know what God wants us to know about Jesus!

1. **WHAT UNKOWNS HAVE ACCOMPLISHED**

The fact that we have in the Bible disciples of whom we know almost nothing at all can actually be very comforting to us. You and I are not likely to be remembered very long by very many either. Does that mean that everything we do today is done in vain? To the contrary! Our lives are Jesus’ disciples are important.

Maybe it will be good to remind ourselves that some of the greatest benefactors of mankind are utterly unknown today. Who was it, for example, in the forgotten past who invented the wheel? Who was it that first discarded the crude and clumsy ox-drawn sled and fashioned the first rough wheel? He was one of the most important inventors that ever lived. Almost all the inventions of modern times depend in some measure on the wheel. All of us came here on wheels. The wheels of industry give you a livelihood. Even ships and airplanes are helpless without wheels. Take away the wheel, and civilization goes back to the stone age. Who invented the wheel?

Who preserved the Bible for us? Who were the humble, faithful men in the early centuries of the church’s history, who sat in their cold and cheerless cells, hour after hour, day after day, and copied by hand with painstaking care the sacred words of the inspired Scripture? They kept alive for generations of sinners yet unborn the gospel of the pardoning mercy of God in Jesus Christ, his Son. Who were they? What were their names?

We would do well to remember this when we are engaged in what people call the thankless work of the church. We will probably never get very much credit for the hours we put in or the sacrifices of effort, talent and money. The same is true of our living for Jesus everyday -- in our families, at our job, in the community. Most of it goes unnoticed. But so what? God is glorified! Sinners are called to repentance! The gospel is proclaimed!

It really doesn’t matter, you know, whether people remember you or me. But it DOES matter that they learn to know our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. “This is life eternal,” Jesus said to his Father in prayer, “that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” Someone has written: “This is what will make good workmen of us all -- to be impressed with the majesty of Jesus, the supremacy of the Kingdom of God, and the eternal worthwhileness of contributing to the advancement of that Kingdom.”

1. **WHAT ABOUT HIS FATHER?**

As I thought about James the Younger, I couldn’t help but wonder **WHAT ABOUT HIS FATHER?** James is regularly identified as Son of Alphaeus -- that’s how you identified people in an age when there weren’t last names. But Alphaeus never once appears in person in any of the references. Mary, James’ mother, is mentioned among the women who had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs. She had stood under Jesus’ cross on Good Friday. She was among the women who hurried to the grave on Easter morning to complete Jesus’ burial. But what about James’ father? True, he may have been back home working at his job, earning a paycheck so his wife and son had the financial means to follow Jesus and serve him. But it strikes me that he was the absent father -- like too many today.

God’s plan for children is that they have a father/mother TEAM to raise them in a stable, loving home environment. And God’s plan is that the father/husband take the lead in that home, serving his family as its head, loving and sacrificing himself for his wife and children like Jesus Christ loved and sacrificed himself for his church. But in much of modern day society fathers are simply not there -- and even if they inhabit the house, they are as good as absent when it comes to leading their family and training their children.

Marriage is sacred, the Sixth Commandment teaches. Christians more than anyone have solid reason to be faithful to their marriage vow, for it’s a promise they made also to God. “Sons are a heritage from the Lord; children a reward from him” (Ps 127:3). Christians more than anyone have reason to take parenting responsibilities seriously, for God has entrusted those precious souls to us. Godly fathers begin by building up their marriage, loving their wife like Christ loved the church and gave himself for her. And then, together, husband and wife as a team, as a united front, seek to “bring up their children in the training and instruction of the Lord.” Being faithful to our marriage vow and being involved in the godly rearing of our children are ways to serve God.

We don’t know much about James the Younger or his father. But this much we do know. Jesus’ encouragement and promise was meant for them -- as it is for us: “Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”