

# “Made Well”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – February 2, 2020*

Rev. John Wahl

Psalm 131

Mark 5:21-43

C. Clifton Black describes these verses as, “a tale of two pities.”<sup>1</sup> Mark sandwiches the stories of two women, two daughters – one actual and the other figurative – who are in desperate straits. For both of them, fear is overcome by faith, and they experience healing through the transformative power of the presence of God.

The first person we meet is Jairus, who is described as a religious leader; not a priest or a rabbi, but a lay person active in his local congregation. Respected in his community, the people around him would have known the urgency of his situation: that his 12-year old daughter is on the verge of death. This man Jairus finds Jesus and – like any parent in his situation – begs him to come to his house and save her.

On the way, Jesus is interrupted by a woman in a different, but equally desperate, situation. For twelve years, she has been seeing doctors but her illness has not gotten any better, only worse. Because of the nature of her condition, she is considered unclean; she has done nothing wrong or sinful, but it would have separated her from her church and society. Because this impurity could be transferred by touch – others becoming unclean without even knowing it – being out in the street that day, itself, posed a risk.

And yet, somehow, she had heard about Jesus and believed that if she could just touch him, it could make her well. She did; and it did. Immediately, Mark tells us, her bleeding stopped and she felt that her illness was cured; all this without being noticed or having impeded Jesus’ progress. Still, Jesus stopped – having sensed the touch and a transfer of power – and wanted to know who had touched him. The woman, now fearful, came forward and – like Jairus had done – fell down at the feet of Jesus.

Calling her daughter, Jesus says that it was her faith that made her well, and that she is now healed of her disease. In making this public pronouncement, Jesus acknowledges her, welcomes her, and restores her back into the community from which she had been estranged. Her faith – her willingness to put her trust in Jesus into action – had made her well; it was her saving grace.

But in those same precious moments when Jesus stopped to acknowledge her healing, the tragic news comes that the daughter of Jairus has died. Jesus immediately turns his attention back to the synagogue leader and tells him not to fear, but to believe;

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<sup>1</sup> C. Clifton Black from *WorkingPreacher.com*

to have faith. In fact, Jesus uses the same exact word that he just spoke to the woman who fell before him in fear. What mattered was not what Jairus thought or felt – maybe resentment that Jesus allowed himself to be interrupted when his daughter was in such critical condition – but that he could put his trust into action. He had trusted that Jesus could make his daughter well; Jesus is telling him to hold on to that faith; that all hope was not lost.<sup>2</sup>

To complete the sandwich of these two stories, Mark describes Jesus arriving at the home of Jairus and assuring those mourning the loss of the 12-year old girl that she is not dead, but only sleeping. In the presence of her parents and his closest disciples, Jesus took her by the hand and told her to get up and walk: a sign not only of Jesus' healing power over this disease, but of the resurrection that is to come.

And so, the heart of these two stories, the meat of the sandwich, is about the battle for faith against fear. Some fears, as we know, are perfectly reasonable. Other fears are manufactured by politicians or advertisers for reasons of power or control. Typically, these fears are framed with a savior to the people they frighten: a miracle cure or painless escape. But the salvation is often a lie. Mark points us to a different Savior, one who subverts fear and fortifies faith.<sup>3</sup>

As Christians – as people who live on this side of the resurrection – we are encouraged to have faith in the face of fear. Though Jesus is no longer physically with us as he was to Jairus and these two daughters-made-well, we embody Christ as the church and through its worship, mission and sacraments. This morning, we will hear the invitation to come to the Lord's Table and to share in the body of Christ and cup of salvation. Here, we are welcomed and acknowledged by Jesus: claimed as daughters and sons of God, our Creator. Here, we are taken by the hand and invited to get up, to be risen in both this life and the next. Here, we are fed so that we might also feed one another and reach our hand out to any who hunger in body, mind or soul.

As I mentioned earlier, and as is described in the bulletin insert, we embark today on a two-year journey of self-searching and discovery through the Vital Congregations Initiative. This will be an opportunity for us as a church – as people living on this side of the resurrection – to find God at work among us and around us and ahead of us; welcoming and acknowledging, healing and feeding, subverting fear and fortifying faith. At times, this process might be hard, because – honestly – we don't always see or believe that we've been fed, or feel unafraid, or made well.

Being the church in this particular time and place is not easy. Al Roxburgh, my doctoral program professor, describes what is going on around us as, “the unraveling.” Others prefer the term, “the unwinding.” The idea is that the norms and institutions that

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Williamson, NR;DR podcast

<sup>3</sup> Karl Jacobsen from *WorkingPreacher.com*

we've trusted and relied on – the very things that are knit or wound together to create the fabric of our society – have become frayed. These include, but are not limited to: corporations, government, neighborhoods, family, and faith communities. Trust has eroded, uncertainty has risen, and participation has declined. There once was a time when it was perfectly reasonable to ask someone where they went to church; today – according to research data – the most likely answer you'd get would be, “nowhere.”

The good news, which may not seem so good at first – Roxburgh says – is that things are not going back to the way things were. Instead, the church is called to discover a way forward, in a different world, in the midst of this unraveling. What this means is that while we see a number of congregations closing, others are being birthed or re-formed in new and creative ways. While average numbers in the pews have decreased, barriers such as exclusion by race, gender and orientation are cracking. Trust in church institutions and leaders might have eroded, but new partnerships between denominations and faiths are being formed. Initiatives in environmental and social justice are being explored. Awareness about mental health and addiction are growing. Many things do not look, sound or feel the same; it's unsettling, but might just be our saving grace.

Today's interwoven stories from Mark are instructive to us here. The tension is not just between long-standing needs and an immediate crisis; not just between what is named and can be recognized as opposed to something forbidden or mysterious. The tension, as Jesus' own words make clear, is between fear and faith; fear which can cause anger and frustration, as opposed to a faith that requires more of us than mere intellectual acceptance, but trust put into action.

Jesus declares to the woman who touched his robe that her faith has made her well. In other words – despite her society's expectation that she would stay out of the way; and without any promise of tangible results – she entered the crowd and reached out her hand. She had suffered for years and was down to her last dollar, but she still had faith; what the author of Philippians calls, “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding.” (4:7)

I believe that – in the unraveling, the unwinding in which we find ourselves today – this faith is what will be required of us. It is this faith that leads us to the Lord's Table to remember the gift of resurrection promised to us; it is this faith that will allow us to take a sometimes hard look at who we are and where God is calling us to go as a church; it is this faith that can subvert our fear and allow us, the church – like the two women we encounter in Mark's gospel today – to be made well. Amen.