
Arise! Get Up! Take Heart!

A sermon by the Rev. Julia Mitchener
Proper 8 - Year B

It doesn't matter about your underwear. It really doesn't. I learned this as a hospital chaplain working the night shift in the ER. Yes, you heard that right: I learned this as a hospital chaplain working the night shift in the ER.

You see, when I was growing up, my mother—perhaps like yours—drilled into me the importance of being clean, tidy, and well dressed whenever I left the house. She liked to repeat that old adage about putting on nice undergarments in case you got into a car accident and had to have emergency surgery. Two years spent ministering in a Level I Trauma Center, however, disabused me of this concern. No doctor I ever saw trying to save someone's life gave a hoot about whether that person needed a shave or a shower or had badly chipped toenail polish. If patients arrived catastrophically sick or severely injured, hospital staff simply cut their clothes right off of them, underwear and all. No one, it turns out, stands on ceremony during medical emergencies, not doctors, not nurses, not social worker, not patients' families—especially not patient's families. Faced with the serious illness of a loved one, high powered executives accustomed to negotiating in corporate boardrooms suddenly start bargaining with God on the hospital chapel floor. Sweet faced grandmothers sometimes curse at lab technicians trying to complete a blood draw. Having a family member's life hanging in the balance can cause a person to behave in some pretty dramatic and desperate ways.

So it is in this morning's gospel lesson. Jairus, a man whose beloved child has fallen gravely ill, approaches Jesus to ask him to heal the girl. Actually, he doesn't just "approach" Jesus, he prostrates himself in front of him. Jairus, we can assume, is not a natural born prostrator. He is an important person, a respected person, a person who is, as one of my great aunts used to say, "high up" in his profession. So here we have this powerful man Jairus, only he's not looking very powerful right now. He's looking frantic. He's kneeling in front of Jesus while the mud squishes between his toes and cakes onto his clothing and he is pleading over and over and over again, "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 Jesus goes with him. Along the way, though, something happens. A woman, every bit as desperate as Jairus, though in a quieter sort of way—a woman who has been bleeding for twelve years sneaks up on Jesus in search of relief. So frantic is she for Jesus' help that she does something outrageous. She touches him, thereby rendering him ritually unclean. And then she is healed

Meanwhile, unfortunately, the situation with Jairus' daughter has gone from bad to worse. A whole crowd of naysayers—a bevy of ancient Palestinian "Dr. No's"—scurry over to tell Jairus and Jesus they needn't bother going to his house anymore. It is too late. "Your daughter is dead," they announce matter of factly. "Why trouble the teacher any further?

Why trouble the teacher any further? In other words, *Give it up, Jairus. It's over. Stop your undignified wailing and cajoling and save some face while you still can.* But Jesus ignores this fatalistic advice and encourages Jairus to press forward, fool's errand though it may seem. While others tell Jairus to "pack it in" and call it a day, there is One who remains, One who stays the course with Jairus even in this, his darkest hour.

It would be hard to overestimate the importance of this story at this particular point in Mark's gospel. Last Sunday, you may recall, in response to a miracle Jesus performs during a storm at sea, his disciples asked each other a question: "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" Who then is this? Today's gospel reading provides an answer to their query. Who is this? This is the One who brings life out of death. This is the One who does not shy away from helpless people or helpless situations, from folks whose despair

has reached the point that they are engaged in pointless, embarrassing, even scandalous, behavior. This is the One who does his best work in the midst of horrific despair. This is the One who joins with the despondent and the dying in their last ditch efforts to find light in the darkness, water in the desert, calm in the storm. This is the One who takes a dead girl by the hand and says to her, against all odds, *Talitha cum. Little girl, get up.* This is the One. This is who Jesus is.

All of which strikes me as incredibly Good News, for you and I are living through a time that is rife with death, cynicism and hopelessness. All around us are there are voices advising us to quit—not to get up, but to give up. To cut our losses while we still can. To abandon our cities in favor of communities we imagine will be safer and more peaceful. To adopt a cynical attitude toward our government and our public institutions. To cease the struggle for racial justice because continuing it may involve dredging up a painful past many had thought was over. To cut ourselves off from family members and friends with whom we disagree on political and social issues. To resign ourselves to coping with a mental health crisis by turning to alcohol, food, or drugs. All around us, there are those who are advising us to quit, to give up—and their siren calls are loud.

But Jesus says, *Not so fast.* Not so fast. In spite of all the loss and pain of the past year and a half, the division and discord in our civic life, the violence in our streets, the almost four million souls lost to COVID-19 around the globe, all the fervently whispered prayers that seem to have gone unanswered—in spite of all this (in spite of it and in the midst of it), there is still healing and beauty and redemption and relationship to be found; there is joy and reconciliation and peace and wonder.

And so, in a living room in Connecticut where a man with Alzheimer's forgot he was married, only to fall in love with his wife a second time and ask her to wed him all over again—in a living room in Connecticut, Lisa and Peter Marshall recently got up. They got up and they renewed their marriage vows. At the other end of the country, amid the devastating rubble of a collapsed high rise condominium in Miami, a passerby out with his dog late at night heard a desperate cry and saw an outstretched hand, its fingers wiggling frantically—and Nicholas Balboa got up. He got up from the spot where he'd been watching the disaster unfold and saved the life of a young boy.

Where in your life have you been left for dead? Where have you given up on yourself? Where have you given up on our world? Where have you begun to abandon hope? Where have you started to surrender to those voices that tell you it's no use, it's too late? Wherever this place is within you, this is precisely the place where Jesus comes to you today and says, *Arise! Do not be afraid. Take heart. Believe. Get up! Amen.*