

"HOPE FOR THE HOPELESS"

Mark 5:21-43

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York Center Church of the Brethren

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We were watching the news Thursday evening when they reported on the building collapse in Florida. Horrifying video showed the twelve-story condo building just crumbling in the early morning darkness. A reporter spoke with a family member who was waiting for news of her loved ones. She said, "God is bigger than anything in this world." The reporter asked, "So, you still have hope?" She replied, "Hope is the last thing you lose in this life." 159 people are missing. "Hope is the last thing you lose in this life."

Poet Emily Dickinson compared hope to a tough little bird in her poem, "Hope is the thing with feathers."

"Hope" is the thing with feathers

That perches in the soul -

And sings the tune without the words -

And never stops - at all -

And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -

And sore must be the storm -

That could abash the little Bird

That kept so many warm -

I've heard it in the chillest land -

And on the strangest Sea -

Yet - never - in Extremity,

It asked a crumb - of me.

The poet saw hope as a bird that lives within the human soul and sings its

song no matter what. Emily Dickinson's images offer us a hymn of praise which honors our capacity for hope. This "thing with feathers" is constant, almost impossible to defeat, and never asks anything from us.

Have you ever held a small bird in your hands? They feel so delicate, so vulnerable. And yet, some of them fly thousands of miles, they survive the coldest winters and the hottest summers. Dickinson sees hope as an essential part of the human condition which gives us strength in hard times.

Most of us have probably experienced difficult times when we clung to hope in the midst of adversity. And probably some of us have experienced times of utter hopelessness when it felt as though that little bird, "the thing with feathers," had abandoned our nest and flown off to a sunnier location.

We turn to the *Gospel of Mark* this morning and find two females, a girl and a woman, both in hopeless situations. One due to death and one due to illness. Both beyond human intervention- they are made whole by the presence and power of Jesus.

We meet the first, the unnamed daughter, through her father, Jairus. She is the cherished twelve year-old child of a very important man. We know he is important because Mark named him. He was a leader in the synagogue, a well-respected religious man who was probably quite wealthy. No doubt he was aware of those in his religious circle who were not happy with Jesus and his popularity with the people. But that doesn't seem to matter when his daughter is deathly ill.

Jairus saw Jesus, ran up to him, fell at his feet, and begged him to heal his daughter. According to Mark, Jesus doesn't stop to question Jairus about his faith or his role in the harassment that Jesus is experiencing from the religious leaders. Jesus doesn't ask what is wrong with the child. Mark gives us Jesus's response in five words. "So he went with him."

On the way there is an interruption. There is an unnamed woman in the crowd of people pushing up against Jesus. She has been ill for twelve years, chronically bleeding, losing strength, money, and self esteem in her search for a cure. According to the Jewish law, her constant bleeding meant that she was "unclean." Anyone who touched her would also be unclean and would be prevented from entering the Temple for prayer until they performed specific rituals of purification. Her presence in the crowd was a danger to everyone.

All that mattered to her was getting close to Jesus. He was her only hope. She came up behind him, reached through the crowd of disciples and other people and touched the edge of his robe. Can you imagine the courage it took for her to do such a simple, yet outrageous thing? It was totally unacceptable but I would imagine that she was beyond worrying about what was acceptable. She was desperate. She was without hope. He was her last chance. Maybe she thought she could touch his robe and then slide back into the crowd without being noticed. But the instant she touched his garment, Jesus knew. As she felt the healing power surge through her broken body and soul, Jesus turned to her and said, "Who touched me?"

The disciples couldn't believe Jesus would ask such a silly question. "Who touched me? Jesus, everybody is touching you! There are so many people here we can hardly move. Why would you ask such a question?"

But Jesus knew and the woman knew that something extraordinary had just happened. Jesus stopped in his tracks and waited. And then she spoke up, revealing her identity to the horror of everyone in the crowd. In that crowd were those who had shunned her and abandoned her and maybe even some who had taken her money with false promises of a cure. They all knew who she was and maybe they scrambled to get away from her.

Like Jairus, she fell to her knees at the feet of Jesus, and poured out her hopeless story. Mark says she told him the "whole truth." Jesus was probably the first person who ever really listened to her. She told him of being poor, alone, vulnerable, sick, exploited, and weak. She belonged to no one, had no one to speak up or stand up for her. And in that moment Jesus claimed her as his own when he called her, "daughter." In that one word she found her home, a place of acceptance and love. She found her identity. "Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace."

The healing of her body was almost secondary to the healing of her soul. In that one word, "Daughter," Jesus made it clear to everyone that this unnamed woman was his child, welcomed into his family, beloved by God.

If Jesus was concerned only with physical healing, he could have just kept walking, knowing that someone had touched him and received healing power, but not too concerned with the particulars. He was, after all, on a mission of life and death. But he stopped and asked, "Who touched me" because he wasn't just concerned with physical healing, he was concerned with relationship. Each and every time Jesus encounters someone it is personal. He calls to them, reaches out to them, speaks to them, welcomes them, acknowledges their presence, and claims them as his own child.

He loved this woman enough to stop his mission of mercy, which probably upset Jairus. He wanted to meet the one he had just healed. He wanted to see her face to face. He wanted

to look into her eyes and let her know that he saw her. He wanted to make sure that she knew who she was. She was his daughter.

And that quickly, word came from Jairus's house that his daughter had died and there was no need to trouble the Teacher any longer. Can you imagine the agony in the heart of that father? Apparently, Jesus could because he said to him, "Do not be afraid, only believe." And he continued to the house where the professional mourners were already assembled outside doing their thing. When Jesus told them to stop weeping because the child was not dead, they laughed at him.

Jesus went into her room with her parents and three of his disciples. He took her hand and said, "Little lamb, arise." And she did. And just like that another daughter is restored to life, restored to her family who loved her.

This story, recorded in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, breaks so many taboos of that time that it is hard to know where to begin to untangle them. Both the unnamed woman, who was probably a widow, and the little girl who was still too young to be married off, were living in a time when the fact that they were single and female meant they were of little value to their society.

They were both unclean, one because of blood and the other because of death. Notice that the woman was bleeding for as many years as the child had been alive. Twelve. Jesus is not made unclean by touching them, they are made whole by his touch.

Theologian Willie Jennings wrote, *"One of the lessons that all Christians must deepen in their lives is that hope is always active, never passive."* Emily Dickinson knew that when she compared hope to a tenacious little bird. The woman who was healed embodied active hope. Probably encouraged by others to a life of passive optimism, she instead got up and walked out of her place of isolation and reached out to the only one who could help her. Jairus wasn't willing to let his little girl die so he went out to find Jesus and actively begged him to save her.

Jesus is the instrument of transformative power - power that brings people back to life. In her commentary on the Gospel of Mark, Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm reminds us, *"In the economy of divine grace, there is no shortage of power and no lack of compassion."*

This story may have a different meaning for us now than it did before the COVID pandemic. Over the past two years many people have died without the personal healing touch of their loved ones. One of the most difficult things about being human is to accept and understand why some people find healing and others don't.

How do you hold on to faith when healing doesn't happen and loved ones die?

How do you keep hope alive when a twelve-story building (there is that number 12 again) full of people is now nothing but a pile of rubble?

The reality is that we cannot promise healing and wholeness to anyone. We cannot promise the anguished families in Florida that their loved ones will be found alive under all of the concrete and steel. I cannot preach a sermon on hope and promise that if you have faith everything will be ok. It won't always be ok. And you know that.

What I can tell you is that I believe that no matter what happens in our lives or in our world, we are held and cherished by the God who created us. I can tell you that I believe the healing touch of Jesus can and does make a difference in our lives. I can tell you that the embrace of a faith community can uphold you in times of suffering.

The eternal question people have been asking since there have been people is- why do bad things happen? No matter how much we hope that they won't we know that they do, and that they will. Passive optimism won't change that. But I believe active hope can make a difference.

When we have the audacity to hope in a hope-starved world we will live our lives as people of hope, knowing that our hope is based in Jesus Christ. As people of hope, we will do our best to make this world a better place. We will empower others to do the same.

Barbara Kingsolver is one of my favorite writers. She recently wrote, "*The very least you can do in your life is to figure out what you hope for. And the most you can do is live inside that hope.*"

What do you hope for? A healthier planet, happy children, an end to hunger, war, and violence?

What do you hope for? A robust church that preaches the mercy, grace, and love of God?

What do you hope for? How can you live into that hope and help to make it a reality?

As Christians, our hope is grounded in Christ, the One who reached out to those who ached for wholeness; the One who touched the untouchable and loved the unlovable. And still does.

Our hope is rooted in the God who created this world and fiercely loves it and us.

Our hope is given flight by the Holy Spirit who empowers us with the breath of God and sends us out into the world to keep the "thing with feathers" singing its holy song.

Our hope is nurtured and protected by this faith community which gives us a safe place to land when our hope needs encouragement and reinforcement.

*"Hope is the thing with feathers-*

*That perches in the soul-*

*And sings the tune without words- and never stops-*

*at all."*

Thanks be to God.

Amen.