

July 7, Ordinary 14B (Mark 6:1–13)

## **The disciples want to know who Jesus is. The people from his hometown do not.**

by [Marilyn McEntyre](#) in the [July 2024](#) issue

For decades I have revisited a little book by Jesuit priest Robert Ochs called *God Is More Present Than You Think*. The claim turns out to be true in surprising ways.

Mark's story of Jesus returning to his hometown is an unsettling reminder of what may happen when we begin to recognize—or practice—the presence of God. From one point of view, we can read it as a teaching tale: you can't go home again. You can't fit back into the role you once had in a family system. You can't climb back into the cocoon. And if you've stayed in the cocoon, you'll have to leave it. Growing in faith means outgrowing.

Jesus' visit to his hometown is a reality check for his family and friends. They thought they knew him—good boy, good man, but only a local laborer. As it turns out, he is more than that, and God is more present than they thought. Jesus is in touch with a scary, mysterious source of power. To acknowledge who he is they would have to give things up: the comfort of familiarity, tribal loyalties, the claims they've had on him as childhood companions or family friends.

The story doesn't speak of Jesus' intentions or foreknowledge; we just hear that he goes to his hometown, people take offense, and he can “do no mighty work there.” Mark doesn't psychologize. He keeps his focus on what happens: Jesus acts, people react, and Jesus moves on, leaving them to ponder what they have seen in their hearts.

The kind of attention the story requires of us is largely imaginative. What must it have been like, we wonder, for Jesus to revisit the place where people knew him only as Joseph's son—not a scholar and certainly not a being of another order? And what must it have been like for them?

“Our dream of safety has to disappear,” writes W. H. Auden. This line from the end of “Leap Before You Look” provides an apt footnote to the gospel. God may be more present than we think, but to fully inhabit that awareness means letting go of our sense of being safe. That we are ultimately safe in the embrace of love itself offers a very different kind of reassurance than the habits and structures that offer provisional safety at best. Jesus is, like C. S. Lewis’s Aslan, not safe but good.

The parallels Mark draws between the townspeople’s reactions to Jesus and his to them are striking, even slightly comic. They are “astounded” at his claims and his gifts, and Jesus in turn is “amazed” at their unbelief. To be fair, their questions about him are not altogether different from Mary’s questions to Gabriel at the Annunciation. It’s good to pause over any challenge to what we have believed—personal, political, or spiritual—and ask, “Wait, what?”

But their questions, unlike Mary’s, are contaminated by fear—rhetorical gestures designed to preserve the status quo, to protect what Jesus seems to endanger. Their outraged “Who does he think he is?” (as Eugene Peterson renders it in *The Message*) is a far cry from the disciples’ question, in a similar moment of frightened amazement: “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” (Mark 4:41). The disciples want to know. The townspeople don’t. As a teacher I have often thought about the challenge in Jesus’ question to the paralyzed man, “Do you want to be made well?” (John 5:6). One might similarly ask, “Do you want to learn? Do you want to know?” Knowing something new will cost you something.

Opening their minds to who Jesus was must have been deeply frightening. Giving up what we think we know is frightening. We don’t know what might be required of us, what fissures might open in our families or circles of friends. We don’t know if we are equipped to cope with the consequences. So too often we resort to the easiest defense: taking offense. “They took offense at him,” we read. It’s what we do sometimes to protect ourselves from what complicates our safe and simple judgments.

I love the question Presbyterian candidates for ordination are asked: “Will you pray for and seek to serve God with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?” Imagination is part of ministry, a dimension of good reading and of pastoral wisdom. To step back and ask occasionally about those we know best, “Who is this person?” is to remember that each of us is fully known only to God. If we allow God to work through us, mighty works may happen.

If we are willing. If not, the flow of divine power will be redirected. Grace, like water in the atmosphere, cannot be diminished, but it can be redistributed. We have a role in how God works within and among us. Though God is present, divine action sometimes requires consent, even collaboration. Without it, Jesus can “do no deed of power” among those who have known him.

It is no accident that immediately after rejection in his hometown, Jesus sends the disciples out as strangers into new places. Their words, like wine, will be poured into new wineskins. When we find ourselves clinging to safety nets and building walls for protection, we might return to the point that our sense of safety has to disappear. God is more present than we think.