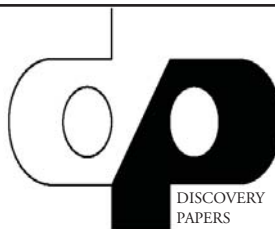


GREAT VISION, SMALL STEPS

SERIES: THE WAY OF THE LORD: FOLLOWING JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK



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Scott Grant
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Ed Turner demanded a great deal of his son but deliberately withheld praise. He reared him to be insecure because he believed that from insecurity comes greatness. One observer commented, “Greatness may not be the term; manic-depression probably is.” Ed Turner, though, capitulated to depression and blew his brains out when his son was twenty-four. His son? Ted Turner became an extraordinarily successful media mogul with a credo that seemed to be, “Hey, if it doesn’t work out, I can always kill myself.” It worked out, I guess. Except that Turner, in a moment of particular vulnerability, offered this haunting assessment: “Success is an empty bag.”¹

Even if we didn’t have a father like Ed Turner, we still know what it’s like to feel insecure. Someone doesn’t need to teach you to feel insecure. You know what insecurity feels like. Feelings of insecurity dog many of us every day. Ted Turner channeled his insecurity into a successful career. Indeed, he became great, as his father hoped he would, though in the end becoming great meant feeling empty. What do we do with bewitching feelings of insecurity that inspire both extraordinary greatness and suicidal depression?

In Mark 9:30-50, Jesus has a sit-down with his disciples to teach them about greatness. Let’s see what we can learn as Jesus continues to teach his disciples—and us—about the way of the Lord.

Mark 9:30-50:

³⁰From there they went out and began to go through Galilee, and He did not want anyone to know about it. ³¹For He was teaching His disciples and telling them, “The Son of Man is to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him; and when He has been killed, He will rise three days later.” ³²But they did not understand this statement, and they were afraid to ask Him.

³³They came to Capernaum; and when He was in the house, He began to question them, “What were you discussing on the way?”

³⁴But they kept silent, for on the way they had discussed with one another which of them was the greatest. ³⁵Sitting down, He called the twelve and said to them, “If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all.” ³⁶Taking a child, He set him before them, and taking him in His arms, He said to them, ³⁷“Whoever receives one child like this in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me does not receive Me, but Him who sent Me.”

³⁸John said to Him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name, and we tried to prevent him because he was not following us. ³⁹But Jesus said, “Do not hinder him, for there is no one who will perform a miracle in

My name, and be able soon afterward to speak evil of Me. ⁴⁰For he who is not against us is for us. ⁴¹For whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because of your name as followers of Christ, truly I say to you, he will not lose his reward.”

⁴²“Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe to stumble, it would be better for him if, with a heavy millstone hung around his neck, he had been cast into the sea. ⁴³If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life crippled, than, having your two hands, to go into hell, into the unquenchable fire, ⁴⁴[where THEIR WORM DOES NOT DIE, AND THE FIRE IS NOT QUENCHED.] ⁴⁵If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame, than, having your two feet, to be cast into hell, ⁴⁶[where THEIR WORM DOES NOT DIE, AND THE FIRE IS NOT QUENCHED.] ⁴⁷If your eye causes you to stumble, throw it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, than, having two eyes, to be cast into hell, ⁴⁸where THEIR WORM DOES NOT DIE, AND THE FIRE IS NOT QUENCHED.”

⁴⁹ “For everyone will be salted with fire. ⁵⁰Salt is good; but if the salt becomes unsalty, with what will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”²

Disciples debate who’s the greatest

After their journey north to Caesarea Philippi, Jesus and his disciples return to the region of Galilee, their home. Jesus hopes to escape notice in order to instruct his disciples away from prying eyes. In Caesarea Philippi, after Peter acknowledged Jesus as the Christ, the long-awaited king of Israel, Jesus predicted his death and resurrection. Jesus once again tells his disciples of his destiny as the Son of Man, the representative of Israel. The disciples, who had no category for a suffering Christ, literally don’t “know” what Jesus is talking about. No wonder Jesus didn’t want anyone to “know” of his presence in Galilee: the disciples, let alone the public, aren’t ready for a Christ who understands death as part of his mission. For the public to eventually understand, the disciples must first understand. Therefore, Jesus instructs his disciples in private. Alas, like many of us, they fear what they don’t understand, so they don’t probe Jesus.

The disciples’ ignorance of Jesus’ mission is evidenced by their discussion as they travel to Capernaum, their base of operations in Galilee. Earlier, they remained silent because of fear after Jesus spoke of his destiny; now, they remain silent out of embarrassment when Jesus asks them what they were discussing. In light of Jesus’ prediction that he would

be killed, a debate concerning who was the greatest among his disciples could hardly be more out of place—unless, of course, they didn't believe that Jesus would be killed. If Jesus is the Christ, as they now believe him to be, and if the Christ is destined to reign, as they believe him to be, then they are his apparent royal courtiers. The disciples, therefore, jockey for position.

Jesus, discerning the nature of their discussion, re-educates them. He speaks to the “twelve” about what it means to be “first.” Being first means being last, and being last means being a servant. In the disciples’ world, servants were accorded little significance. If each one of the disciples serves the other eleven, then first and last are irrelevant. Everyone can be first (or everyone can be last), because everyone can serve the other eleven. Jesus employs different language, but he is going over the same lesson he taught his disciples after he first predicted his death: “If any one wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s will save it (Mark 8:34-35). Later, Jesus will tell them what it means for him to be the Christ: “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Being first means being last, and being last means being a servant. In other words, lose yourself in the gospel and sacrifice for the sake of others.

The disciples were concerned for their status. To redirect them, Jesus embraces a child, who had no status in the world of the disciples. If the disciples will honor children and others of lowly status, then they’ll be honoring both Jesus and the Father, who commissioned Jesus. If each of the disciples fathomed himself as the Christ’s right-hand man, then being the intimate of the Christ—and, by extension, the intimate of the Father—involves honoring those of lowly status. By jockeying for position, the disciples are running the risk of shutting themselves off from both Jesus and the Father.

Anyone, not just one of the twelve disciples, can receive a child in Jesus’ name. Furthermore, Jesus invokes his name so that those of lowly status might be honored. If anyone, not just one of the twelve, can receive a child in Jesus’ name, and if those of lowly status are accorded honor because of the name of Jesus, then the twelve disciples enjoy no special status. Therefore, they should stop arguing about who’s the greatest and start serving one another. Who’s the greatest? The question is irrelevant. It’s a non-sequitur in the kingdom of God.

Take action

Sometimes, people openly debate with others in their inner circle about their greatness in comparison to each other. More often, politeness prevails and we relegate our arguments concerning our merits and others’ deficiencies to the privacy of our own thoughts. Our concern for greatness betrays our ignorance of the mission of Jesus. The disciples had a reasonable excuse to argue for their relative greatness: they didn’t know Jesus was going to sacrifice his life for them. We know better: we know Jesus died on the cross for us. All claims to greatness meet their end at the foot of the cross. Why argue for your greatness when you know that, apart from the sacrifice of Christ,

you deserve God’s wrath? To argue for your greatness in the face of Jesus’ death on your behalf is downright embarrassing.

Still, we press our case, if only in our minds. Why? Because we’re insecure. To prop ourselves up, we compare ourselves to others. Such is the nature of our insecurity that we can’t stop arguing for our greatness—or against our greatness, if we want to put ourselves down for the sake of self-pity, which is simply a way to protect ourselves from the demands we might feel if we believed in our greatness.

We need help. Therefore, Jesus re-educates us, as he re-educated the disciples. He teaches us not just to think differently but to take action, because taking action affects the way you think.

Jesus teaches us to serve one another by sacrificing for one another, as he sacrificed for us. The goal is to serve, not to be great. If we serve one another by sacrificing for one another, the question of greatness becomes irrelevant. How often, while you’re serving someone, do you think to yourself, “Wow, I’m great”? No, you’re doing something, and by virtue of the nature of what you’re doing, the way you think is changing.

Or, Jesus tells us, instead of thinking about greatness, think about receiving him, which is equivalent to receiving the Father. Again, don’t just think about it; do something about it. Receive a child or someone else of lowly status. Pick up a child; talk to a child; play with a child. Honor a child. You can hardly avoid children at our church on a Sunday morning; they’re running all over the place. Instead of tripping over them, receive them. Say hello and smile. Pat one on the head as you go by. Or, volunteer to teach them on Sunday mornings. When you receive a child, Jesus says, you’re receiving both him and the Father. You’re honoring God; you’re knowing God. You’re breaking out of statistical categories and you’re entering the realm of relationship, where who’s first and who’s last doesn’t matter.

When I began seeking work as a pastor, I didn’t immediately turn up anything. So, while I was looking, I offered my services to some friends who owned a frame shop. They offered me a job framing pictures but could pay me only slightly more than minimum wage. Income wasn’t a concern for me then; I simply needed to do something while I looked for full-time work. Still, at age 36, I felt ashamed of this job. My friends, though, valued my help and my companionship. We talked of life while laboring together. Working with wood reminded me of Jesus, who worked as a carpenter. While framing pictures that would decorate houses for years, I thought, “I’m bringing beauty to people’s lives.” At first I thought framing pictures was beneath me, but then, to my surprise, I started thinking differently about it. I learned about friendship and humility. I learned about being a servant. I now consider my three months in the frame shop to have been a great experience.

Stop jockeying for position, either openly or privately. Instead, serve one another; receive a child. You don’t have to be great to serve or to receive a

child. Anyone can take such actions. Who's the greatest? It doesn't matter.

After being rebuked for looking at others in his circle to gauge his status, John, one of Jesus' disciples, looks elsewhere to bolster his insecurity.

Disciples hinder an outsider

Jesus spoke to the disciples about acting in his name. John assumes that only the twelve disciples are authorized to act in Jesus' name. If Jesus says it doesn't matter which of the twelve disciples is the greatest, John at the least thinks it must matter who's part of Jesus' inner circle and who's not. John expects Jesus to endorse the disciples for hindering someone who was casting out demons in his name. From John's perspective, someone outside the inner circle who acts in Jesus' name undermines the disciples' supposed status. Recently, however, the disciples failed to cast out a demon (Mark 9:17-18). John, if he had his way, would want Jesus to praise him and his fellow disciples for hindering someone from effectively doing what they failed to do.

Jesus, though, has no problem with those outside his inner circle casting out demons or doing other works of power in his name. Someone who is able to do a work of power in Jesus' name quite clearly is not an enemy of Jesus—at least for the time being. If he were an enemy, he wouldn't be effective in using Jesus' name in the unseen world. If he's effective and if he's not an enemy, then he's a friend. John was concerned that such a one was not following "us." Jesus, however, tells John that such a one is not against "us" but for "us." Someone from outside the inner circle enjoys the same status as the disciples. Even someone who practices minimal hospitality because of Christ and offers a cup of water to thirsty disciples will be rewarded for being part of the kingdom of God, even if John and the other the disciples would question his fitness. Just as the disciples must receive children and others of lowly status, they must receive those from outside their circle who act in Jesus' name.

Already, people are lining up either in favor of Jesus or against him. Some believe he's from God, but others believe he's leading Israel astray. Shortly, Jesus will take his disciples with him to Jerusalem. There, the leaders of Israel will render their verdict. When they do, those who invoke the name of Jesus will be risking their lives. Even Jesus' disciples will abandon him (Mark 14:50). Then who will be the greatest? Then who will be first? Then who will be in and who will be out? The irrelevance of such questions will be embarrassingly self-evident. When victory seems imminent, the courtiers-in-waiting jockey for position. When the enemy closes in, they run for cover. At that point, if the disciples want to renew their faith, they'll take all the help they can get from those outside their circle who call on the name of Jesus.³

A common foe

Our insecurities not only drive us to compare ourselves against each other in our inner circles, they also drive us to compare our inner circles against other inner circles. In our inner circles, we fend off encroaching feelings of inferiority by reinforcing the supposed superiority of our

collective ways. If those outside our inner circle cast out demons better than we do, so to speak, we help each other explain away their success. Well, Jesus tells us, if they're acting in his name, consider them friends, not enemies. Again, Jesus makes an appeal to our behavior. In this case, he tells us to stop doing something. Stop trying to hinder those who name Jesus and practice different ways. Stop besmirching their reputation, especially when you know little or nothing about their characters. Differ with them, sure. Debate with them, sure. Express a different opinion, sure. But don't hinder them. Paul rejoiced that Christ was being preached even by those who were preaching out of selfish ambition while seeking to cause him distress (Philippians 1:15-18).

Doing something "great," like casting out demons, is not something to measure your group by. If you really want to talk about greatness, then realize that something small, like the simplest gesture of hospitality, qualifies as greatness. If you really insist on talking about greatness, then know this: anyone can be great. You can't be greater than the one who does the smallest thing. Which group is greater: your group or the other group? The question is irrelevant. Concerning the person from outside your group who names Jesus but doesn't follow your ways: receive that person, whether he casts out scores of demons or gives you a small cup of water. Embrace him as a follower of Jesus.

If those in opposition to Jesus close in, then you'll know it doesn't matter which group is greater. As followers of Jesus, we face a common foe: the prince of darkness. When he corners your group and you want to hold onto your faith, you'll take all the help you can get from those outside your circle who call on the name of Jesus, regardless of the supposed inferiority of their ways.

Recently, I taught at a pastors' conference that was attended by Roman Catholics and Protestants of different stripes in an Islamic country. Two bishops were present: an Anglican bishop and a Roman Catholic bishop. Each had been persecuted because of their faith in Christ. They considered themselves partners in the gospel. The Anglican bishop told me, "Islam has brought us together." Persecution helped them to realize that they needed each other.

Although the opposition we face in this part of the world is of a different sort, pastors from different churches, representing different theological traditions, gather once a month at this church to encourage each other. The Silicon Valley, which is largely opposed or indifferent to the gospel, makes it hard on pastors. It has brought us together.

First, Jesus rebuked his disciples for trying to discern which of them had the most status. Then he rebuked his disciples for making a distinction in status between the inner circle of Jesus' followers and others who are acting in Jesus' name. Finally, he warns his disciples about their affection for status.

Disciples need to make sacrifices

When Jesus warns his disciples by using the image of stumbling, he hasn't changed subjects. He's not talking about sin in general, although the imagery could equally be applied in such a way; he's still talking about his disciples' interest in status. The child that Jesus took in his arms is still present, so that Jesus can speak about the pos-

sibility of causing “one of these little ones who believe in me to stumble.” Then he warns the disciples three times about stumbling, leaving them with the impression that stumbling is equivalent to causing someone of lowly status to stumble. How would a disciple cause someone of lowly status, such as a child, to stumble? By not receiving him or her. Why wouldn’t a disciple receive such a one? Because he’s concerned with his own status. Responding effectively to stumbling means that the disciples will “be at peace with one another.” What threatens their peace with one another? Their concern for status, evidenced by their argument about which one of them is greatest.

Jesus certainly isn’t commanding the disciples to cut off parts of their body if they fall victim to their affection for status. No, he’s using the imagery of severing body parts to challenge his disciples to deal severely with their affection for status.

Positively, if disciples confront such affection, they will “enter life,” which Jesus further defines as entering the kingdom of God. Jesus earlier told his disciples, “For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s will save it” (Mark 8:35). For Jews, “life” was connected to their covenant, or partnership, with God, who instructed them to “choose life” by remaining faithful to him (Deuteronomy 30:15-20). Many Jews believed that such life continued beyond the grave in the kingdom of God.

Negatively, if the disciples refuse to confront their affection status, they will be literally cast into “Gehenna.” Jesus depicts being cast into Gehenna as a fate worse than being cast into the sea with a millstone around one’s neck.⁴

Gehenna, or the Valley of Hinnom, as it was called in Hebrew, was a ravine south of Jerusalem where Israelites imitated the pagans by sacrificing children (2 Kings 16:3, 23:10). The prophet Jeremiah saw such sacrifices as abhorrent and used Gehenna as a symbol of God’s judgment, calling it the “Valley of Slaughter” and predicting the destruction of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 19). His prophecy was fulfilled when Babylon sacked Jerusalem in 586 B.C. You can visit the valley to this day. You can, quite literally, go to hell! After the completion of the Hebrew Scriptures, Gehenna became a symbol of final judgment. Jesus, like Jeremiah, warned that Jerusalem, which for him symbolized opposition to his way of the kingdom, was heading for destruction (Mark 13). Jesus’ warning about being “cast into Gehenna” carries with it the connotation of the physical destruction of Jerusalem, but it also points forward to a final judgment, graphically symbolized by unquenchable fire and worms that perpetually feed on decomposing bodies, imagery drawn for Isaiah, another prophet (Isaiah 66:24).⁵ Those who identify with Jerusalem in its opposition to Jesus will face the judgment of God—some in a very physical way, when Rome, in fulfillment of Jesus’ prophecy, sacks Jerusalem in 70 A.D., and all in a final way. Jesus graphically illustrates final judgment, but he’s not precise about the nature of it. It’s enough for him to depict it with repulsive imagery. Furthermore, even the prospect of maiming oneself would be preferable to the final judgment he envisions.

Jesus is about to begin his journey to Jerusalem to battle for the kingdom. This is no time for his associates to be preoccupied with their status. If Jesus is battling for the

kingdom and they are his associates, they’ll need to make painful sacrifices, beginning with cutting off and plucking out their love for position and place.

Salt for the world

What does Jesus mean when he says, “For everyone will be salted with fire”? The imagery of fire in the preceding context relates to judgment. Also, Jesus literally said that it was “good” for someone to enter life, or the kingdom of God, crippled, lame, or with one eye and thereby avoid the fire of judgment. Now, he says salt is “good.” Jesus’ meaning seems to be this: God’s judgment, fiery though it be, is good. It is good in a final sense, of course, for if God did not judge evil, evil would have no end. It is also good in a personal sense, at least until the final day, because both experiencing the effects of judgment and being aware of final judgment can purify people so that they choose what is “good”: self-sacrifice for the sake of the kingdom. Furthermore, some sacrifices prescribed by the Hebrew Scriptures were accompanied by both fire and salt (Leviticus 2:13, Ezra 6:9, Ezekiel 43:24). To be salted with fire, then, entails self-sacrifice. Everyone will be salted with fire: God’s judgment motivates that which is “good.”

Salt, in this context, is good for seasoning. If the disciples sacrifice their pride for the sake of the kingdom, they will be effective in the world, as salt is effective with food. The disciples, if they persist in their pursuit of status, risk losing their flavor, so to speak. If, however, they sacrifice their affection for status, they will “have salt” in themselves: they will “be at peace with one another.” If they’re at peace with one another, instead of bickering over status, they’ll be salt for the sake of the world, which hungers for peace. They’ll also throw open the doors of the kingdom to those of lowly status and outsiders who act in Jesus’ name.

A great vision

Our concern for status often shows up in our disposition toward those of lowly status, such as children. How you think about, and how you act toward, those of lowly status will tell you much about your affections for your own status. Attachment to status is a serious matter in the kingdom of God, so serious that Jesus invokes the awful specter of judgment for those who fail to take the matter seriously. Those who confront their affection for status belong to the kingdom of God. Therefore, if your treatment of those of lowly status makes you aware of your attachment to status, deal severely with it, as if you were cutting off and plucking out your love for position and place.

Where we stand in whatever pecking order we subscribe to is irrelevant in light of the concerns of the kingdom of God. There’s a war on, and the world hangs in the balance. It’s essential that those who form a platoon in Jesus’ name to do battle with evil live in peace with one another. If we insist on pursuing and defending our status in relation to one another, we will be unable to advance the cause of the good. Or, to put in another way, we will lose our flavor, and the world will not taste what it hungers to see: a people who set aside differences for the sake of love—love for Jesus, love for each other, love for the world. To live in peace with one another for the sake of the kingdom, we

must choose what is good: we must be willing to make sacrifices. Affection for status, love for pride and place, must be set aside, must be sacrificed, must be cut off and plucked out.

We need a vision larger than personal greatness. Greatness involves not being better than anyone else; greatness involves being connected to a great vision. We need a vision that inspires us to service and self-sacrifice. Don't seek greatness; seek a great vision.

In the 1968 Summer Olympic Games, John Stephen Akhwari of Tanzania was entered in the marathon. He suffered an injury during the race, but he persevered in the darkness on the streets of Mexico City, all alone, as the other runners left him behind. An hour after the race was over, he hobbled into the darkened stadium, his right leg bandaged in two places, grimacing with every step. The few thousand spectators who were lingering in the stadium noticed him and began to applaud as he limped around the track. When he finally stumbled across the finish line, holding his leg with both hands, the crowd erupted.

Filmmaker Bud Greenspan asked Akhwari after the race, "Why did you do this? You were in such pain, and you couldn't win." The runner looked at the filmmaker as if he were crazy and answered, "Mr. Greenspan, I don't think you understand. My country did not send me 5,000 miles to start the race. They sent me 5,000 miles to finish the race."⁶

How do you measure greatness when you finish last? What kept him going, painful stride after painful stride? A great vision kept him going. He wasn't running for himself; he was running for his country. How about running—sacrificing and serving—for Jesus? How about running for the gospel, which means not running for country but running for the entire world? The gospel, after all, is good news for the world: the good news that God has triumphed over evil in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and is bringing to the world his healing, loving rule. How about connecting with that vision?

Channeling insecurity

As I reflect on the spiritual race that I have run, it has been my vision of the gospel that has been most helpful in channeling my insecurity-tinged lust for greatness. I have sought to understand my value in God's eyes. I have sought to understand my identity in Christ. I have sought to find my voice. These quests have all been somewhat helpful in my spiritual race, but they have not been enough. In the end, I need not to find something but to lose something: I need to lose my life for the sake of the gospel.

The gospel, properly understood, pulls us outside ourselves and thrusts us into the world. The mission of the gospel gives shape to your value, your identity, and your voice. You find your voice for the sake of singing in the worldwide orchestra of God and blessing the world. Looking inward has value, but in looking inward, you

will not find a vision worth giving your life for. You will not, most likely, give up your life to find your self-worth, because you know your self-worth isn't worth it. You will not, most likely, hobble through the streets of Mexico City, all alone, with no chance to win, painful mile after painful mile, wincing each step of the way, to find your value, your identity, or your voice. You might, however, do it for a greater purpose.

What do you do with your feelings of insecurity? What do you do with your lust for greatness? You channel such feelings and lust into a purpose greater than yourself. You need a great vision. There is no greater vision than the one the gospel casts. Bringing God's healing, loving rule to the world is worth everything you can give it. And everything you do for it, spreading salt here and there, God uses to establish his reign. The beauty of it is that you don't have to be greater than anyone else. All you have to do is serve. All you have to do is receive a child. All you have to do is receive an outsider. It's a great vision, the greatest vision, but you participate in it by taking small steps.

NOTES

- ¹ Beth Gutcheon (*San Jose Mercury News*, July 9, 1995), reviewing *Citizen Turner* by Robert Goldberg and Gerald Jay Goldberg (Harcourt Brace).
- ² A Disciples did not understand Jesus (30-32)
 - B No special status for disciples: "Whoever receives one child" (33-37)
 - X Inclusion of one who acts in Jesus' name: "Do not hinder him" (38-41)
 - B' Disciples must sacrifice desire for special status: "If ... causes you to stumble ..." (42-48)
 - A' Disciples potentially unsalty (49-50)
- ³ Jesus' response to John echoes Moses' response to Joshua after two men other than Moses began to prophesy. Joshua asked Moses to restrain the two men, but Moses said, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD's people were prophets, that the LORD would put His Spirit upon them!" (Numbers 11:26-29)
- ⁴ A millstone was normally placed around the neck of a donkey, and death by drowning was particularly abhorrent to Jews, because they considered the sea the abode of evil. From Jesus' perspective, a horrible death that involves being treated like a beast of burden is preferable to being cast into Gehenna.
- ⁵ In all likelihood, verses 44 and 46, which are identical to verse 48, were not part of Mark's manuscript. They don't appear in the earliest copies.
- ⁶ Joan Ryan, *San Francisco Chronicle* (December 14, 1995).