And again he began to teach beside the sea, and a very great crowd gathered by him so he got into a boat and sat on the sea, and all the crowd were on the land beside the sea. And he taught them many things in parables. He said to them in his teaching, “Listen! Look, a sower went out to sow. And during the sowing, it happened that some seed fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate it up. And other seed fell on the rocky ground where it did not have much earth, and, at once, it sprouted up because it had no deep earth. And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and because it had no root, it withered. And other seed fell in the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked it, and it did not produce fruit. And other seeds fell on the good earth, and coming up and growing, it kept producing fruit. One seed bore thirtyfold and another sixty and another a hundred.” And he said, “Whoever has ears to hear, hear” (4:1-9).

And when he was alone, those who were around him together with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them, “To you the mystery of God’s rule has been given, but to those outside everything is in parables, so they may look and look, and not see, and listen and listen, and not understand, lest they convert and receive forgiveness” (4:10-12).

And he said to them, “Do you not understand this parable? And how will you comprehend all the parables? ‘The sower’ sows the word. And these are the ones ‘beside the road’ where the word is sown. When they hear it, at once Satan comes and removes the word which was sown in them. And similarly these are the ones sown ‘on the rocky ground.’ When they hear the word, at once they receive it with joy. Yet they do not have a root in themselves but are temporary. Then when oppression or persecution occurs because of the word, at once they fall away. And the others sown ‘in the thorns,’ these are they who hear the word, and the worries of this world and the lure of wealth and desires for the other things penetrate them and choke the word, and it becomes fruitless. And those which were sown on ‘the good earth’ are whoever hear the
word and accept it and bear fruit, one thirtyfold and one sixty and one a hundred” (4:13–20).

And he said to them, “A lamp is not brought in to be put under a bucket or under a bed, is it? Rather to be put on a stand! For there is nothing hidden except to be made known, and nothing is hidden away, but so it may come to be known. If anyone has ears to hear, hear” (4:21–23).

And he said to them, “Pay attention to what you hear. By the measure which you measure, it will be measured out to you. And more will be added for you. For whoever has, it will be given to them, and whoever does not have, even what they do have will be taken away from them” (4:24–25).

In this section, Mark passes on several different sayings which go back to Jesus and one which probably came from early Christian preaching. The Parable of the Sower, the exhortation to hear, and the following sayings about a lamp, about what is hidden being revealed, about receiving back the measure we give, and about those who have gained more, almost certainly come from Jesus. By contrast, the words about looking and not seeing are based on Isa 6:9–10, and it was probably early Christians who first used them to explain why many outsiders rejected the Christian message. The Gospel of John also resorts to Isa 6:10 to explain why people did not believe in Jesus, and in John the quotation does not appear in Jesus’ own words, but in a comment from the evangelist (John 12:39–40).

It may well be, however, that Mark himself composed the interpretation of the Parable of the Sower. In the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas (log. 9), the Parable of the Sower appears without an appended explanation. Historically, it seems likely that Jesus used parables to help his audiences understand his message, rather than make it totally obscure. Surely, if Jesus did not want the crowds to understand and repent, he would not have bothered to preach to them. Moreover, the explanation of the parable seems less suited to the time of Jesus than to that
of the early church. It was in the later era that such things as persecution arose.

For Mark, the Parable of the Sower with its appended explanation contains the key to Jesus’ message. Earlier, the gospel mentions that Jesus was teaching with authority (1:21–27), but we receive no information as to what that teaching was. Now, with the Parable of the Sower and its explanation, we have the first extended presentation of Jesus’ message. Before giving the explanation, Jesus says that if his students do not understand this parable, they will not understand any parable. Mark is now providing us with the essence of what Jesus has to tell us.

The point of the parable with its appended explanation is that people who hear Jesus’ words must endure with patience in order to bear fruit. In the first half of the parable and its explanation, we have a series of groups who hear the word but do not endure. Some forget the word almost immediately; others fall away because of persecution; still others forsake the gospel to pursue worldly success. None of these bear fruit. The second half of the parable and its explanation tell us that there are other people who do go on to bear fruit abundantly.

Mark suggests that this message must be preached to the world at a later time, as it cannot be preached yet. Indeed, Jesus talks in parables so that no one but his students will understand. Nevertheless, as soon as Jesus privately explains what the parable means, he insists there is nothing hidden which will not be revealed. The gospel is a lamp, and no one brings in a lamp only to hide it. Mark emphasizes this point by adding the words, “If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.” Accordingly, the time to share the message hidden in the parable will surely come. Later in Mark’s gospel, Jesus will insist that “the good news must . . . be proclaimed to all the nations” (13:10).

Mark’s Greek suggests that Jesus is the lamp which will be hidden temporarily and then give light to all. The Greek in 4:21–22 is ambiguous—apparently deliberately so. One could
also translate it, “A lamp does not come to be put under a bucket or under a bed, does it? Rather to be put on a stand! For it is not hidden except to be made known; and it was not hidden away, but so it may come to be known.” Of course, in Mark’s gospel Jesus is the one who “comes” (e.g., 1:14), and elsewhere in the New Testament he is explicitly called a “lamp” (Rev 21:23).

The reason the message of Jesus cannot yet be preached is that prior to the crucifixion outsiders have no hope of understanding the need for patient endurance. The parable itself suggests that even after Jesus has given the supreme example of patient endurance, most people who hear the word will still fall away because of such things as persecution or the lure of wealth. Accordingly, Jesus would not be doing outsiders a favor by preaching his message clearly before his death. The crowds might indeed turn and be forgiven. However, they would later desert and so end up worse off than if they had never really heard the good news.

Indeed, as we shall see, even the students to whom Jesus explains the need for patient endurance will fall away prior to the crucifixion, and this section of Mark begins to prepare us for the disaster. When Jesus tells the parable, the disciples do not understand it. After Jesus explains it, he warns them to beware as they listen. Those who fail to understand will lose even what they have. Subsequently, as we shall see, the disciples do lose everything. Here in chapter 4, Jesus says that it is outsiders who look and do not see and listen and do not understand. However, a few chapters later after his students have remained obtuse, Jesus will tell them that they have eyes and yet do not see and ears and do not hear (8:18).

Of course, Mark’s intended Christian readers lived in the era when endurance could be proclaimed and had to be lived. Jesus had already been crucified, and so they had to be steadfast both in preaching and practicing the truth.
Questions for Reflection:

Do most people in our time who initially become enthusiastic about religion later fall away? Do they do so for the same reasons Jesus gives in the explanation of the Parable of the Sower or for other reasons? What would patient endurance in being a Christian involve in our own situations today?

14. Mark 4:26–34

And he said, “God’s rule is like this: It is as if a person throws seed on the earth. And he sleeps and rises, night and day, and the seed sprouts and becomes long. How, he does not know. On its own the earth bears fruit, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear, but whenever the fruit is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle because the harvest stands ready” (4:26–29).

And he said, “How shall we compare God’s rule or with what parable shall we put it? It is like a mustard seed, which when it is sown on earth is the smallest of all the seeds on earth. Yet when it is sown, it comes up and becomes bigger than all vegetables and produces big branches so the birds of the sky can nest under its shadow” (4:30–32).

And with many such parables he kept speaking the word to them as they were able to hear it, but without a parable he did not speak to them, but in private to his own students he kept explaining everything (4:33–34).

After using the Parable of the Sower to emphasize the need for patient endurance, Mark passes on two other parables which further this message. Both the Parable of the Seed Growing by Itself and the Parable of the Mustard Seed
emphasize the contrast between the small beginnings of God’s rule and its ultimate greatness. Hence, in the larger context Mark provides, they reinforce the teaching that Jesus’ followers must wait patiently.

Mark ends the section on parables by stressing that Jesus spells out his message to his students but not to outsiders.

Once more, Mark hints that later it will be time to share the full message with the multitudes. Both the Parable of the Seed Growing by Itself and the Parable of the Mustard Seed suggest that the kingdom which is now small will grow to include vast numbers of people. Mark tells us that Jesus spoke to the crowd “as they were able to hear.” As of yet, they could not fully hear. However, when God’s rule expands, they too will be able to understand.

Questions for Reflection:

Is the way that God’s power enters our lives (whether as individuals or as communities) fundamentally mysterious?
Is it sometimes a mistake to try to explain everything, especially to people who are spiritually immature?

15. Mark 4:35–41

That day, when it became evening, he said to them, “Let’s go over to the other side.” And leaving the crowd, they took him along as he was in the boat, and other boats were with him. And a strong windstorm came up, and the waves splashed into the boat so the boat was already starting to be filled. Yet, he was in the stern, sleeping on the cushion. And they roused him and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are dying?” And when he was
fully awake, he reprimanded the wind and said to the sea, "Settle down; shut up!" And the wind stopped, and there was a great calm. And he said to them, "Why are you scared? Don't you have faith yet?" And they became greatly afraid and said to each other, "Then who is this that even the wind and the sea listen to him?" (4:35-41).

After Jesus has taught the disciples verbally about the need for patient endurance, he begins to teach them—and the reader—the same lesson through his deeds. He invites his students to cross the lake. A storm arises. Yet he remains asleep. Finally, when the boat is about to sink, they become desperate and wake him up. He saves them, and then reprimands them for cowardice. If they had only trusted him more, they would have endured the storm longer.

The story suggests that the reason Jesus' followers should be able to endure is that he exercises the very power of God himself. In the Hebrew Scriptures, only God can control the elements (e.g., Ps 107:23-30). Here, Jesus controls the wind and the sea. Hence, his students need not fear. Significantly, the story dramatically concludes with the disciples wondering who Jesus might be.

As we shall see, the stilling of the storm is only the first in a series of miracles in which Jesus challenges his students to endure and hints to them who he is.

This opening story suggests that the disciples will fail to meet the challenge because they do not pay enough attention to Jesus. In the story the disciples fail completely. They do not endure the storm, and Jesus must reprimand them for cowardice. They also do not perceive who Jesus is and so the story ends with them wondering who he could be. Perhaps it is Mark's need to foreshadow the reason for their failure which explains the odd details near the beginning of the narrative. Thus, it is strange that Mark tells us the disciples took Jesus along "as he was in the boat," and it is even stranger that he mentions "and other boats were with him." Subsequently, these play no role in the story, and since the disciples have already left the crowd, it
is not even clear whose boats these could be. I would suggest that Mark added the odd details to hint that the disciples are not paying attention to Jesus. Even though he was the one who proposed that they go across the lake, they took him along mostly by accident. Since he was already in the boat, they let him stay even though he could have used another vessel.

Questions for Reflection:

What is faith? Must genuine faith include a willingness to persist in following Jesus despite obstacles and danger? Does it sometimes seem in times of crisis that God does not care? What can we do to perceive more clearly at times of crisis who Jesus is and that he does care?

16. Mark 5:1–20

And they came to the other side of the sea to the district of the Gerasenes. And when he had come out of the boat, at once a person from the tombs who had an unclean spirit met him. He had his dwelling in the tombs, and no one was able any longer to bind him, not even with a chain (because often he had been bound with fetters and shackles, and the shackles were pulled apart by him, and the fetters were shattered), and no one was strong enough to subdue him. And all night and day in the tombs and on the mountains he was shouting and cutting himself up with stones. And when he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and knelt down before him. And shouting in a loud voice he said, “What have we got to do with each other, Jesus, Son of God Most High? I implore you in God’s name, do not torture me!” (for Jesus was saying to him, “Unclean spirit, come out of the person”). And he asked him, “What is your name?” And he said to him, “‘Legion’ is my name