

Finding the Rest You Crave
Mark 6:30-33; Matthew 11:28-30

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He said to them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” Mk. 6:31

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. Mt. 11:28-29

Rest is rapidly becoming an industry in our culture. Books are being published about it. Two of the most recent titles are *How to Do Nothing*¹ and *The Art of Rest*.² There are even apps for getting rest. The ad for one of them says, “Download calm today.” Another app offers bedtime stories for adults, and its radio ad dares a person to stay awake during the trial story. So it seems that entrepreneurs and authors are recognizing that many of us are tired and do not get nearly enough rest. Some are capitalizing on the idea that we have forgotten how to rest.

If we have forgotten how to rest, one of the reasons may be that we have forgotten what rest is. Is it sleep? It can't be sleep alone, for you know from experience that a person can sleep and sleep and sleep and wake, not rested but groggy and sluggish. Is the essence of rest taking time off from work? It can't be, for you know from experience that idleness can leave a person edgy and stir-crazy. Well, then, is rest at its core recreation? No; it can't be that either, for you know from experience that vacations full of recreation can leave a person anxious to get home because having fun can be a great deal of exhausting effort. If rest isn't sleep or time off or recreation, what is it? And how can you go about finding it?

This very well may be the question of our time and the field for evangelism today. The question that troubled Martin Luther 500 years ago and gave rise to the Protestant church was the question of how to find salvation in terms of forgiveness of sin.³ I venture to suppose that the guilt of 500 years ago – though it isn't gone – has given way to exhaustion so that now the vexing question before men and women is one that wonders how to find salvation in terms of rest. The paramount thing may not be freedom from sin, though that is still part of our message, but freedom from fatigue.

So against the background of a craving for rest I turn this morning to Jesus, to see what he knows about it. Specifically, I turn to the two instances in the New Testament when the word “rest” in the sense we are using it today is on the lips of Jesus: Mark 6:31 and Matthew 11:28-29.

I begin with the verse from Mark. “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.”

¹ Jenny Odell, (New York: Melville House, 2019).

² Claudia Hammond, (Edinburgh: Cannongate, forthcoming [2019]).

³ Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Mentor Books, 1950), p. 40.

Jesus knows our need for rest.

The immediate background of this verse is work the disciples had been conducting out in the field on the Lord's behalf. He had sent them on a mission of teaching, preaching, casting out demons, and healing the sick. (Mk. 6:7-13) All the work was to be done on a shoestring budget, relying heavily on hospitality for support, and wholly without guarantees of welcome. That whole atmosphere of responsibility must have left the disciples footsore, famished, and fatigued.

Jesus knew from his own experience how wearying this work of teaching and preaching and healing and traveling could be. He did his work with love in his heart, but it was still physically draining and emotionally wearing. He sat beside a well one blistering mid-day and asked a woman for a drink of water. (Jn. 4:6) He was spent, weary, and in need of a refreshing break. There was another day when a sorrowful need was put before him, and he groaned at the thought of doing the heavy lifting one more time. "You faithless generation," he said, "how much longer must I put up with you?" (Mk. 9:19) Jesus sent his disciples out into the field of labor and he knew the task was going to be physically demanding and emotionally wearing.

So when they came back to him, excited about what they had been able to do, but a little stooped in their shoulders, maybe, and with weariness on their faces, he said, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while."

Let's never forget that note in religion. Jesus wants us to rest. He doesn't want us to be lazy, of course, but he doesn't want us overburdened, over taxed, stressed, and thinking God blesses only workaholics. Jesus knows the need for rest is great, wants us to have it, and does not begrudge our desire for it.

Jesus knows the difficulty of finding rest.

Jesus saw the need for rest, and called his disciples to come away by themselves to a secluded place for a time of rest. But the rest they sought was interrupted. People, many of them with heart-breaking need, saw where Jesus and the disciples were headed, and they hurried there, too. How it could happen, I do not know, but some of them – maybe even many of them – outpaced Jesus and the disciples and got to the place of rest first.

The needs of these people who broke in upon the intended quiet time were so many and great that Jesus could not deny them. His heart went out to them. Jesus, tired as he was, had compassion on them, taught them, healed them, helped them. Rest, though it was much needed, had to take a secondary place. At last the disciples tried to get Jesus to send the people to their homes so they could get something to eat and so the weary disciples could get on with their much-needed rest. But Jesus told the disciples, "You give them something to eat." (Mk. 6:37) And then he put his tired disciples to work once again, this time to feed the hungry crowd.

Now, I want to take this episode of unfound rest and use it to venture a hypothesis. Even though we are dealing with a proposed strategy of Jesus – come away by yourselves and rest – the strategy of going off by yourselves to rest is a strategy that fails. The deserted place – let's call it "alone time" or "me time" or "Miller time" or "Calgon, take me away time" - does not necessarily have restorative properties. There is nothing inherent in the far off country – whether

it's sleep or time off or recreation – to restore. There is nothing inherently bad about these things either, but they haven't the power to guarantee restfulness. Much of this, I think, is because when we go off by ourselves to rest, we still have ourselves to deal with, and that is often far from restful, and because demanding need has a way of finding us wherever we are. "Come away by yourselves and rest" is a strategy that fails.

And so I pass now from the passage in Mark to the one in Matthew. "Come unto me," Jesus said, "Come unto me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."

Jesus calls the weary to himself.

The strategy in Mark was "Come away by yourselves." The strategy in Matthew is "Come to me." And the difference is profound.

The conditions of life are still the same in Matthew as they were in Mark. They are, for Jesus and the disciples, the conditions of a busy ministry. The disciples had been sent to cure disease, cleanse lepers, cast out demons, teach and preach, and to do it all on a shoestring budget. (Mt. 10:5ff). The workplace was going to be rife with tension. Jesus said the disciples were going to be like sheep amongst a bunch of wolves (10:16ff). It turned out there was doubt (11:2-6); there was rejection (11:20ff); there was plenty of cause for weariness. Against this exhausting background Jesus does not say "Come away by yourselves to rest" but "Come unto me."

Here now is the doctrine I want to draw for you. The rest you crave in this busy, fatiguing, and fast-paced world is not found in a place or an activity. Rest is found in a Person. More specifically, the rest you crave is found in the Person of Jesus Christ.

The really good news about this is that the rest you can have in Jesus is not a rest you have to find. It is a rest he gives. "Come unto me," he says, "and I will give you rest." My interlinear Greek New Testament tells me that the Greek of this passage is actually "I will rest you." "Come to me and I will rest you." Jesus, in this as in so much more, will do the work; he will take charge. He will give the rest.

Another piece of very good news is that the rest Jesus gives can happen – can rest you – right in the middle of the intrusions, interruptions, and responsibilities of work. Jesus likens it to being partnered with him in a yoke. In the days when farmers farmed with teams of animals they would yoke a younger, inexperienced animal with an older, experienced animal who would show the way and make the work easier and smoother. The images teaches that the kind of rest we need – the kind that renews, recharges, unwinds, and calms – is not sleeping, or doing nothing, or recreating, though these should not be denigrated; it is partnering with Jesus in every endeavor all through the day.

Come to him, all you who are weary and heavy laden; he will rest you. And in the rest that is partnership with him there is strength and hope and peace.