

Rise! *

Mark 5:21-24, 35-43

First Sunday after Pentecost, (May 30) 2021

(First Sunday back in building in 14 months due to Covid)

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Why are you here? Why did you come?

Most of us are here because it is our first Sunday back in-person, in-the-building in 14 months. We're here because we have missed one another and because so much has happened. We're here because we want to see the changes inside the building since we rebuilt last summer. And many of us are here because it is Sunday morning, the Lord's Day, and this is our habit in spite of 14 months of separation.

Why are you here?

In our Scripture reading this morning, Jesus walks into the room full of people mourning the death of Jairus' twelve-year-old daughter. Many of the people start asking themselves and whispering to one another, "Why is he here?" "Why did he come?" "What does he think he can do for the dead?"

And most of the people in the room already know the answer to their question. He can do nothing. What can he do for the dead? Nothing. Oh, maybe he can give condolences. Perhaps he can cry. And maybe he can hug some necks, but as far as Jairus' daughter is concerned – she's already dead. It's too late for Jesus to do anything.

It makes we wonder why the parents went to Jesus in the first place? Probably they had heard about him being a healer, and whatever their skepticism about faith healing, they decided that it could not hurt to give Jesus a try. When our loved ones are suffering, we'll try most anything – faith healing, new medications, going to some other country for experimental treatments, drinking liquified concoctions of kale and grass clippings, with the eye of newt and a touch of natural honey ... We'll exhaust every option, even crazy ones. Maybe Jairus went to Jesus for some of the same reasons.

When Jairus went to Jesus, I have little doubt that he assumed that Jesus would make a bee-line back to his home to meet his request, for Jairus was not an unimportant man. Mark tells us he was a leader of the synagogue, which means he oversaw the synagogue building (if they had one) and decided who would read the Scripture each Sabbath and who would do the prayers. We also know he was likely wealthy because in that impoverished Palestinian world, Jairus' twelve-year-old daughter has her own room.

So Jairus probably assumed that when he asked, Jesus would come straightaway. And sure enough, Jesus responds to the call for help, but on the way, he gets interrupted. Making his way through a crowd of people, Jesus is interrupted when an unnamed and desperate woman, a defiled woman (by the standards of that day and time), reaches out and grabs the hem of his robe as he passes by. Instantly, she is healed as Jesus feels healing power go out of him to someone in the crowd.

Let me encourage you to pause and think about the healing power of the Living God. When we are paralyzed and exhausted by fear of touching someone

and being infected by Covid, here is a story that reminds us that the life-giving power of Christ can also spread like a pathogen, a pathogen of goodness and healing, hope and justice.

I won't take much time with this unnamed woman this morning, saving her for another upcoming Sunday, but suffice it to say, Jesus stops everything to praise her, calling her "daughter" which means, though she has been isolated and quarantined for twelve years, Jesus restores her to community and relationship. Jairus and his servants are urging Jesus onward to Jairus' house, "Please hurry, Jesus, my daughter is at the point of death." Yet, Jesus stops as if he has nothing else to do and gives this so-called unimportant woman his full attention.

This story also prompts me to think about how much we have missed during Covid by our isolation and social distancing. We've zoomed as best as we could, but we have missed the innumerable small conversations that happen in the life of church. The little interruptions on the way into or out of the church building, or in the hallway, or in the kitchen, or standing by the car. Sometimes dismissively referred to as "small talk" they are anything but small. Those little conversations are the ligaments and sinews connecting us to each other and to God. It is often in these unexpected interruptions that God heals and renews and restores us. If Jesus had not made time for such interruptions, this woman would not have been healed and would not have been restored to community. She would have continued living in isolation. But Jesus made time, and always has time – for her, for Jairus' daughter, and for us.

Why is Jesus here? Why is he here on the way to Jairus' house yet stopping to heal this woman in the crowd? Here in chapter 5, Mark tells us three stories of

the abundant life in Christ, breaking out and spreading like a pathogen. Earlier in the chapter is the story of the Gerasene demoniac and his dramatic healing and restoration to community. Then there is this story of the woman in the crowd being healed and restored to community, and all of this is on the way to the healing, indeed resurrection of the twelve-year old daughter of Jairus. What is Mark showing us? What are we being prepared for? Why is Jesus here?

I wonder if Mark is preparing for what else is to come with Jesus? Perhaps Jesus is here showing us that his power over illness is the foretaste of an even greater power – the power over death.

Mark tells us that while Jesus was still speaking to the woman, messengers came from Jairus' house, "Sir, we have sad news. Your daughter has died. Trouble the rabbi no longer. He's not needed. Come on home for the funeral, family and friends and mourners are already gathering."

Jesus overhears the news and says to Jairus, "Do not fear, only believe." Notice the verb tense of "believe" in what Jesus says. Jesus does not say, "start believing," he says, "keep believing." Commentators tell us that this is the present tense of the Greek verb. Precisely, it is the present tense imperative mood, and it means continuing action. Believing is not a one-time event; it is ongoing. Jairus demonstrated faith by coming to Jesus but now he must keep on believing. Jesus is saying, "Jairus, don't be afraid. Don't give up! Don't give in to death. Don't quit. Don't give up when the believing gets hard, because right now, with the death of your daughter, it's hard! But don't give up now! Keep believing."

Jesus is not saying, “Ok, Jairus, it is time to grit your teeth and believe even harder.” No, the kind of belief and faith Jesus is talking about is the kind that says, “Jairus, you have had faith in God for a long time, now is not the time to give up.” Jesus is encouraging Jairus – and us – to continue to grow in faith and practice believing over time. Make it a habit.

In *Alice in Wonderland*, Lewis Carroll wrote, “Alice laughed. ‘There’s no use trying,’ she said. ‘One can’t believe impossible things.’ ‘I daresay you haven’t had much practice,’ said the Queen. ‘When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.’”

Belief takes practice and like Alice, many of us haven’t had much practice. We can’t believe when the chips are down, when facing the power of death and despair, if we have not had much practice. It’s much like being out of running shape, and all of a sudden, we enter a race and we’re expected to run a mile in under 8 or 9 minutes. We can’t do it. But if we have been running every day for months or years, building up our endurance, we can do it on the big day of the race, when it counts. Believing/faith is an everyday continuous action kind of practice, and if you have a difficult time doing it by yourself, you make sure to gather with others as often as possible to practice, practice, practice – praying, singing hymns, reading scripture, being together, serving together. Believing.

Jesus and Jairus get to the house already filled with mourners and people. In that day and time and place, the dead were often buried on the same day they died, so the funeral has already begun. Jesus enters the house and says loudly, “Why are you weeping and making such a commotion. She is not dead, but only asleep” (5:39).

And the crowd of mourners – professional mourners was the practice in that day and time – are all looking around whispering, “Why is he here? We know why we’re here. We’re paid to cry at funerals. But who does this guy think he is? Why is here?”

Jesus says, “She is only sleeping.” He is not making light of the little girl’s death and the grief of the family. New Testament scholar Brian Blount says that this is not pretending death is not real. It is to say death is not ultimate (*Invasion of the Dead*, p.116). Remember that death is more than the ending of our biological lives. It is the death of our humanity, the death of our compassion, the death of our moral conscience, and the death of who God created us to be. We give up and give into the powers of Sin and Death and go along. We become numb. Or we become instruments of division and violence, fear or anger and despair (see Charles Campbell, *The Word Before the Powers*, p. 32).

“Jairus, don’t quit now. Keep on believing. Do not let the power of death and despair overwhelm you. Don’t let the forces of disaster and destruction, diminishment and disintegration have the final word. They are not ultimate. She will wake up. You will wake up. She will rise up and so will you.”

We are here this morning to testify and praise God that for the past fourteen months, and the truth is for many months before, we have not stopped believing that God is at work. We have waited and watched and prayed a part, separated from each other but not separated from God, and now this morning we’re here to testify and give thanks to God. God has been faithful for these months. And God keeps on being faithful. We have faced political upheaval, authoritarianism, and even an insurrection. We have stared at blatant racism and hatred and fear that tries to convince us we all need to be wearing guns. Daily shootings overwhelm us

while we have struggled against Covid-19, had to rebuild the structure of our building, had many personal and family and job set-backs and struggles, and now we're dealing with changes at church and changes in our health and looking at the unknown future in front of us. As a church we have had to rise to this moment. Death keeps trying to intimidate us and wear us down, but we keep on believing and we rise.

Jesus takes the hand of the little girl and says, "Little girl, rise" (5:41). Jesus is using the language of the resurrection. This is the language that changes how we see the world and how we see death. "Little girl, rise." According to Blount, Mark uses the same word when Peter's mother-in-law rises after her healing by Jesus. It is the same word used when Jesus heals the paralyzed man. Jesus called a man with a withered hand to come forward by telling him to rise. It is the word used by the angel at the empty tomb when he told the women that Jesus had been raised (Blount, p. 117).

You want to know why Jesus is here? He is here at this crucial, critical moment to tell us to rise up. In the face of death and despair, when we are exhausted and tired, Jesus is telling us to rise! Here on this important Sunday morning, after all we've been through, Jesus is saying, rise! He is here to demonstrate God's resurrection power.

And with this resurrection of this little girl, Jesus is giving us a preview of things to come. Like a movie trailer of coming attractions, we get a glimpse of the future when this little girl is resurrected. One day, Mark is saying, Jesus will rise. And someday, we will rise, too!

Why is Jairus here? To keep on believing. To not give up after a lifetime of believing.

Why is Jairus' daughter here? To rise. To show us that death does not have the last word and death cannot grind us down. For we will rise.

Why are you here?

What Jesus said to that twelve-year-old girl, I say to this 53-year-old church: Rise! The Living God in Christ calls us to rise, rise through budget challenges in our church and rise through all sorts of challenges beyond our church. We raised the roof, so let's raise the church, and then go raise a community. Let us rise and reinvolve ourselves in mission and ministry. Those of you who are exhausted – rise! We are a community of straight and LGBTQ in Christ – let us rise! We work hard at reconciling and repairing across racist division – let us rise! God has said to you time and time again, rise! so we can make a difference in the lives of people in this town. Sarah, you and Jose and Lelin go to Houston to rise. Austin Heights, God calls us to rise.

Take hold of Jesus' hand, keep believing, keep singing, keep praying, keep forgiving. Rise! For 53 years God has worked in us and through us. Today we begin a new chapter. All we have done is a preview of what God is yet to do.

That is why we're here this morning. To celebrate! And... to rise!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.

*(For inspiration and insights in this sermon thanks to Brian K. Blount and his sermon "Rise!" in *Invasion of the Dead: Preaching Resurrection*, pp. 109-120).