

THE MAN FROM THE TOMBS, 2019

He was a local man. Kind of quiet. He and his wife kept mostly to themselves, but he was friendly enough when I saw him out mowing the lawn or raking leaves. I've known him for a while now, and I'm telling you the truth, he never bothered anyone at all before he "lost it." That's why his change of personality and temperament was so startling to me. The way he was acting wasn't like him at all.

He lived just down the street from me. I waved to him almost every morning on my way to work. Occasionally we would borrow tools from each other (that's how you know you can really trust a guy: when you lend him your electric drill or your brand new jigsaw and he returns it to you in good condition, and in a reasonable length of time). My kids went to school with his kids. Once in a while he and I would run into each other at O'Malley's Bar, and we'd have a beer together, talk about the weather and the Red Sox (we agreed that they needed a little more pitching help if they were going to make a serious run at another championship).

Occasionally my wife socialized with his wife. Mostly coffee at the kitchen table, or maybe go to a yard sale together and bring home several bags of junk that we'd end up selling at our next yard sale. And his wife even gave mine her secret family recipe, that went back three generations, for chocolate chip cookies. They were amazing!

I don't know exactly when his behavior started to change. Maybe three or four years ago (I lose track of time. It passes by so quickly, doesn't it?). He started getting this strange look in his eye, as though someone was out to get him. He was fidgety, nervous, and that made me a little nervous. I remember sitting next to him at O'Malley's one late afternoon, before things really went south for him. He had this frightened expression on his face, and when I asked what was wrong told me he was hearing voices, talking to him. I told him it was probably just his imagination, but he said they seemed pretty real to him.

"What are they saying to you?" I asked him.

"That they found a real nice place to live, in here," he said, and tapped his chest where his heart was

After that, I didn't talk with him again. Then one day he just up and left his home and family. His wife came running over to our house, upset and crying her eyes out. "He's gone!" she kept saying. "He's gone!" Soon afterwards, all of his marbles must have spilled out on the floor and rolled away because the next thing we knew he was living at the town cemetery. He'd make funny noises—grunting and snorting and howling like a wolf—and if you got too close to him he'd scream at you like you were the devil himself.

No fooling, his behavior freaked out a lot of people, including me! On occasion some people would go to the cemetery and try to catch him and get him some help, but he was too fast for them and he knew all the places in that graveyard where he could hide out, so they weren't successful. Well, except for this one time when four guys were finally able to corner him and restrain him. It took them three or four hours to do it, but in the end they succeeded.

They brought him to the Psych ward over at the Medical Center, and the doctors there were good and kind to him. They tried to help him get his sanity back with counseling and medications, but he eventually overpowered one of the therapists, broke out of there and escaped, without any clothes. He ended up right back down at the cemetery, running around naked and frightening the townsfolk half to death. And he lived there for the longest time. Out of concern, some people occasionally left some food for him to eat. How he survived the winters without any garments to keep him from freezing to death I'll never know.

After a while we just kind of gave up trying to catch him altogether, and he became known around here in the Gerasenes as "the man from the tombs." Some people thought he had a mental illness; others believed he was demon-possessed. But who could say for sure? One thing all the townspeople did agree on was that, whatever had happened to the guy, it was a terrible, unfortunate tragedy. He was a good and decent human being, and he and his family didn't deserve what they were going through. But we were all helpless. There was nothing anyone could do to help him. I imagined him living out the remainder of his days there among the dead, howling and cursing and cutting himself on the gravestones until he was covered in his own blood.

Then this fella came to town from away. Jesus was his name. He was a godly man who, we later learned, had healed all sorts of people of all sorts of ailments. I wasn't there when it happened, but someone who was present told me that as soon as Jesus appeared he had a tense encounter with the man from the tombs. Some welcome to our town that must have been. Jesus got screamed at—loudly—but fortunately the guy kept his distance and didn't attack him. Still, it must have been a pretty terrifying experience for that

wandering rabbi, who many people claimed had a powerful healing touch.

Okay, now here's where the story gets really strange. It was told to me like this. First, the man from the tombs yelled at Jesus, "What do you want with me, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, don't torture me!" Now, as far as anyone there could tell, Jesus hadn't made any kind of move toward the guy at all. He didn't go anywhere near him, let alone try to physically hurt him, so no one could figure out where that comment came from.

Then, Jesus asked the man from the tombs a question. But funny thing was, he didn't address the man himself. He was talking to whatever was in the man—those crazy voices the guy had told me about at O'Malley's that were making him act so strange and be so self-destructive. "What is your name?" Jesus asked him. Now, it seems to me that was pretty poor judgment on Jesus' part. It sure wasn't a good time for introductions, when he was confronting someone as disturbed as the man from the tombs was.

But Jesus got an answer. And it was an odd one. "Legion." It seems that, whoever or whatever voices had responded to Jesus, there were a lot of them. A Roman legion is made up of 6000 soldiers, so if there were six thousand voices talking, Jesus was seriously outnumbered; but from what I was told he handled himself extremely well.

Witnesses who were there told me that this story ended very bizarrely. Whatever "things" that were in the man from the tombs and had taken over him were ordered by Jesus in so many words to get out. Now. And they didn't have a choice in the matter. Jesus was in total control of the situation. At this point I need to tell you that, while all this was going on, some farmers were tending this large herd of pigs over on a nearby hillside. They made their living selling the porkers to the village butcher shop. Those guys were there, just minding their own business, is all. But they discovered that they were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Jesus was about to cast out the things that were driving the man from the tombs insane, but they didn't have any place to go to. So they begged Jesus to let them enter that herd of pigs. Jesus allowed it, and darned if those poor animals didn't go crazy themselves. Picture a couple hundred or more of those big hogs taking off and stampeding down a steep bank that was just over the hill, right down into the pond where the town's kids liked to swim in the summer. It must have been an amazing thing to see. And all of them porkers drowned—every last one of them!

Well, the farmers taking care of those pigs weren't happy. They ran off in a panic and headed to town. They told anyone who would listen what had happened, and how they had lost their entire herd of swine, which was their

livelihood, so they were justifiably upset; and they didn't have insurance to cover their loss and now what were they going to do?

Some of the town bigshots, including the mayor and the town manager, went to find Jesus. I tagged along with them. When we found him I asked what in heaven's name had happened here. Jesus turned his gaze to the man from the tombs. Only he wasn't the man from the tombs any longer. He was his old self, peacefully sitting there on the grass right beside Jesus. Someone had brought him a set of clothes to put on, so he was no longer naked (thank you, God!); and Jesus had given him back his sanity. I could tell because I saw him sitting there with a smile on his face, as calm and rational as anyone could be.

Now, you'd think we townsfolk would have all been happy, cheering and pumping our fists in the air and begging Jesus to hang around us for a time and show us what else he could do. Maybe he would have even cured my gout, and taken care of my wife's arthritic knee. And we were happy—sort of. At the very least we were happy for the man from the tombs.

But on the other hand we were terrified that someone could have such incredible power. What if he decided to use it to do us harm? We also only had a limited number of pigs left in the town, and we couldn't afford to lose any more. So we told Jesus to leave us alone. I said to him, "If you wanted to impress us, you succeeded. Now I'm begging you to please go home." He kind of shook his head in disappointment, like a teacher whose entire class had gotten an "F" on their math test. Then he and his followers turned and left us without saying a word. We all breathed a sigh of relief.

Well, all of us except for the man from the tombs. He ran over, fell on his knees, grabbed Jesus' cloak and pleaded with him. "Let me come with you, Lord. Wherever you go, I will follow and serve you." Jesus placed his hand on the man's shoulder. "You can serve me right here," he said. "The region of the Gerasenes has no voice calling to it, telling people the Good News of God's Kingdom. I want you to be that voice. Would you do that for me?" The man from the tombs nodded, and Jesus smiled at him. "Good," he said. "Then return home and tell everyone who will listen how much God has done for you."

I have to say, Jesus created a monster. This man hasn't shut up since that rabbi came and healed him. All I hear from him is, "Jesus this. . ." and "Jesus that. . . Trust in him and give thanks to God." Yada, yada, yada. I don't even walk by his house when he's outside or stop into O'Malley's for a beer when I see him in there because if I get within earshot, off he goes. And it takes me forever to get away from him.

So, if you ever visit the Gerasenes and happen to run into this guy, I hope you don't have to get anywhere in a hurry because he's not going to let you go

any time soon. Be prepared to spend at least an hour listening to his spiel.

Okay, I know. Maybe I should take this matter more seriously, look a little closer at this person, Jesus, and really consider who he is. But I've got a life! There's always so much work for me to do, and so little time to do it in. After all, I have to make a living and support my family. Maybe later . . . tomorrow, or next week, or a year or two from now, I'll have all my ducks in a row and I can give some thought to—

Uh oh, what's that? Someone's knocking at my door. Okay, okay, I'm coming! Cool your jets! Oh, great. It's that man from the tombs, wanting to talk about Jesus again. Will he ever leave me alone?