

IN THEIR RIGHT MINDS By Steve Schmutzer

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The pig herders reached the top of the hill. They panted from the exertion as they bent over with their hands on their knees, and sweat dripped off their noses onto the ground. The slopes were steep on this side of Lake Tiberias.

Had they walked up, they'd have been fine. But the men had run up the hill as fast as they could.

They turned and scanned the slope behind them, but there wasn't a single pig to be seen. All two thousand of the hogs had stampeded down the hill and plunged into the lake and drowned. The herdsmen knew the ways of pigs well - but these had lost their minds! It wasn't natural.

There were other things that were unnatural too. The men glanced over to the stony shoreline where Jesus was standing. His companions had already climbed out of the boat, and two of them were pulling the small craft up on to the beach. The rest had clustered behind Jesus, and some of them leaned a bit to look around Him.

Directly in front of Jesus, the two disheveled and naked wild men lay on their backs. One had bent his knees and was starting to prop himself up on his elbows. The other held his arms in front of his face, and he was tugging at a metal shackle on one of his wrists.

The herdsmen could hear the voices of Jesus and his companions down below, but they could not make out their words.

The wild men gathered themselves to a sitting position. They had evidently realized their nakedness, and they awkwardly covered themselves with their hands in shame. They glanced around at Jesus and His companions, but mostly they just stared at each other.

One of Jesus' companions said something and pointed up the slope. The rest of the group turned to look. The herdsmen at the top of the hill looked over to where the man was pointing, and one of them groaned.

The men on the beach below had noticed the two cloaks the herdsmen had left behind. The garments were still hanging through the branches of the small tree where they'd been carefully placed. Jesus gestured uphill and two of His companions started walking up the slope.

One of the herdsmen inhaled sharply. "Look!" he exclaimed. He pointed down the hill to where the cloaks were. "See the ground? – the pigs did not go there!"

The other pig herders furrowed their brows and squinted against the late afternoon sun. They studied the place he'd indicated. Sure enough - he was right.

Starting from where the herd of pigs had been before they all went crazy - to where every one of them had plunged into the lake, the ground was badly distressed. Bushes were trampled, grass was flattened, and small trees had been snapped and shattered. Nothing had escaped the dense mass of stampeding hogs, and the ravaged landscape bore testimony to the odd event.

There were two exceptions to the scarred terrain. One was where the herdsmen had cowered as the mass of pigs had split and rushed around them. The grass and brush were undisturbed there. The other was the place where the small tree with the two cloaks stood. By the looks of things, the frenzied hogs had avoided this second spot the same way.

It was too much for the herdsmen's frayed nerves. Furthermore, Jesus' two companions were coming up the hill towards the cloaks. The pig tenders turned and jogged down the path towards the nearby Gerasene village.

They reached the little community and found a group of people gathered in the square. The crowd was talking about the afternoon's peculiar weather and the haunting cries they'd heard earlier. Some of the townsfolk were claiming these events were bad omens.

Their discussions paused as the herdsmen trotted up. This was a place where everybody knew everybody else, and pig herders returning without their pigs was not standard procedure. The little crowd quickly swelled as more people ran up to learn what had happened.

The herdsmen recounted their story about the sudden departure of the storm and the arrival of Jesus. As they described the antics of the wild men and the power Jesus had over them, gasps of amazement were heard. As long as anybody could remember, no one had been able to control these two bizarre creatures. Some in the crowd murmured about "bad omens" coming true.

The suicidal stampede of the pigs was beyond belief! Pigs were pigs, and they didn't act that way. All two thousand? Just....gone?

No one knew how to respond to the herdsmen's account. Questions of the same sort were lobbed at the pig tenders from every side. Doubters began to whisper.

The exasperated herdsmen felt the pressure. The townsfolk were anxious and skeptical. Public sentiments were turning unfavorable, especially without more evidence to back up the story.

One of the herdsmen stepped back and shouted for attention. "Come!" he yelled.

It had been a tough day. He'd lost his cloak and his job, and he wasn't in the mood to argue. He wanted to put all this behind him. "Come with us," he said. "Come, and see the things we say are true."

He turned and began walking briskly up the path that led to the hills above Lake Tiberias. The other pig herders sighed and followed him. They didn't want to go back to that place, but they knew they had to. Many of the townsfolk weren't buying the story, and some of them were already wagering bets against it.

The large crowd moved quickly up the rough path behind the herdsmen. Word of the events had spread, and more people from the surrounding country were running over to join the procession. A few children scampered ahead. The day's strange events had broken their usual boredom, and they raced to see who'd be first.

It was not long before the front of the crowd had reached the top of the hill. They stopped and looked down the slope at the scene below. More and more people arrived, and folks jostled for a better view. Soon, most of the hilltop was standing room only.

It was all exactly as the herdsmen had described.

Not a single pig was seen. A little ways down the slope the ground was badly bruised. From there to the lake's edge, every plant was trampled. In some places, the ground was rutted and bare. The mad dash of the hogs was clear.

Just as clear were two islands of undisturbed turf. They contrasted sharply with the scarred terrain around them. The smaller area had a little scrawny tree in the middle, and its branches were bare.

On the stony shore, a group of men were gathered in a loose circle. About half of them crouched in a relaxed position while the rest stood casually with their hands on their hips. A small fishing boat lay angled just beyond the water's edge.

In the middle of this group were the two wild men. They sat cross-legged on the ground beside each other, and their hands were folded in their laps. They were wearing the herdsmen's cloaks that had been placed in the small tree, and they were looking up at Jesus who stood before them.

Jesus was speaking to them, and He was gesturing as He talked. The crowd at the top of the hill could not make out what He was saying, but it seemed the wild men were soaking in every word. Everyone watched as both of the wild men lowered their heads. Their shoulders were heaving. Jesus stepped forward and placed His hands on them.

Murmurs of surprise rippled through the hilltop spectators, and Jesus looked up at the crowd. He lifted both His arms and motioned them to come down. Several of His companions looked back and forth between Jesus and the throng - then they gestured to the townspeople the same way.

The children went running down first - then the children's parents. Gradually, the rest of the hilltop crowd broke ranks and followed. The pig tenders waited to descend till it seemed sufficient safety in numbers had already gone ahead.

Jesus' companions organized the new arrivals so everyone could see and hear. The villagers formed a dense circle around Jesus and the two wild men and listened.

The conversation between Jesus and the seated men seemed ordinary enough, at least in how it was taking place. Jesus spoke, and the wild men listened. Then one or the other of the wild men would speak or perhaps ask a question, and Jesus would respond.

The two seated figures seemed perfectly coherent. Their faces were relaxed, and they looked around and smiled at some of the children. Apart from their matted hair and scraggly beards, there was nothing particularly unusual about them. They gave no evidence of being the same wild men who had terrorized the locals for years.

Here and there in the encircling crowd, low voices hissed. Discussions arose. The trend continued and arguments flared. Jesus and the wild men stopped their conversation and looked around at the assembly.

"NO!" one bystander suddenly shouted. "These men are imposters!"

He stepped out from the crowd and pointed at the two seated figures in front of Jesus. "These men are not those who live among the tombs!"

Another man from the crowd joined him. He turned to face the villagers and he cried out, "These men are deceiving us!" He waved tersely towards Jesus and the two wild men. "They have come from Galilee to spread lies and to bring us ruin!" Many of the bystanders nodded and murmured restlessly.

Jesus raised his hand and everyone became silent. He looked down at one of the two men sitting on the ground in front of him. "Show them," Jesus said.

The wild man looked around at the people that were pressing in. All eyes were on him. He hunched his shoulders and glanced back up at Jesus. Jesus nodded gently.

The wild man hesitated. He gazed down at his lap for a few moments. Then - with his right hand - he pulled the left sleeve of his cloak back. He slowly lifted up his left arm to reveal a metal shackle with three links of chain still attached. His wrist around the device was heavily scarred.

Gasps of surprise and alarm erupted from the townsfolk, and they scrambled to move further back. Women yelped in fear as they looked about for their children and pulled them close. Uneasiness settled over the crowd, and nobody was talking anymore.

Two of Jesus' companions stepped forward and held out their hands in a display of public appeal.

"People of Gerasene," one of them called out to the crowd. He turned around slowly as he spoke. "We are indeed from Galilee, but we do not deceive you. We have come here with our Teacher - this man Jesus, whom you see." He pointed at Jesus.

The second one spoke, "You have seen how Jesus made the storm on the sea to be still," he said. "We were afraid on the water, but He spoke and the wind listened to His command."

The first one addressed the crowd again as he motioned to the wild men, "You have also seen how these men who were once feared among you are now in their right minds as you are. These men have received peace through the power of Jesus. They have been freed from the evil one who has tormented them and destroyed your livestock."

It was the second man's turn once more, "Some among you have seen these things with your own eyes. This day you have...."

He didn't get any further.

The two wild men stood up and faced the crowd. The townspeople muttered and shifted, and they eyed the wild men warily.

The wild men looked around. The one with the shackle glanced up at the early evening sky and he took a deep breath, "My days have been dark," he said. "I have lived in shadows, but now I have seen a great light."

The other wild man nodded. "I have been unknown by my people," he said, "and I did not know them." He continued, "I have dwelt too long among the dead, but I have found life at last. My tormentors have departed from me, and my....."

"Please leave us," a woman from the crowd interrupted. The wild men looked quizzically at each other and back at Jesus.

The wild man with the shackle tried this time, "You do not need to fear. The evil one has...."

"We want you to leave us alone," a man from the crowd interjected. He was looking at Jesus. "We beg of you - please! - leave us alone." The same man flicked his wrist at Jesus' companions as one would shoo away a dog. "Take these men with you," he said. "We do not want you here."

More people in the crowd joined the protest. "Please leave!" "We beg you to return to your people." "Leave this place." "Go back to Galilee and take these men with you." The inhospitable chorus grew in strength and number.

Jesus looked around, and His face was sad. His companions were already pushing the boat back into the shallows of the lake and turning it about. The evening was getting darker and pinpoints of stars were appearing here and there in the clear sky. Jesus turned back toward the lake.

“Teacher!” the wild man with the shackle called. He ran up to Jesus who was preparing to get into the boat. “I want to go with you.”

The other wild man hurried over too. “Please,” he begged Jesus. “Say the word that we might be with you.”

Jesus paused. He looked out over the lake towards its western shore, then He turned to face the two men. “Return to your home,” He instructed them. “Go and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how He has had mercy on you.”

The wild men looked back at the crowd for a few moments, then to Jesus once more. They said nothing, but they both nodded and took a single step backwards. They glanced at each other and clasped hands.

Jesus smiled at them. Then He turned and motioned at the boat before stepping into it. Most of His companions were already seated in the vessel, but two of them stood in the shallows ready to push the craft out.

Jesus sat down and faced the opposite shore. His two companions gave the craft a firm shove and stepped in over the gunwales. A light breeze arose and filled the little boat’s sail. It moved steadily away from the shore and gradually faded in the gathering darkness.

The crowd began to dissipate. Groups of people worked their way back up the slope and towards the village they’d come from. Children walked with their parents now.

The herdsmen were weary. They ascended the hill for the second time that day, but now at a comfortable pace instead. They said little to each other. Each of them were deep in thought. They looked down as they chose their steps cautiously on the uneven ground.

They were almost halfway up the slope when a little tree materialized in front of them. The ground around it was undisturbed, and two familiar cloaks were laid neatly in its branches.

The pig herders stopped and stared at the tree for a moment. Something wasn’t right. They wheeled quickly and looked downhill. In the fading light, they could see the two wild men starting up the hill behind them. The two figures were still wearing the herdsmen’s old cloaks.

“It cannot be!” exclaimed one of the pig herders. He lifted one of the cloaks from the branches and examined it closely. It was exactly like the one he’d placed there before, but this one he now held in his hands was new. There were no rips and the fabric was tight and sturdy.

His companion who had also placed his cloak in the tree's limbs was inspecting the other garment. It too was new, and it was also identical to his previous one. They unfolded their new cloaks and put them on, and the group resumed its homeward trek.

There was nobody behind the wild men as they made their way to the outskirts of the small Gerasene village. They had followed the crowd into town. Most of the residents were gathered in the town's square again - and once more the discussions were about the day's strange events.

The two wild men approached more closely. As they stepped into the glow of nearby lamps, the townspeople went quiet.

The two wild men looked around at the villagers and smiled broadly. One of them quickly pulled his left sleeve back to the elbow, and he thrust his left arm high above his head. A heavy shackle and three links of chain glimmered dully.

"People of Gerasene!" he loudly yelled. "Come and hear what Jesus has done for me!"

