

CHAPTER ONE

We Need Some Crazy Christians

Then [Jesus] went home; and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind.” (Mark 3:19–21)

Jesus “has gone out of his mind.” That’s what the people say in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. The King James Version translates it as, “He is beside himself.” The old J.B. Phillips New Testament puts it, “He must be mad!” But my favorite is from the 1995 Contemporary English Version which says, “When Jesus’ family heard what he was doing, they thought he was crazy and went to get him under control.”

Trying to get Jesus “under control” is exactly the problem. Fyodor Dostoyevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov* rightly warns us that the Church and we Christians have often tried to make Jesus tame. We want to manage the Messiah. But this Messiah won’t be managed. As Richard Holloway, former Primate of Scotland, once wrote, “Jesus goes on breaking out of all the tombs to which we have consigned him.”¹

So, forgive me for saying it this way, but Jesus was, and is, crazy! And those who would follow him, those who would be his disciples, those who would live as and be the people of the Way, are called to be exactly that—crazy. If you asked me what the Church needs today, I would say this: We need some crazy Christians.

Let’s go back to that line, “When Jesus’ family heard what he was doing, they thought he was crazy and went to get him under control.” I don’t want to be too quick to judge Jesus’ mother and the whole family. They had good reason to be concerned. The First Letter of Peter tells us something that Jesus had already taught in the Sermon on the Mount: “Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing” (1 Peter 3:9). That’s crazy! In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus says, “The greatest among you will be your servant” (Matthew 23:11). That’s crazy!

What the world calls wretched, Jesus calls blessed. Blessed are the poor and the poor in spirit. Blessed are the merciful, the compassionate. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst that God’s righteous justice might prevail. Blessed are those who work for peace. Blessed are you when you are persecuted just for trying to love and

1 John Drane, ed., *The Great Sayings of Jesus: Proverbs, Parables and Prayers* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999).

do what is good (Matthew 5:3–11). Jesus said all that in the Sermon on the Mount, to crowds of people. That was crazy. Jesus said, “Love your enemies and pray for those that persecute you” (Matthew 5:44). Jesus was crazy. He prayed while folk were killing him, “Father, forgive them; they know not what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). *Now that’s crazy.*

What the Church needs, what this world needs, are some Christians who are as crazy as the Lord. Crazy enough to love like Jesus, to give like Jesus, to forgive like Jesus, to do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with God—like Jesus. Crazy enough to dare to change the world from the nightmare it often is into something closer to the dream that God dreams for it. And for those of us who would follow him, those of us who would be his disciples, those of us who would live as the people of the Way? It might come as a shock, but those of us called to that life are called to craziness, too.

Let me suggest one example of such a call from the New Testament: Mary of Magdala, also known as Mary Magdalene. For whatever reason, Mary often gets a bum rap. Whether it is the false portrayal of her as more sinful than most or even as one of the prostitutes in the New Testament or in *The Da Vinci Code*, Mary gets a bum rap. But I want to suggest that Mary Magdalene might be the quintessential example of what it means to follow Jesus, to be his disciple, to be a person of the Way.

That’s because Mary Magdalene was crazy. She shows up when she’s not supposed to. She speaks up when others shut up. She stands up when everybody else sits down. She was crazy. Mary was somebody who obviously heard a different drummer. And folk like that are what the world calls crazy.

Think back to the crucifixion of Jesus. Crucifixion was

execution by the Empire for crimes against the state. It was public torture. It was an intentionally brutal means of capital punishment, an execution designed to send a message that revolution and revolutionaries would not be tolerated. If you were a supporter or follower of the person being crucified, it was dangerous to stand too close by during the execution. The rational and sensible thing to do was to go into hiding or even exile.

Having said that, let's call the roll of those Jesus asked to follow him, let's take the attendance of the apostles at the crucifixion of their Lord. Simon Peter? Absent. James? Absent. Andrew? Absent. Bartholomew? Absent. Judas? Absent. Mary Magdalene? Present and accounted for! When the old slaves sang, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?," there was a woman named Mary who could answer, "I was there!" Now that's crazy!

But that's not all. On that Easter morning, who gets up and goes to the tomb of Jesus? Not Peter. Not Andrew. Not James. Not John. But Mary and some of the sisters! And it didn't make any sense. As I said, it was dangerous to be so closely associated with a person executed by the Empire. Going to the tomb made absolutely no sense. It's just plain crazy. The gospels say there was a large stone rolled in front of the tomb. Presumably Mary knew about it. She had no plan and no way to move that stone. But she went to the grave anyway. That's crazy. Matthew's gospel says the Romans had placed guards at the tomb. Mary had no plan and no way to take them out. But she got up and went anyway. That's crazy. And that craziness led to her being the first witness to the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, the first witness to the fact that the love of God is greater than any hatred humans can inflict. Because Mary was crazy like Christ, she was Christ's witness to the world. Brothers and sisters, Mary

Magdalene has shown us the way. She has shown us what we need. And what we need are some crazy Christians.

Now it may not be obvious at first, but we actually have a day to remember crazy Christians. I think we call it All Saints' Day. It's not called "All the Same Day," it's called All Saints' Day, because the saints, though they were fallible and mortal and sinners like the rest of us, when push came to shove they marched to the beat of a different drummer. In their lifetimes, they made a difference for the kingdom of God. As you know, we even have a book to help us commemorate them with prayers and readings and liturgy. We call it *Holy Women, Holy Men: Celebrating the Saints*. But we might as well call it *The Chronicles of Crazy Christians*.

One of the people we celebrate in the book is Harriet Beecher Stowe, a woman who used her words to set the captive free. She was born in 1811 into a devout family committed to the gospel of Jesus and to helping transform the world from the nightmare it often is into the dream God intends it to be. Beecher Stowe is best known for a novel titled *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In this fiction, she told the truth. She told the story of how chattel slavery afflicted a family—afflicted real people. She told the truth of the brutality, the injustice, the inhumanity of the institution of chattel slavery. Her book did what YouTube videos of injustices and brutalities do today. It went nineteenth-century viral. It rallied abolitionists and enraged vested interests. The influence of that book was so powerful that Abraham Lincoln is reputed to have said, upon meeting Harriet Beecher Stowe for the first time, "So this is the little lady who started this great war!"²

In 1944, Beecher Stowe's witness was celebrated in a

2 *Holy Women, Holy Men: Celebrating the Saints* (New York: Church Publishing, 2010), 448.

Broadway play titled *Harriet* and dedicated to the work of Eleanor Roosevelt. Helen Hayes played the part of Harriet Beecher Stowe. At the end of the play Beecher Stowe's family stands around her and sings the words of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," affirming the Christian witness of this brave and bold woman. Part of the hymn goes like this:³

*In the beauty of the lilies, Christ was born
across the sea,
With a glory in his bosom, that transfigured
you and me:
As he died to make men holy, let us die to
make men free,
While God is marching on.*

*Glory, glory hallelujah,
Glory, glory hallelujah,
Glory, glory hallelujah,
God's truth is marching on.*⁴

Beecher Stowe once explained her anti-slavery writing in these words: "I wrote what I did because as a woman, as a mother, I was oppressed and broken-hearted with the sorrow and injustice I saw; because as a Christian I felt the dishonor to Christianity; because as a lover of my country, I trembled at the coming day of wrath."⁵

There's no doubt about it: Harriet Beecher Stowe was crazy. A woman of her era was supposed to write nice stories, not stories that would disturb the conscience of

3 Susan Belasco, "Harriet Beecher Stowe in Our Time," <http://www.nationalera.wordpress.com>

4 *Lift Every Voice and Sing II* (New York: Church Publishing, 1993), #226.

5 <http://www.harrietbeecherstowecenter.org/hbs>

a nation. A woman of her social standing was supposed to marry well, raise well-bred children, participate in a few charitable activities, and at her funeral be fondly remembered by all who knew her. That was the life she was supposed to have. But Beecher Stowe had been raised in a family that believed that following Jesus means changing the world from the nightmare it often is into the dream that God intends. And sometimes that means marching to the beat of a different drummer. Sometimes that means caring more when we are tempted to care less. Sometimes that means standing up when others are sitting down. Sometimes that means speaking up when others are shutting up. Sometimes that means being different. Sometimes that even means following Jesus, and being crazy.

After the death of Steve Jobs, one of the founders of Apple Inc., an old Apple Inc. commercial from the 1990s went viral on YouTube. It was a commercial whose goal had been to rebrand Apple products. The tag line for the commercial and for the company was: *Think different.*

In the commercial they showed a collage of photographs and film footage of people who have invented and inspired, created and sacrificed to improve the world, to make a difference. They showed Bob Dylan, Amelia Earhart, Frank Lloyd Wright, Maria Callas, Muhammad Ali, Martin Luther King Jr., Jim Henson, Mother Teresa, Albert Einstein, Pablo Casals, Mahatma Gandhi, Albert Schweitzer, and on and on and on. As the images rolled by, a voice read this poem:

*Here's to the crazy ones. The misfits. The
rebels.*

*The troublemakers. The round pegs in the
square holes.*

*The ones who see things differently. They're not
fond of rules.
And they have no respect for the status quo.
You can quote them, disagree with them,
glorify or vilify them.
About the only thing you can't do is ignore
them.
Because they change things.
They invent. They imagine. They heal. They
explore.
They create. They inspire. They push the
human race forward.
Maybe they have to be crazy.
How else can you stare at an empty canvas
and see a work of art?
Or sit in silence and hear a song that's never
been written?
Or gaze at a red planet and see a laboratory
on wheels?
While some see them as the crazy ones, we see
genius.
Because the people who are crazy enough to
think
they can change the world,
are the ones who do.⁶*

We could paraphrase that to say, the Christians who are crazy enough to think they can change the world are the ones who do. My friends, we need some of those crazy Christians. Sane, sanitized Christianity is killing us. Comfortable, demure Christianity may have worked once upon a time,

6 Apple's "Think Different" commercial, 1997.

but it won't carry the gospel anymore. We need some crazy Christians like Mary Magdalene and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Christians crazy enough to believe that God is real and that Jesus lives. Crazy enough to follow the radical way of the gospel. Crazy enough to believe that the love of God is greater than all the powers of evil and death. Crazy enough to believe, as Martin Luther King Jr. often said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."⁷ We need some Christians crazy enough to believe that children don't have to go to bed hungry; that the world doesn't have to be the way it often seems to be; that there is a way to lay down our swords and shields, down by the riverside; that as the slaves used to sing, "There's plenty good room in my Father's kingdom" because every human being in this world has been created in the image of God, and we are all equally children of God and meant to be treated as such.

What we need are some crazy Christians—Christians who are crazy enough to catch a glimpse of the crazy, transforming, transfiguring, life-changing vision of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Christians who are crazy enough to follow him into the work of helping God to realize God's dream for all people and for all creation.

7 Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954–63* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 197. The original quote is from the nineteenth-century abolitionist preacher Theodore Parker, who wrote that "the arc [of the moral universe] is a long one . . . And from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice." Theodore Parker, in *Ten Sermons of Religion* (Boston: Crosby, Nichols, & Co., 1853).