

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany • February 4, 2018

Isaiah 40:21-31 • Psalm 147:1-11, 20c • 1 Corinthians 9:16-23 • Mark 1:29-39

A few weeks ago, our gospel reading came from St. John's gospel. And after service, I popped into Gerry Lauro's Bible study. And, if you've never gone to one, I would encourage you to go, if only to see the big grin Gerry has on his face when he gets to talk about the Bible. Gerry has all these books strewn in front of him and a big grin on his face. And Gerry really doesn't like Mark that much. So when I walked in, he said something to effect of, "Gospel of John today, huh? Nice. Glad we're done with Mark." And so I had to break the bad news to him. That we'd be back in Mark the next week. And the week after that. And the week after that. And for most of the year until we get to Thanksgiving. So I invite you to keep Gerry in your thoughts and prayers during this difficult time.

Just to recap, Mark's gospel is written as a circle. And so the full import, the full weight of his gospel doesn't really become clear until you read it a second time. At the very end of Mark's gospel, in his Easter story, a man at the empty tomb tells a group of women that if they want to see the resurrected Jesus, they need to go back to Galilee. Galilee is where the beginning of Mark's gospel takes place. So if you want to see the new life and resurrection that Jesus is bringing, go back to the beginning.

And that's an invitation not only to those women but to us as readers to go back and read it again. And you'll see that stories, conversations, and references that meant one thing the first time you read the story start to take on a new level of depth once you know how the story ends. They don't erase their original meaning, but they bring out something that you didn't really notice before. Few stories in the gospel of Mark take on more meaning when you read them a second time than the story of Simon's mother-in-law.

There are at least two reasons for that. One reason is because the first time you hear the story it seems like hardly anything happens. The story is so concise, so terse that the lectionary combines it with two other anecdotes just so preachers have a little more to work with. Jesus simply takes Simon's mother-in-law by the hand and lifts her up. And her fever is gone. No conversation about what just happened. No reaction from Simon's mother-in-law or Jesus or the other disciples. No nothing. Just on to the next thing.

The other reason is that we are told so little about Simon's mother-in-law. Mark doesn't even bother to tell us her name, which means that you have to keep referring to her as Simon's mother-in-law. Not only is that an awkward choice, it also that gives you the impression that her identity is defined primarily by her relationship with men. And thanks to Mark's omission of her name, generations of clergy have been unable to resist the Sirens' call of bad mother-in-law jokes. To make matters worse, after Jesus heals her, she doesn't get any time to recuperate, doesn't get a minute to herself. Jesus heals her and then she begins to immediately take care of Jesus and his new disciples. It's easy to read this story and think it is about some woman who gets healed so she can get back to taking care of other people's needs. A kind of first-century Stepford wife. But if you read this story through the ending of Mark's gospel, if you read it through the resurrection, a whole different story starts to emerge.

Since we've been hearing these stories from the beginning of Mark's gospel week by week, they give the impression that this story is moving at a meandering pace. Which is not true at all. This is all happening at breakneck speed. One day, Jesus calls Simon and the disciples to follow him. They do. Immediately. When the Sabbath comes they go to the synagogue where Jesus heals a man who is possessed by a demon. And after realizing what Jesus is capable of, Simon wonders, "Well, if

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he could do that for the possessed man, maybe he can do something about my sick mother-in-law.” So as soon as they leave the synagogue, Simon drags Jesus to his house, where his mother-in-law is lying in bed with a fever. And as Simon is hopped up on adrenaline, tripping over his words telling Jesus about her condition, Mark says that Jesus simply “took her by the hand and lifted her up.” That’s it. “That’s it” is how many people read this story. Simon had a problem to fix, Jesus solved the problem. Jesus can heal people who are sick. Got it. Moving along to the next thing.

But that’s only it if you don’t know the end of the gospel. That’s it unless you know that on Easter when the man tells the women at the empty tomb that Jesus has been raised, Mark uses the same word. “He has been raised, he is not here.” He has been egeirō, the same word Mark uses to describe how Jesus lifts up Simon’s mother-in-law. You can see the circle forming here. Mark wants us to see that Jesus isn’t the only person who gets lifted up. So does Simon’s mother-in-law. The resurrection is an event that happens to Jesus. But it’s also an event that Jesus brings about in others through his healing. That in the healing of Simon’s mother-in-law, there is a glimpse of Jesus’s own triumph over death. So if you want to see the resurrection, go back to Galilee. Go back to Simon’s home.

This is nice little linguistic bank shot except for one difficulty, which is that Simon’s mother-in-law isn’t dead. She’s sick. She hasn’t been raised from the dead like Jesus. So what does Jesus’s resurrection have to do with her? How can Mark say that she’s participating in Jesus’s resurrection or receiving a foretaste of Jesus’s resurrection when she’s not even dead? The problem isn’t that Mark is being too imprecise with his language. The problem isn’t that the way Mark talks about resurrection is too large. The real problem is that the way we often talk about death is too small.

Sometimes death comes to us slowly. It comes to us in pieces. If you have a loved one with memory loss then you know what that experience feels like. One of the most common refrains you hear after someone with Dementia or Alzheimer’s dies is that it feels like they died a long time ago. And when they finally die you might even feel a sense of relief. Not because they’re gone but because you can publicly grieve a death that you’ve been mourning privately for years. Sometimes death comes to us as all at once. It comes to us as a shock. Most of us have some version of that experience when someone our own age dies for the first time. Before that, death seems sad but inevitable, a natural part of life. And then one day it strikes you as deeply unfair and even random. Life feels like a given, and then one day it’s not.

And sometimes that death comes to us, as it did to Simon’s mother-in-law, in our relationships. Not only was Simon’s mother-in-law sick, but Mark tells us that she was laid up in bed. Taken out of her community. Left alone all day as life went on without her. The feeling that you’ve been forgotten or that you’ve become expendable is one of the most stinging deaths of all. And it’s from this death in her life that Jesus raises her. Simon’s mother-in-law isn’t just restored to health, but is restored back to life. Restored to her community. To the relationships that give life its meaning and wholeness.

And this resurrection that Jesus gives her takes on a very particular form. After being lifted up, Mark says that Simon’s mother-in-law began to serve them. Which makes it sound like she has been raised for a life of playing hostess. Something akin to what’s on your bulletin covers today. But “serve” here has a much broader notion than we usually ascribe to it. This is not a life confined to the home, handing out finger sandwiches and macaroons. This is engaging in the work of ministry. Later in Mark’s gospel, Jesus will say that he came not to be served but to serve. Simon’s mother-in-law is engaging in the work of Jesus.

And if you know the ending of Mark’s gospel, you know where Simon’s mother-in-law is headed. You know where discipleship gets you. When Mark describes the scene when Jesus was

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crucified, almost as an afterthought, he adds, “There were also women looking on from a distance” who “used to follow him and provided for him while he was in Galilee.” Do you want to take a wild guess how you can translate “provided” for him? Served him.

Now, do we know if Simon’s mother-in-law was in that group of women? No. But it seems possible, even likely that that’s what Mark is alluding to with his reference to these women of Galilee who served Jesus. And if that’s true it means that Jesus lifted her up to a life of discipleship. Of ministering to and ministering with Jesus. Leaving her home and following Jesus to Jerusalem, all the way the cross.

Her being lifted up doesn’t erase suffering from her life. It doesn’t protect her from the shadows of death that darken our lives. Jesus heals her fever but he still leads her to the foot of the cross. Jesus doesn’t promise that death won’t exist, only that life in God is stronger than death. Jesus doesn’t promise an escape from life, only the courage to look at it honestly. Jesus doesn’t promise that life is free of suffering, only that God always suffers alongside us.

To put it another way, Jesus doesn’t cure Simon’s mother-in-law. He heals her. He doesn’t just fix her problem and tell her to go back to life as it was. He invites her into something new. A new relationship ministering to and with Jesus and the disciples as the mission of God unfolds. So that when Jesus is lifted up on the cross and lifted up from the dead, she is present. And she can see that, in Christ, she has been lifted up, too.

What Jesus gives Simon’s mother-in-law and all of us is a foretaste of that great feast to come. That’s what we receive every time we gather around this table as a people of God. Life in and with God and all God’s people. In bread and wine, in water and word, God lifts us up to new life.

So as we do every Sunday, let’s eat and drink. Let’s sing and pray. Let’s teach and care. And let’s get lifted.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor