

# WHAT HAPPENED IN THE CEMETERY...

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Text: Luke 8:26-39

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## SCRIPTURE

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Luke 8:26-39

Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me"— for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) Jesus then asked him, "What is your name?" He said, "Legion"; for many demons had entered him. They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss. Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned. When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

The Word of the Lord...

**Thanks be to God!**

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## SERMON

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This might sound rather weird to some of you when I say it, but I happen to like cemeteries. As I think about it, I have been in some rather amazing cemeteries. I have been to the great Pyramids of Giza, which are incredible feats of construction and engineering, but basically they were tombs for the pharaohs of ancient Egypt, in other words, a cemetery. I have also been to the Valley of the Kings in Luxor, Egypt and seen those elaborately decorated tombs, carved into the side of these massive cliffs.

When we were in Scotland, we visited cemeteries surrounding old churches, some of them a thousand years old. In many of these old graveyards, any place there was a bare patch of ground, if you looked closely you would see pieces of human bones. This is because over the centuries hundreds and hundreds of people have been buried there, but only the very rich could afford a coffin. Most were buried in a shroud, which deteriorated over time. So after five or six hundred years the soil is just saturated with bones.

I have visited World War II American military cemeteries in both the Philippines and in Belgium. The rows and rows of thousands of markers is an awe inspiring sight, especially when you think that most of those lying there were so young, 18, 19, or 20 years old. What is especially poignant are the number of markers that simply read, "Here rests in honored glory, a comrade in arms, known but to God." A soldier lies in that grave that they were unable to identify in any way. Somewhere a family grieved a son or husband or father who never returned from the war, but that is all they know. His body was placed in this particular spot with honor and dignity, but there was no way for his loved ones to know this.

But I happen to enjoy visiting ordinary cemeteries found in any town or village or out along a country road. I think our Oak Shade Cemetery, here in Marion, is an absolutely beautiful place. The Rev. Alexander Marshall, the pastor who was serving when this church was built, is buried there in a nice spot under a huge old oak tree. My predecessor and good friend, Jay Miller, is also buried in Oak Shade. And, while circumstances can change, for now I am thinking that when my time comes I would like my remains to be placed in Oak Shade. Now, yes, of course, cemeteries can be very sad places, but there are two main reasons why I like them. The first is that woven into all the sorrow is an immense amount of love. Everywhere you look you can see it. Many stones read something like, "Beloved wife and mother..." or "In loving memory..." Or "Gone but loved and not forgotten..." The Bible says that love drives away fear, and perhaps that is why I have never found cemeteries to be particularly scary places. I find myself keenly aware of that love as almost a palpable force when you stand among those stones.

But the second reason I like cemeteries is that, as you know, I love stories. As you walk around and look at the monuments, you discover many stories; stories of families, stories of sacrifice, stories of hope and stories of loss. As I walk around on a sunny afternoon and look at names and dates. I start to figure out connections, and I imagine all sorts of scenarios and circumstances that might have resulted in the information that is etched on the stones before me.

Our scripture lesson for this morning is a rather amazing story that is almost beyond imagination, and it takes place in a cemetery. But before we get into all this, you need a little background into what was going on. Our text opens with this, "Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee." Then it says, "As he stepped out on land..." Obviously, Jesus had been in a boat, and if you look at the verses just prior to our text, you will find the account of Jesus calming the storm. You might remember that story. Jesus had been teaching and healing and evidently wanted to get away for some rest. So, he gets in a boat with his disciples and goes for a little sail out on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus is exhausted and is fast asleep, when a terrible storm blows up. The disciples are terrified and wake up Jesus. He immediately calms the storm, amazing the disciples, who wonder, "Who is this, that he commands even the winds and the waters and they obey him?"

The disciples are shaken up, battered by a storm and blown far off course. They made for the nearest land and found themselves in a place that was unfamiliar. The Sea of Galilee is located in the middle of some very rough terrain. It is surrounded on all sides by steep hills and bluffs some of them quite rugged. Most of these hills are limestone and so they are riddled with caves, and this is where the cemetery part comes in. It was not a park-like setting with trimmed lawns and tasteful landscape. No, in those days, people would often bury their dead in such caves, sealing up the body in niches and cavities.

So the place where the disciples landed was rocky and barren, isolated from human activity, with the dark mouths of these caves, here and there. Furthermore, it was completely on the opposite side of the lake from their home town of Capernaum and therefore gentile territory. Even if they didn't have their bearings they would have known this from the herd of pigs grazing on the high banks overlooking the water. Jews don't keep pigs, of course, so they knew they were among foreigners. So all in all the disciples must have been uneasy and anxious, and ready to be on their way.

Suddenly their worst fears were realized, for out of one of these caves came a creature, screaming and ranting. Was it human, animal or something else altogether? Whatever it was, it wore no clothes with hair long and matted. Its body covered with cuts and bruises. And this creature comes running straight for Jesus. I don't know about you but if I was one of those disciples I would have been out of there. I would have had my boat back in the water and rowing like crazy. I am sure that was what they wanted to do, and would have done. But Jesus stood still and waited.

The text tells us that this man was possessed by demons, or actually what it literally says is that he was possessed by unclean spirits. Today, of course, we would describe him differently. We would say that he was mentally ill, suffering from delusions and probably schizophrenia. But in that culture, something that was unclean, was not just dirty, it was the opposite of anything that was holy or decent or worthwhile. It was the

opposite of anything to do with God. And the original readers would have been amazed at this story, because Jesus is in a just unbelievably desperate situation. First of all, he was in gentile territory, which is always a spiritually precarious place to be. Then he was among tombs, and if he should even accidentally touch a bone or some other part of a corpse, he would be ritually unclean. Finally, he was confronting unclean spirits that were absolutely out of control. It was a position that no devout Jew would want to be in, let alone a rabbi who had devoted his life to walking in God's ways.

In the previous verses, the disciples had wondered, "Who is this that he commands the wind and the waters?" The gospel writers answer with this story that seems to say, not only is Jesus in control of the forces of nature, but Jesus can walk right into the epicenter of evil spiritual forces and be totally unaffected by whatever happens. So let's continue with our story. This deranged wild man comes running at Jesus, falls down on the ground before him and screams out something that is absolutely incredible when you stop and think about it. The man cries out to Jesus, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me"— Literally what he says is, "Do not torture me!"

This must have completely confused the disciples who were standing there. This horrible, crazy man comes screaming out of the tombs, a man so strong and powerful that no one is able to keep him under control, even with physical restraints. He comes flying towards Jesus, looking like he is going to attack... but it turns out he is the one who is terrified. He is the one cowering in fear. He begs Jesus not to torture him. Does that make any sense at all? I mean, think about it. Is there any way you can imagine Jesus as a torturer, as one who inflicts pain? What is going on here?

I have begun to clean out my office, sort through books and papers and files. I came across some of the papers I had saved from many years ago when I was a commissioner from this presbytery to General Assembly. I only did that once, and it was quite enough. I know some pastors and elders enjoy that sort of stuff and God bless them for it. That is not one of my gifts. But you do get to hear some good speakers and preachers and one of them that year was Tony Campolo. Tony is a well-known scholar, professor, an author, a pastor and a noted speaker. I was looking over my notes and remembered that Tony had set up a polemic between love and power. He said that they are opposite entities, for the more power someone has the harder it is for that person to love. Think about those in the last century who had absolute power, ruthless dictators like Joseph Stalin, Adolph Hitler or Chairman Mao. They were not very loving, now were they? Conversely, Tony said, the more you love someone, the less power you have over that person. Tony was emphatic about this to the General Assembly, the highest governing body in our denomination, because he said that the church gets into all sorts of trouble when it becomes more concerned about power than it is about love. That is a good thing for you to remember as you go into this time of transition. Always let love be your guide, even if it seems like you are losing power and things seem out of control. Love matters more than anything else.

Tony said that there is only one person who can possibly bring together these direct opposite forces of power and love. Jesus Christ as the very incarnation of the Most High God, embodies both, being at the same time both all-powerful and all-loving. When we study the gospels, we see the loving nature of Jesus. However, the forces of evil, by their very nature, cannot experience the love of God. It is invisible to them. God's love is beyond their comprehension. So what is left? All they know and understand is God's infinite power. All they can imagine is that Jesus wants to exert that power and torment them. So that is why they are terrified.

The demons cry out to Jesus, "Leave us alone. We will go somewhere else. We won't bother another human being. We are unclean spirits so send us into those unclean pigs over there. What harm will that do?" And Jesus agrees. Jesus was so concerned about loving this poor tormented man that he did not need to show his power. He was not at all worried about punishing the demons, but he did want to heal their victim. So the evil leaves the man, enters the pigs and they go flying off the cliff into the waters below. It freaks out those watching the herd. They run into town and soon everyone in the region knows what has happened. They come out to see for themselves, and there is this man, in his right mind, clothed and calm and sitting and listening to Jesus.

You would think they would be happy and excited. This poor tortured man was now free and whole, and Jesus made it happen. That's great, isn't it? Let's go with that happy ending. Well, not quite. It says that they "asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear." Now, I used to think it was the owners of those pigs who were upset about the financial loss they had just incurred, but that is not what the text says. It says they were seized with great fear.

So, what was it that frightened them? I think it was the same thing that frightened the demons. This community had been dealing with this demented man for years and years, maybe since he was a child. They knew firsthand the strength of the evil power that controlled him, for it was far more than they could handle. They had tried to restrain him, tie him up, hold him down, and he always escaped. That is why they had driven him away from the community, off to the tombs where he could do little harm. Their fear was similar to the fear of the disciples after Jesus calmed the storm. Who is this man who can control what is completely uncontrollable? Whoever he is, he has immense power, and that is frightening. They had no concept of the great love of Jesus, but it was clear to them that he had power, and that could be dangerous. So they did not want him around.

Jesus and the disciples get ready to leave, and the healed man asks to go with them. But Jesus tells him to go home and tell everyone what God has done for him. Once again we have another ironic twist in the story. The demons ask Jesus if they can be sent into the pigs, and Jesus says yes. The townsfolk ask Jesus to leave the area and Jesus says yes. This grateful man who has been tormented for so many years asks to come with Jesus. He says no. Now, why is that? Jesus doesn't let this man come with him, because the only way for these people to begin to understand God's great love would be through him. He needed to go back and work to undo the brokenness and pain the evil in his life had caused. He needed to go back and be a part of his community, to be a loving son, a brother, maybe a husband and father. He needed to be home and in that home be a constant reminder of what the love of God can do.

It is a wonderful, amazing story, what happened in that cemetery so long ago, but what does it have to say to us today? Well, two things... First, Jesus has the power to go into the darkest, wildest parts of your life. Jesus is not afraid to walk among the dead and desolate portions within you. He has power over any evil that controls you. He can help you break your addiction, end the abuse, drive out the bitterness that consumes your life. He can expel whatever your demons might be and make you clean and whole and sane.

But the second thing this story has to say to us is that often we are the only way others are able to experience the love of God. It is indeed a sad and hurting world out there and the unclean spirits are legion. They are many. Furthermore, they are well aware of the power of God. They know of God's holiness, justice and ultimate authority. What these unclean spirits are doing is preventing so many from seeing God's forgiveness, love and mercy. So that is what we are called to do; to be a part of the community, a part of the lives of those around us, and to show how much God has done for us.

I mentioned at the beginning that I like cemeteries. Let me close with one more reason. Over the last 24 years I have stood with many of you in one of the nearby cemeteries, as we have said good bye to a loved one. Sometimes those have been very sad and difficult moments, but they have always been holy moments. And I am extremely grateful for the privilege of being a part of those very sacred times. So when I visit a cemetery, even if I have never been there before, I can't help but think of those times. They have been moments when we have experienced both the immense power and the infinite love of God. This is one of the things I often say in those moments: "We thank our God, who is a God of new beginning. Our God can take ordinary everyday things and transform them into important and beautiful things. Our God has promised that in his great mercy, we all can be born again into life full of hope." That is exactly what happened in that cemetery two thousand years ago. It is what can happen in our lives again and again each day. Thanks be to God. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.