

They Laughed at Him (His Power Had Gone Forth)

5th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 8 (13) B, 2021

One of the most difficult things in the life of a minister, or in the life of any person, is having to bear bad news. Like unto it is the inability to bring good news when good news is desperately wanted. It is in this spirit – and mindful of the many dead in Miami following the collapse of that building, and the millions dead and still dying around the world of Covid-19 and other diseases for which vaccines and other treatments exist, but not yet where they can reach all who need them – that I find myself reading today’s gospel. It holds some of our most beautiful and poignant stories about Jesus, how he lived, what he lived for, and what people saw in him, expected of him, and came to him to find. But they are also stories marred, like a sunny day at the beach when clouds begin to gather in the west, or an intimate conversation is thrown off by a misplaced word or a misunderstood expression.

But first, the beauty. Jesus, on his way to heal someone, is interrupted by someone else who needs him to heal her. Jairus, leader of the synagogue, needs the teacher and healer from Galilee to come quickly to the bedside of his daughter, lying near death, and off Jesus goes. In the midst of the crowd that is also going with him – to see, to witness, to get some of this grace and power as well? Probably all three – there is a woman whom the medical professionals of her day had failed. She has been losing blood, slowly but persistently, for well over a decade, no-one knows why. Yet she believes that touching Jesus’s cloak, even, will be enough to access his power and have that power heal her. It is, in a way – but it’s not his power *per se*, but her faith in his power, he says, that has made her well.

How tempting it is to believe it, to cling to the idea that the will to be well, the trust that one will be, the hope that one will be, is enough. “If I but reach out my hand and touch the hem of his cloak” – ah, yes, but what if you cannot reach it? What if he had not walked that way today? What if you touch it and it doesn’t

work? Is it your belief that makes it work? Why? What if this belief, this faith she has. and that the Gospel of Mark clearly wants us to have as well, is necessary, but not sufficient. Must we conclude that those who are not healed, though they pray for it, lack faith?

But not yet; not such tones yet. Let's stick with the beauty. The woman is healed, and she knows it. *Exit believer, made whole.* The crowds press him on. Yet faith is not done with its lessons. They come from the house; *enter servants, weeping.* Jairus, your daughter has died. Trouble this man no further. There's nothing he or anyone can do now. Heal the sick he may, but raise the dead? Ah, yes, it turns out, he can. "She is not dead, but sleeping," he wryly says, telling her to get up – and you know they know he said it, because they put the words in Aramaic, the language he would've known best: *Talitha, cum.* Come on, little one, rise up and play. You are young, and the young should not die, but only sleep until they rise in a bright new sunshine, with the smiling face of a healer to greet them against the agony that was all-too near. Come on, little girl, it is time to rise; rise and shine, breakfast time. And she does.

You know the dead have returned when they eat. If they don't eat, they're not really back.

It's like that when children return home from college, or even graduate school, or friends stop by (or parishioners stop by) after a long season of quarantine-mandated time away. Until the drinks start flowing and the feasting starts, they're not really back, and the good times are not really here.

But eat she does, this young lady halfway from age 6 to age 18, not quite a child but not yet quite a woman, amazed. She has her life back, when she thought it lost – and her family has her back, when they thought her lost. As with Jesus's friend Lazarus later on, this return to life is but a reprieve from the debt we all must pay as we slip out and head west, crossing over Jordan to lie beneath the elms. Christ

came not to end death but to defang it, pull its sting. This reprieve that grants a girl who had likely not yet reached puberty the chance to live long enough to see her children's children is a good example of what that means, and of the power used with compassion to make it possible. You have – and now, little girl, you have back – this one, beautiful life. What will you do with it? Whom will you share it with? What will you use it to make happen in the world that was here before you and will remain after you?

Yesterday we laid to rest in the churchyard the remains of Hannah Crosswhite MacMartin, whom many of you will have known. Among her many accomplishments – which included years of “research on the structure of atoms in rare earth elements” and being one of the first women in the 1970s to program computers – was getting these needlepoint cushions made to go around this altar. As her daughter Dorothy wrote to me, “The church had been left money to make needlepoint kneeler cushions for the church communion rail, and the [then-] rector asked Hannah, who was known for her needlework, to make it happen. She researched designs, and modified them to suit the project. She wanted fairly simple patterns, so that beginning needlepointers would be comfortable working them. She organized a group of congregants, including at least one man, to do the needlepoint work, part of it in gatherings at her house. When the needlework was done, Milton [Crosswhite, her husband] blocked the canvasses so they would be square, and a professional assembled them into cushions.” She didn't have to do that, but she did, and because she did, this church and all who worship in it benefit from it, even if they never know her name.

Hannah Crosswhite's funeral was a beautiful ceremony in the shade and breezes of June, poignant and graceful, much in the spirit, her family said, of the deceased herself. As I had never gotten to know her, her family was kind enough to tell me some stories and share some memories – and then to share them with one another

as part of their final goodbye. She, I reflected after hearing all these stories, was clearly a brilliant and kind, reserved and respectful woman who had a good life, though with its wounds and heartbreaks. Her world and that of her loved ones, was better off for her having lived. That is a comforting thought as one walks away from a grave, having watched an urn lowered and the dirt placed back in, and the green swath of turf tamped down over it, a final resting place for the dead beneath the roots of that which still lives, blithe and dewy, and longing to remain.

We do now know what became of the young woman whose life Jesus restored, or of the woman who touched the hem of his robe, felt his power flow from him to her, and then heard him say, “Your faith has made you well.” It is likely that their world was better off because they lived and were healed and restored by the one who would become the savior of us all. It is not true that they were remembered only so long as someone knew their names, as the saying goes. That is because we do not know their names but remember them anyway – and their spirit, their grace, the gifts they were given, whether or not they had the faith necessary to get it. It was the young woman’s father, after all, whose faith drove forward his daughter’s return to life, and his name – Jairus – we do remember, since he got a gift that is given to few people indeed: getting back a loved one who has died.

That’s the difficult part, the bad-news part, of these lovely gospel stories we have today. They’re atypical. Most of us do not get our loved ones back, even our beloved children back, once they leave this life for the next. Sometimes we pray fervently for healing, both personal and on a national level, and what we pray for comes to pass. Sometimes it does not. It can appear arbitrary to us, who lives, who does not – who, for example, was away on the night the building collapsed in Miami, vs, who had just flown in for the week. We celebrate when miracles occur, when healing happens, when recovery obtains and lasts. We mourn when it does not. It is meet and proper to do both. It is also meet and proper to remember that

all lives are gifts, and to be cherished, to be lived beautifully, leaving the world better than it would have been had that life not been lived. We can do nothing about the fact that life ends. We can do everything about the fact that life is, while it is – and can make of it anything we can imagine.

See, Christ's power did not simply go forth when a woman touched his robe, or a father's grief touched his heart. It went forth in the very beginning of things, as the Word that was with God and the Word that was God, the Spirit, the breath by which all that is came to be. The mystery of it is not so much how – something about a bang, they tell me, and a big one – but why. Why? Because life's purpose can be hard to find because it ends, though it might be hard to find even if it didn't. In our other readings for today, we see hints to its purpose. We are, as 2 Corinthians says, to make sure that none has too much nor none to little, and that we give from where there is abundance to where there is need for it, being generous with what we have, even as Christ was generous with what he had. Have we riches? Use them to improve the lives of those who don't. Have we knowledge? Use it to improve the lives of those who don't. Have we kindness and grace. Use them to improve the lives of those who don't. Have we privilege, which is often the absence of stigma and prejudice, the decks stacked for us by no merit or desert of our own? Use it to improve the lives of those who don't – and end the systems by which inequalities and the like persist, by which far too many still earn their bread by the sweat of other men's faces. Have we known joy? Use it to bring joy to those who have not? Have we known love? Use it to bring love to those who have not. Have we been upheld in grief? Uphold others. Have we been sustained by grace, unmerited and unearned? Be gracious unto others. Leave the world a better place because we were in it. There's always the chance to do so. Use it well, because the chance does not last forever.

In this, we do the Lord's work, as Lamentations reminds us. The Lord's love never ceases, and his mercies do not come to an end. He causes good to us, especially when we seek him, yet grief as well, the inevitable price love exacts of mortality. The Lord afflicts us and grieves us, Lamentations says – praying over the smoking ruins of Jerusalem, its corpses strewn God knows where, I might add – yet not willingly. What the Lord wills is compassion, yet the Lord allows affliction. Why? There is no good answer to that, which is among life's persistent mysteries. "That grace might increase" is not good enough; "that compassion might be shown" is not good enough. "Ye shall know in time, when time is" is not good enough, either, but it may be the best we get. Be that as it may, the power of today's gospel is found in using one's power for compassion, no matter what anyone else is doing or whether or not one wonders about life's purpose or fears its futility. Do all the good you can, in all the ways you can, to all the people you can, for as long as you can. Who, if we're honest, really wants to live any other way?