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First Congregational Church of Blue Hill  
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“Wake Up!”

***“Daughter, your faith has made you well”***

*Jesus is asking us to wake up to the power that is within us*

Our Scripture reading for today is drawn from an early phase of Jesus’s public ministry as told in the Gospel of Mark. Jesus has emerged on the scene as a celebrated healer and teacher, and the healing stories that we explore today are part of a series of incidents that demonstrate the scope and power of his work and of his message. They spoke powerfully to Mark’s audience two thousand years ago, deeply in need of healing, as they speak to us today.

As we pick up the story, Jesus is returning to his home in Judea from the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee.

Let’s listen for the word of God.

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly, “My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live.”

So he went with him. And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, “If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.” Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, “Who touched my clothes?” And his disciples said to him, “You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, ‘Who touched me?’” He looked all around to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.”

While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader’s house to say, “Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?” But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, “Do not fear, only believe.” He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. When he had entered, he said to them, “Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.” And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child’s father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, “Talitha cum,” which means, “Little girl, get up!” And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat. (Mark 5:21-43)

The word of the Lord.

I've been thinking a lot recently about the future of church. I got a pretty direct read on how our students at Harvard think about this these days in a workshop that we ran at the school this past January. We created a weeklong course—over Zoom, unavoidably—entitled “The Spiritual Lives of Leaders.” We wanted to give our students an opportunity to hear from leaders from around the world about how their faith commitments and spiritual practices influence their approach to life and leadership and help them in making their big decisions.

We described it as “an invitation to a conversation we seldom have at Harvard Business School,” and we got a lot of interest from the leaders we invited. We had 29 speakers Zoom in across the week, including the president of Harvard, who joined us with his rabbi (which was super-interesting); the president of Middlebury College; the CEOs of Merck and Procter & Gamble and Apax Capital. It was a really diverse speaker list, in all ways, and our guests represented all of the major world religions.

We also attracted a surprisingly large group of students—over 50—all of whom had to take time off from January break to attend. The students were eager for this experience, in part because it was so different from what we typically do at the school, and in part because they are deeply torn. To generalize, they don't trust organized religion, or established denominations, or institutions generally, really. The more that something smacks of dogma or creeds or what they are being told to believe, the more allergic they are to it.

At the same time, they are hungry to understand how to express their faith, and how to be guided and supported by it. They want to know how faith and spirituality and religion fit in the modern world. Do people still do these kinds of things? And if you do have a particular faith commitment, can you express it at work, or do you need to “cover”?

I'll bet their questions are increasingly our questions as well. It is a hard time to be about the exercise of church renewal, as we know. We've got our work cut out for us here.

I thought a lot about my students and the questions they carry with them as I was reading today's Scripture passage and trying to put myself in the shoes of the people to whom Mark was writing. And they share a lot—we share a lot with

them: A troubled hour in history, a loss of trust in major institutions, a sense that the world is spinning out of our control.

What significance might these miracle stories from Jesus's ministry have had for them, and what guidance might they give to us today? I'd like us to explore that together this morning: Let's understand the context of Mark's time and his community, and what these healing stories might have meant to them, and then come back to the present and explore what we might take away.

First, a little context on Mark's gospel. Historians agree that the book of Mark was written around the year 70 CE, during or just after a period of intense upheaval in first-century Palestine. Following the failure of a Jewish revolt against the Roman occupation, the empire brought its entire might crashing down on Jerusalem, desecrating and destroying the Jerusalem temple, the heart of the Jewish world.

For this reason, the community Mark was writing to was full of fear and grief and dread—a group of individuals searching for a sense of direction, for a way forward. This is surely why Mark's gospel found such a ready audience. Jesus had been gone for a generation or two by this time, so all that they had—what Mark had to work with—was memories, many of them written down in collections of miracle stories and sayings and the like.

I think all of that helps to explain why Mark chose to share these two particular stories of Jesus's healing ministry—and also why he intertwined, or sandwiched, them in the way that he did. He starts out telling the story of the distraught father, shifts to the desperate woman, and then returns to the father and his daughter. This was a favorite device of Mark's—to build suspense, for sure, but more importantly to draw out his central theme, or lesson. He's so good at this, in fact, that we should stop thinking of this passage in terms of two episodes—there's really one story here, not two. Two characters who at first blush seem so different from each other but who come together to illustrate a single, ultimately reassuring, point.

So let's dig in.

As the passage opens, Jesus is returning to the Judean side of the Sea of Galilee—he's actually heading home, to Nazareth—when he's accosted shortly after he gets off the boat by a man named Jairus, a leader of the local synagogue, a Pharisee. Throughout the whole book of Mark, Jairus's peers have been trying to catch Jesus doing something wrong, to pin a crime on him, and so it's all the more surprising when Jairus seeks Jesus out, throws himself at his feet, and begs him to come heal

his daughter. You can imagine his grief and desperation as he's been watching his daughter slip away week by week.

Jesus agrees to go with him, and the crowd follows along with them and keeps pressing closer and closer. Maybe they're intrigued, maybe they're emboldened by Jairus's presence. And then a very different character enters the picture. To get to Jesus, a woman who has been bleeding, hemorrhaging, for twelve years pushes through the crowd in an attempt to touch his cloak. She's made her mind up that if she touches his clothes she will be healed. And what a sympathetic character she is to us; Mark tells us that she's suffered for the entire twelve-year span of her illness, that she's spent all the money she had on physicians, and that she is now penniless. In the eyes of Mark's audience, however, she was an outcast. Unclean, according to Hebrew scripture and custom. As, by the way, was anyone she touched.

She is successful—she does touch Jesus—and Mark tells us that she is immediately healed. Don't miss this—it's a small point, but an important one. It is not Jesus's intention, but hers, that brings about her healing. Jesus feels this touch—he feels the power flow through him to her—and he stops to find out who touched him. The disciples don't know—they actually think he's being a little unrealistic to try to find one person who touched him in that sea of people—but the woman knows. Like Jairus before her, she throws herself at his feet and tells him “the whole truth.” Jesus says to her, very clearly, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.”

Jesus then turns back to Jairus, who has just been informed that in the time it has taken him to find Jesus and lead him back to his house, his daughter has now died. To bolster his confidence, Jesus says to him, “Do not fear, only believe.” They approach the house, Jesus tells the mourners that their weeping is unnecessary, that the girl is merely sleeping. He brings a small group with him into her bedroom, takes her by the hand, and raises her up.

So how is this one story? These two people come from such different stations in life, they're on different missions, with different needs. In fact, each of them is inconvenienced by the other: The suffering woman sees Jesus about to leave, just when she was mustering the courage to get close to him; and the leader of the synagogue wants Jesus to get to his house as quickly as possible, with no distractions or delays.

These are two people who you might imagine would not find their way to Jesus, who've been operating on autopilot, as it were. The suffering woman has followed doctors' orders, year after year, until she had spent all of her money. The leader of the synagogue risks the ridicule of his community, or worse, perhaps expulsion at throwing himself at the feet of this itinerant preacher and healer.

They share desperation, they share determination—but what they share most deeply is that they have awakened to faith. They're beyond worrying what other people will think of them, they're not looking to institutions or earthly powers for their salvation, they recognize the truth of Jesus's words: "Your faith has made you well." In the *Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus expresses this same truth by saying, "If you bring forth what is within you, what is within you will save you." (repeat)

Just as Mark's community must have, I find this message so timely for us, and for the work we are about. Faith is resurgent, while dogma is dying. The reason Mark's community celebrates these stories is that, while Jesus lived before them, he was speaking to their deepest needs – he was preaching a ministry of healing that was radically anti-institutional, radically personal, and radically timely and timeless.

What will save us is inside us. This was an important lesson for Mark's community, who saw little that they could cling to in their time of upheaval, and it is every bit as important to us now. Jesus healed by encouraging us to "go inside." That is the simple promise of faith: By helping each other bring forth what is within us, we connect ourselves to Spirit, to the saving grace of God.

One of the leaders we invited to our workshop shared this lesson memorably with our students. Ken Frazier, the CEO of the pharmaceutical company Merck. You might have heard of Ken—he's the CEO who made quite a stir when he quit President Trump's Manufacturing Council in the aftermath of Charlottesville. He talked about that decision with our students. In fact, we were so surprised that he made the time for us: this past January, he was beyond busy, running a \$50 B pharmaceutical company, organizing the production of the COVID vaccine, co-founding the One Ten initiative, whose aim is to upskill, hire and promote one million Black Americans into family-sustaining jobs across the next decade. No one's dance card is more full, but Ken cleared time on his calendar to speak with our students that week because his faith is so important to him. At one point he kind of blurted out the following:

No matter what organized set of religious principles one believes, the prophets were all basically saying one thing, and that is “Wake up!” If you’re really going to live your life, you need to wake up. You cannot be programmed, and in some ways in the wrong hands religion becomes a form of programming. One conclusion I have reached is, if you are living an unaware life you are living a mechanical life. You’re being programmed by other people, and what I have struggled with, what I have been trying to do in the latter part of my life, is figure out who this person I call “I” is.

Escaping a mechanical life: Isn’t that what the suffering woman and the Pharisee sought to do? Isn’t that what we seek to do?

I can’t tell you what a deep impression Ken’s words made on our students. That’s what they want as well. They want to wake up. They want to understand how faith can guide them to bold action, to give voice to their deepest values. One of them told me afterwards that she wants “a support system that supports me when I am weak. Faith and spirituality are wells I can draw upon to build strong purpose and set about the work of repairing the world.”

Isn’t that amazing. I draw such hope from her and her peers

We are the inheritors of a ministry of healing. And we are the latest in a long line of barrier-crossers and risk-takers, who can trust that our most daring, faithful efforts will be met with God’s merciful healing touch.

The church wants to grow, but it won’t look like what it has looked like in the past. As we return to the sanctuary, let’s hold onto the silver linings from the pandemic: our intimate conversations; our focus on faith; and our radical welcome of all seekers after truth. Supported and sustained by the wisdom of our teacher, Jesus, and the prophets throughout history who have been mouth to mouth with God.