

Mark 5: 21-24, 35-43 “A Surprising Easter” Rev. Janet Chapman 7/22/18

Christ is Risen! (You are supposed to say Christ is Risen indeed!) Christ is Risen (Christ is risen indeed!) Now I know Easter is over – you probably think I’ve gone off the deep end... here we are in the middle of summer and I am asking you to share the Easter greeting. No, the heat hasn’t gotten to me yet. However, I do remember a Board meeting where we were discussing how to increase church attendance and the suggestion was made to declare every Sunday “Easter Sunday” – maybe it could work, I don’t know. But it occurs to me that the church is far too easily surprised at the miracle of Easter, whenever it happens. We continue to be caught off guard whenever the resurrected Christ shows up. Even in midsummer, we are blown away when the dead do not stay that way.

The story of Jairus and his daughter is one of three resurrection stories in the gospels, not counting Christ’s. It is one part of two miracles shared in the fifth chapter of Mark. It is the bread of a larger narrative sandwich that our author Mark has prepared for us. The inside of this narrative sandwich is the story of a woman who has bled for 12 years, the exact age of Jairus’ daughter incidentally. This old woman touches the hem of Jesus’ garment and is healed. Mark inserts this second story inside the first one for a reason, because bleeding women and dead little girls were both taboo in Judaism. As a holy man, Jesus was to steer clear of both. If he drew near, he too became unclean and was both contagious and unfit for holy duty. Today, I want to focus on the little girl’s healing, her Easter moment as an avenue to our own. It takes place in the proximity of Jesus’ home, among the faithful, the Bible believers, his own people. Some say that the number 12 popping up in both stories is no accident because that is a familiar number to the people of God – Israel had 12 tribes, Jesus chose 12 disciples, and now

Mark wants us to know this is a story for the inner circle, those who want to be faithful followers on a daily basis, you know, those insiders who come to church in the middle of July and not just on Easter Sunday. Listen up for this story is for you.

Jesus is accosted by a church official who pleads, “My daughter is dying!” We get the sense this is a hands-on dad, active in his daughter’s life, frantic for hope and willing to break every rule in order to save his daughter. Can you imagine what it must have been like for him to fall at Jesus’ feet in front of a big crowd? Then the horror he must have felt as Jesus got interrupted and slowed down by an unclean woman bent on spreading her uncleanness. By the time Jesus gets to Jairus’ house, it is all over – the daughter is dead. The weeping and wailing has already begun, but Jesus says, “What is all the fuss?” To us who know the stories, it sounds a bit like another encounter the Risen Christ has with Mary who is overwhelmed with grief. He says, “What is all the fuss? Why are you crying?” Like Mary, these mourners do not see any hope because the dead stay dead. This is as bad as it gets – there is no greater pain than the loss of a child, some of you know that all too well. But Jesus touches the girl and announces, “It’s time to get up... Talitha cumi!” Those gathered in this house of death are astounded as she gets out of bed and begins to walk around. Jesus warns them to tell no one and, oh yeah, don’t forget to feed the poor girl, she’s probably starving. Even though it wasn’t Easter that day, even though we find ourselves in the midst of summer, whenever Jesus shows up, it’s Easter!

Here we are in the church on this mid-summer July Sunday. All of us are well adjusted to declining aspects in church life – stoic resignation is about the best our theology can deliver. We console ourselves, like other mainline churches, with “Everybody’s losing members...

decline is prevalent...death is normal,” we say with a knowing smirk. So a visitor asks the pastor, “Do you think my son will ever get over his drug addiction?” The enlightened minister replies in love, “Recovery from heroin? What are the chances of that? Get real – better leave him for dead.” The expression, “get real” could easily be translated as “adjust to death,” “adjust to the way things are,” “accept the situation as unchangeable, because ultimately everybody gets what they deserve.” Ironically, these are similar to the words of the Jewish leaders who taught that sickness is a result of sin, a punishment for failing to be righteous. In our story, people come from Jairus’ house to say, “Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?” Jesus doesn’t respond, “Leave her for dead,” but instead says, “Do not fear, only believe.”

It is not a formula or prescription for success as some make it out to be. The phrase “If you just have enough faith, things will turn out all right,” is a lie. We know it simply doesn’t happen that way every time. Most people don’t get a miracle like Jairus and his daughter did, and one of the meanest things religious people can ever do is to blame sickness or tragedy on a lack of faith. To imply such a thing is to make miracles out to be some kind of strength test like the ones we see at county fairs, the ones that look like big thermometers with red ringers at the top. If you just hit the thing hard enough with the sledgehammer, you will ring the bell and win the prize. If you are not strong enough, then better luck next time. Miracles are not something we can control. Believe me, I wish they were. To try and control miracles is idolatry, it is one more pitiful effort on our parts to pretend we are in charge of our lives, instead of owning up to the truth that every single breath we take is a free surprise from God. Dr. Bruce Epperly, who will be joining us in October, asserts that churches need to learn to become laboratories for healing and wholeness. We need to say “yes” to God’s energy of love, to let go

of our fears and need for control, and recognize that God is subtly and actively present in every aspect of our lives. It is not our faith that brings about miracles, it is God. To think that our own beliefs somehow bring about miracles is like trying to perform a magic trick. To concentrate on the strength of our own beliefs is to practice magic. To concentrate on the strength of God is to practice faith. This is not just semantics. It is the difference, as Barbara Brown Taylor says, between believing our lives are in our own hands and believing they are in God's. It is our God, not our faith, who works miracles.

We don't know if Jairus' daughter had faith. Mark doesn't even say Jairus had faith. But we are given this father/daughter story to sandwich around the story of the hemorrhaging woman for many reasons, not the least of which is the need for clarification of Jesus' statement, "Daughter your faith has made you well." We need to recognize that the woman's faith only opened the door to that healing power which ultimately resides in the Healer. Jairus is told, "Do not fear, only believe," because if Jairus can simply do that, then no matter what happens to the daughter, he will survive. Even if Jesus walked into the girl's room, closed her eyes with his fingertips, and pulled the sheet over her head, the father's belief would have been the miracle in that moment. His willingness to believe that she was still in God's good hands even though she had slipped out of his – that is the miracle. Whenever and wherever Christ shows up, resurrection is experienced. Whenever and wherever Christ commands, "Get up!," even if it is on an oppressively hot day in July, it is still Easter. Every time we believe that God is God and we are not, every time we believe that our loved one who has died now resides in God's realm having been transformed for the good, we encounter the miracle of resurrection.

I don't expect any of us will stop praying for miracles nor should we, because the world needs all the miracles it can get. Every time you hear about one, remember that you are getting a preview of God's realm being fulfilled. There is simply no formula for success, which I guess is a relief for those of us who cannot seem to ring the bell. Maybe we cannot do it because it is not our job. "Do not fear, only believe." That is our job. The rest is up to God.

Happy Easter!