

## Trusting God Moment by Moment

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Last week it was commanding the wind and sea. This week, it's power so brilliant that it overflows through the hem of his garment, and then raises a little girl from the dead. We are on a fast-track introduction to what it means to call Jesus the Christ, God's Son, our Savior. On the one hand, we are invited to let out a cheer, "Go, God! Keep it coming, Jesus." Heal the sick; forgive sinners; command demons; call disciples; still the storms in life; remove the sting from death. In short, become the magic man of our hopes and dreams. But that is the rub. That is the flaw in Mark's introduction, a problem that future chapters will soon begin to correct. In chapter 1, Jesus is the Christ, God's Son, our Savior. In chapter 2, he's forgiving sins, a power reserved for God alone. In chapter 3, he's majoring in more miracles. In chapter 4, he's honing in on God's power over nature, as even the wind and sea obey him. In chapter 5, it's power over death. Then, in chapter 6, we pause to consider John the Baptist's gruesome death. In chapter 7, we see that the divide between Jesus and God's people Israel is widening. In chapter 8, we're introduced to the cross. In chapter 9, we're introduced to the cross again. In chapter 10, we're reminded about whole cross-thing a third time. In chapters 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15, all Mark talks about is how the passion narrative leads by the divine necessity of God's plan to the earthly purpose of Jesus' ministry, culminating with his suffering and death on the cross at Calvary. In sum, Mark is telling us that miracles do not hold the key to knowing who Jesus is and why he came. That key belongs to the cross.

Here in this particular text in the fifth chapter, Mark has provided us one of his more artful presentations. By combining two miracle accounts into a single narrative, he adds pace and tempo, which adds to a heightened sense of drama and action. Mark was way ahead of his time. Just think of some of those old episodes of *The Fugitive*, or *Perry Mason*, or any of the older television series. Typically, there is a single story line developed with a single set of characters leading toward a single climax and conclusion. Compare that with today's series that offer multiple story lines with different characters taking the lead in different directions simultaneously. At least, that's how series like *NYPD*, *NYPD Blue*, as well as *Law and Order* and its many off shoots add to the sense of action and movement present with each and every episode. Mark has pioneered the multiple story-line option in this morning's text by telling us about the leader of the synagogue, Jairus, and his daughter, along with a strange woman, with a puzzling, perhaps an incurable, case of inexplicable hemorrhaging. Each story-line creates its own sense of crowded commotion. With the one, it is Jesus creating a scene when he stops in the crowd and demands to know, "Who touched me?" With the other, it is Jairus' friends who cause a scene by carrying on about the daughter, her dying, Jesus' long-delayed arrival, and his seemingly off-the-wall diagnosis. They worked themselves into such a fervor that Jesus sends them all packing out of the house so that he and Peter and James and John could be alone with the little girl. Jesus says she's sleeping, but the mourners shrug their shoulders, shake their heads, raise their eyebrows, and continue with their weeping as they respond to the tragedy of the little girl's untimely death.

So, which is it? Is she sleeping, or is she dead? Is Jesus saying that death is just like sleeping? That seems to be a little delusional, or illusional, certainly philosophically wrong-headed, and just plain silly. Look, the truth of the Gospel narrative, the good news of salvation, promised and delivered, has everything to do with the death of death, with Jesus battling toe-to-toe with Satan, face-to-face, eye-to-eye, the author of life staring down the lord of death, entering into bowels of darkness, enduring the suffering of crucifixion and death. That is at the heart of our creeds: crucified, dead and buried. The notion that Jesus was just sleeping on the cross, the speculation that Jesus escaped the curse of death, with all its devilish darkness and utter finality: these ideas have been rejected as having anything whatsoever to do with the power of the gospel, the promise of salvation, and the victory Jesus delivers as the Christ, God's Son, our Savior.

Paul says it directly in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15:14. He tells us that if Christ has not been raised from the dead, then the gospel is folly and our faith is foolish. If Christ has not been raised from the dead, then the proclamation of salvation is without meaning and our faith in God's grace is in vain. Again, if Jesus Christ was not raised from the dead, then our faith is futile, and we are still in our sins, and death, sin's wages, is a curse that has not yet been broken. Death, according to 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15:26, is the final enemy that Jesus came to defeat. Let there be no doubt: death is God's ultimate contender, outlasting as it does every other pretender to the throne reserved only for the one true God. Death as the Big Sleep? I don't think so. The final enemy, the ultimate curse, a power so pervasive, persistent, relentless and unyielding that it feigns to be God, were it not for the victory Jesus Christ brings as our Resurrected Lord: these are descriptions of death exposed for exactly what it is.

I understand that Jesus' raising Jairus' daughter from power that consumed her on her death bed is not the same as what occurred with the Resurrection. Giving life to this little girl is still in the realm of resuscitation. Jairus' daughter will rise from the dead, only to yield to death's claim and curse another day. That's the rub with this miracle, and that's the rub with all the miracles. They are temporary and incomplete. The dreadful realities that required Jesus' action have not been vanquished, but only temporarily decommissioned. Just think of the two walking miracles we have among us, not the only two, to be sure, but the two most obvious, and most glorious, namely, Steve Dague and Rick Riffle, both of whom experienced accidents that could have killed them. But death's claim was muted and death's aim diverted through the miraculous outcome of immediate survival, with subsequent therapy, leading to daily improvement and long-term, ongoing rehabilitation.

We praise God for the miracles He has worked in our midst before our eyes. But we also recognize that the perfect order of things has not yet arrived. Let's face it, the daily pain these walking miracles still experience is humbling, and the courage, endurance, and sheer will that is required to claim the victory their lives proclaim is astounding. Just take a moment to speak with Steve and Rick, and you will sense quite quickly the constant diet of prayer their recovery requires, inspiring praise and joy, to be sure, with all sorts of gratitude and thanksgiving, but more importantly, involving step-by-step reliance on the goodness of God to see them through each new day. No one's complaining; but the stakes are high, and there's a big difference between sleeping and being dead.

Just consider how each waking moment summons Steve and Rick to prayers that God will supply movement, that God will keep the process of healing moving forward, that God will provide strength for ongoing improvement. When was the last time that any of us thanked God for something so simple as the mobility of our bodies, the health we enjoy, the strength that is ours. Whose approach is closer to what Jesus commends? Just think about the model he lays out with the Lord's Prayer. "Give us this day" – not tomorrow's bread, or a week's worth of bread, or, lifetime's supply and more ... no – "Give us *this day* our *daily* bread. Jesus wants us to trust God on a daily basis for the essentials of life. Rick and Steve have certainly had their eyes opened, and are opening ours, to that kind of trust. What Jesus is doing in our text this morning is stretching the limits of our imagination to believe that he has power over life and death. Death is not yet vanquished. Its sentence has only been stayed, temporarily delayed. But even these short delays can fill our hearts with confidence and faith's eyes with dreams of what will someday become our reality when Christ returns and fills all things with the infinite majesty and unending glory of God.

The Book of Lamentations doesn't shy away from acknowledging the temporary character of the victories over death we experience during life; but it also points us in the direction faith desires and requires, inviting us to trust God anew each and every day, inspiring the words we sang just moments ago: *Great is thy faithfulness, O God our Father; there is no shadow of turning in thee; thou changest not, thy compassions they fail not; as thou hast been, thou forever will be.* And then there's the memorable refrain, which comes straight from the first couple of verses in our reading from Lamentations: "*Morning by morning new mercies I see; all I have needed thy hand has provided; great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me.*" You can check in the Scriptural Index found in the back of *With One Voice*; it was Lamentations 3:22-23 that inspired this wonderful song we know as *Great Is Thy Faithfulness*.

None of the Lessons we have read today inspired our hymn of the day, *Healer of Our Every Ill*, but God's enduring faithfulness in Lamentations and Jesus' miracles restoring health and wholeness in Mark 5 certainly help to explain the faith and hope that inspired it. The specific Scriptural verses listed as inspiring *Healer of Our Every Ill* are found in Jeremiah and Romans. Jeremiah's dour and doleful lament – that's right, doleful, not soulful – gave rise to a word that is synonymous with the laments of Lamentations. That seldom used word is *jeremiad*, meaning one who laments chronically, constantly, without any relief whatsoever. Oddly, it was Jeremiah who wrote the verse that inspired *Healer of Our Every Ill*: "Heal me, Lord, and I will be healed ... for you are my praise." [Jeremiah 17:14] Then, it was Paul who filled out the prayerful hope found in this song with his words of great faith and confidence proclaimed in Romans 8:26-27. "The Spirit searches the heart and knows God's mind, interceding for the saints according to the will of God. For we know that all things work together for good for those whom God loves." In this regard, listen to verse 1 in our Hymn of the Day: "*You, who know our fears and sadness, grace us with your peace and gladness. Spirit of all comfort, fill our hearts.*" Paul's words and Jeremiah's experiences are so evident here. Each of the verses in this hymn gives expression to the hope God's love inspires and to the faith Jesus' power invites. We can read the verses, and marvel, or just sing them and rejoice. I suggest the latter. So, let's stand, and sing the song we have selected as our Hymn of the Day, *Healer of Our Every Ill*. It's #738 in the Blue Book.