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**Summer Preaching Series:**  
*Characters of the Bible*  
**James, the Brother of Jesus**

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A Sermon By  
The Rev. Andrew W. Walter

August 26, 2018  
The Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost  
Grace Episcopal Church  
Silver Spring, Maryland

*An audio version of this sermon may be found on the Grace Church website at*  
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/2018-08-26-AWW.mp3>.

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How many of you have an older sibling? Raise your hand if you have, or had, an older brother or sister.

For those of you who didn't raise your hand, having an older sibling is both a blessing and a curse. On the up side, an older sibling is someone to learn from and talk to, someone who will watch out for you when you need it, and older siblings often take the blame when there's been trouble. Parents look to them, look to the older sibling, as if whatever's happened is their fault or their responsibility. On the down side, though, when you have an older sibling, you're constantly wearing "hand me downs;" your parents seem to forget your name a lot; and, you get picked on relentlessly, as the older sibling like to assert their dominance and keep you in your place, always letting you know they rule the roost.

Most of all, when you have an older sibling, you live in that sibling's shadow. At home, and at school, all around town, you're continually being compared to your older sibling, whether it's in a good way or a bad way. Your parents, your teachers, your coaches, they look at you, and they see your older sibling. They project things on to you, qualities and characteristics, based upon your older sibling. If your sibling was a straight A student, they expect you to be really smart. If your sibling was captain of the team, they'll presume you're a great athlete. If your sibling was gifted at music, they'll think you can play an instrument and sing. Whatever reputation your older sibling had, you get stuck wearing it, as well, at least for a while.

I have an older brother, and growing up in our small town, he was pretty much a celebrity. Everyone in town knew him, or knew who he was, because my brother was incredibly charming and outgoing, smart, good looking, a great athlete. He had it all together and was a real leader for his age group, and so everyone just loved him – the parents, the kids, the teachers.

My brother's name was Doug, but for someone with his outsized personality, that name wasn't nearly enough. He needed something more, something bigger, a nickname that suited his big shot status, and so he was known as "The Wal." W-A-L. "The Wal," and that's how everyone referred to him, or talked to him:

"Where's the Wal?"

"What's the Wal doing?"

"Hey Wal, where should we go?"

Naturally, wherever I went in town, "the Wal" loomed large in my life. People thought I should be just like him, charming and outgoing, smart and athletic. People didn't see me for who I was. They didn't see Andrew, who tended to be a much more quiet and shy. They saw me as "the Wal" or, at least, a smaller version of "the Wal." And, that was tough. In fact, people around town didn't even call me Andrew. They never used my given name. Instead, everyone just called me: "Little Wal."

I guess that's why I've always felt a little sympathetic for James, the brother of Jesus.

Many people don't realize that Jesus had a brother, and of those that do, some don't want to acknowledge it. They want to believe Mary remained pure and holy her entire life, and therefore, James was a half-brother, or even a cousin. But, as we heard in today's Gospel reading, the Bible says otherwise:

*Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power? Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not his sisters with us?*

So, according to the Bible, Jesus did have a family, with brothers and sisters.

Unfortunately, we don't know much about his brother, James, and what we do know comes mostly from early church historians, since James does not often appear in Scripture.

From what we can tell, James was not one of the twelve disciples, who originally followed Jesus, but after the resurrection, Jesus appeared to James just before the ascension. James, then, went with the disciples to the upper room in Jerusalem, where they all prayed and waited patiently for the gift of the Holy Spirit. It was around this time, sometime soon after the resurrection, that James became a follower, and it didn't take long for him to become a pillar of the early church, particularly in Jerusalem, where he would eventually become the first bishop. James' role in the early church was so important that both Peter and Paul reported to him at different times, and as those first Christians wrestled with allowing Gentiles into the church, and if they did allow Gentiles to join the church, whether those Gentiles needed to be circumcised in accordance with Jewish law, it was James who announced the final decision, as we heard in our first reading from Acts.

Throughout his ministry, James was revered for his piety and faith. It is said he never ate meat, or drank any liquor or intoxicating beverages, and he was given continually to prayer, so much so that the skin of his knees became leathery and wrinkly like that of a camel.<sup>1</sup> James' devotion was so compelling that thousands of people became Christians, just because of him, though this only angered the authorities in Jerusalem, the same authorities who killed his brother, and so, just as they did to his brother, they killed James, as well. Some say James was stoned to death. Others say he was thrown from the pinnacle of the temple and beaten with a club. But, what we do believe is that before he died, James did what he always did: he prayed. He prayed for the people about to kill him.

That may be one of the most important takeaways from James' life – the power of prayer. Many people often ask me about prayer, how to do it, what to say, does it really work, and James reminds us that prayer does make a difference. It can change your life and my life. It doesn't matter so much what you say. It's more about just doing it, not just occasionally or when you need something from God, but consistently, day in and day out, just as James did. Imagine what your relationship with God might be like if you prayed as much as James did, if you prayed until your knees were all leathery and wrinkly like a camel. Imagine how well you would know God, and God would know you.

James also reminds us that each and everyone is unique, and that we all have something special to offer. James may have grown up in the shadow of Jesus, but eventually, he forged his own path, discovered his own calling, found his way of making the world a better place.

None of us lives in anyone else's shadow. We are our own person, with our own talents and gifts. God only made one of us, and therefore, no one else can offer the world what we can offer. So, forge your own path, discover your own calling, and make the world a better place, as only you can. The world is waiting.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History.