

“Not Dead, But Sleeping”

Date: June 28, 2015

Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: Mark 5:21-43

Occasion: Pentecost 5, year B

Theme: Hope

A business executive once became depressed. Things were not going well at work and he was bringing his problems home with him every night. Every evening he would eat his dinner in silence, shutting out his wife and 5 year old daughter.

Then he would go into the den and read the paper using the newspaper to wall his family out of his life. After several nights of this, one evening his daughter took her little hand and pushed the newspaper down.

She then jumped into her father’s lap, wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him strongly. The father said, rather abruptly, “Honey, you’re hugging me to death!” “No, Daddy,” the little girl said, “I’m hugging you to life!”

This is the greatness of Jesus. He has the power to love us back to life. He has the power to heal and the power to redeem. He has the power to give hope to the hopeless. This is the greatness of Jesus. He has the power to give us life, even life eternal.

In the gospel lesson this morning we have two stories, one inserted in the midst of another. The inserted story was that of a nameless woman with a chronic condition who was exhausted. She had been ill for twelve years and depleted all of her resources seeking medical treatment.

Most likely she had been publicly pronounced “unclean” because of her flow of blood. She was probably the victim of much

ridicule and contempt. She probably believed herself to be unlovable and incapable of giving love. And yet she was a woman of faith.

She struggled through the crowd to get close enough to Jesus so that he might help her. She thought if she just touched the hem of his garment, he might be able to make her well. She crossed the social boundaries of her time, causing Jesus himself to now be unclean, having come into contact with an unclean woman.

But Jesus named her “Daughter,” a term of endearing grace and compassion. She had suffered so much – physically, emotionally, socially. He included her in the human family and declared that she was worthy of love and capable of giving love, to God and to others.

He tells her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well,” pointing to her amazing faith. But his statement made it clear that neither He nor His clothing had any magical powers to heal. Rather, it was her trust in God that healed her. She had amazing faith, and Jesus had the power to give hope to the hopeless.

Meanwhile, Jesus had been on his way to assist a ruler by the name of Jairus, whose daughter was deathly sick. By stopping on the road to assist this woman He called Daughter, Jesus is delayed. Enough time passes that the girl he was going to visit, in order that he could heal her, had died.

By the time Jesus arrives at the house he hears the sounds of weeping and the shrill tones of flutes – signs he has arrived too late. Friends of the father come to him and advise: “Why bother the Teacher further?”

Jesus, however, counsels the crowd: “The child is not dead but only sleeps.” Now, there are two ways we can interpret that. First, this

is a medical diagnosis. Jesus might have been saying that the child is not dead, but only in a coma.

The second way of interpreting it is a theological one; Jesus is making a statement about death. In Pulaski, Tennessee there is a very old cemetery, dates range from 1810 to 1850. One out of every three graves belongs to those of children, a stark reminder of the incredibly high rate of infant mortality in those rugged days. How sad!

But if you look carefully, you will notice something else. On almost every tombstone of a child, there is chiseled on the bottom of the stone, these words of Jesus: “The child is not dead but asleep.” That is a statement of faith. Death does not have the last word. The last word belongs to Jesus, which is life.

But when Jesus first uttered those words, “The child is not dead but asleep,” they were not heard as words of hope. Indeed, Mark tells us that the crowd scoffed at him, they laughed at him. There are those today who scoff at Jesus.

They see religion in general and Jesus in particular as pie in the sky, nothing but a lie, or at best a fairy-tale made up to satisfy weak minds. But Jesus confronted the scoffers of his time and the scoffers of today. He looked directly at Jairus, the father, and said, “Do not fear, only believe.” (repeat)

Oh, my friends, it makes an incalculable difference to hold onto faith, however rudimentary our faith may be. Though it may not be much, perhaps only the faith of a mustard seed, hold on to your trust in God’s love for us.

What we have is not merely wishful dreams, but audacious prophecies. Christ’s resurrection from the dead is living proof that all

the powers of the world have ultimately been defeated. Jesus is the hope of the hopeless. The hope of the woman who had been bleeding for 12 years, and the Father of the 12 year old girl, and the hope of everyone who feels like giving up.

Pastor Billy D. Strayhorn writes, “In the war years, triage or sorting out, referred to the policy by which medical assistance was given. It was up to the doctors to “color-tag” the wounded, placing them in one of three categories according to their condition.

One color meant hopeless – nothing we can do will save them. Another tag meant they’d make it whether they got help or not. The third tag indicated a doubtful prognosis – a chance to live only if medical assistance is given. Since there were severely limited medical supplies, assistance was being given only to this last group.

“Lou was badly blown apart, including one leg severely injured. The doctor who examined him made the decision that Lou was a hopeless case and tagged him as such, leaving him to die.

“But a nurse noticed that Lou was conscious and began to talk with him. They discovered they were both from Ohio. Getting to know Lou as a person, and not just as a tag-color, the nurse couldn’t let him die. She broke all the rules, and changed his color-tag.

“There followed a two-day trip in the back of a truck and months spent in a hospital. But Lou made it. He met a girl in the hospital who he later married. Even minus one leg, he has led a full and happy life, all because a nurse broke the rules of triage and changed a tag.”

Rev. Strayhorn goes on to say, “Maybe the task of the church is to go around changing the tags on people’s lives. Maybe that’s what Jesus meant to tell when he healed the woman and when he healed

the little girl. Jesus is the friend of the hopeless. He came to save the hopeless from despair. He gave his life on the cross and was raised from the dead for that very reason.”

And so, I go back to that line that Jesus said to the scoffing crowd, those who told the father not to bother the Teacher any more. Jesus said: “The child is not dead, only sleeping.” Friends, wake up! Hope again! Hold fast to your faith in the One who conquered the grave. He has all power.

And if you are not currently going through trials and tribulations, go forth to change the tags. Remind the hopeless that there is One who has all power and he can change any situation. Don’t give up.

No matter how far down you are, No matter how bleak it looks, put your faith in God and in the Lord Jesus Christ. May it be your motto – “Not dead, only sleeping.” To God be the glory! Amen.

“Friend of the Hopeless,” by Billy D. Strayhorn, ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc.