

Healing. Cures. Casting out demons. What do such things mean to a 21<sup>st</sup> century audience? Mark's gospel is filled with such stories. But what does this mean for us in an age of doctors, TV healers, antibiotics, surgery? And also in this age of brokenness, disease, and illness that spreads across nations as well as individual bodies?

We read these stories as people who have struggles with illness, as those who have lost loved ones even as the prayers for healing are warm on our lips, as ones desperate for healing, yet skeptical of anyone who promises such. How do we read these stories and not just be angry that God seems to choose not to heal us or those we deeply care for? That brokenness in our world continues seemingly untouched by this one who brings healing? I know there are some in this community who have experienced healing, and yet I imagine these questions still enter our thoughts and hearts every now and then. It seems so simple in Mark's quick stories, with his fast-paced Jesus, but so complex in our actual lives.

And here we are. It's the end of a long Sabbath day in Capernaum. Jesus has been preaching, teaching, and casting out unclean spirits in the synagogue. Tired, hungry, and ready for a nap, Jesus and the disciples head home to Simon and Andrew's house. And they are told that Simon's mother-in-law is sick, burning up with a fever. Jesus goes to her, takes her by the hand, and lifts her up.

Such a simple gesture of healing. He took her by the hand and lifted her up. It seems rather easy. And her response is interesting. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them. Women and mothers and feminists in the congregation, before the hair on the back of your neck stands up as you think about this woman healed so that she could get back to cooking and laundry, serving the men of the household, let's enter into the text and this world for a moment. Although bible translations vary, the word translated *serve* is the same word that Mark uses during Jesus' temptation when he talks about the angels *waiting* on Jesus. With the holiness of angels who served Jesus in the wilderness, Simon's mother-in-law serves Jesus. Others translate the word as "deaconed" or "ministered to." In other words, important work. The work of ministry – nourishing, healing, hospitality.

She is lifted up, healed, and she immediately begins carrying on the work of lifting up and healing herself. Lifted up is also what happens at the empty tomb – "he is not here, he has been raised, lifted up, gone" the man in white proclaims. Taking her hand and lifting her up, Jesus invites this unnamed woman into his story, into living life as a lifted up one, a resurrected one. And she is the first in Mark's gospel to be honored with such a ministry.

Naturally, word quickly spread throughout Capernaum. So that evening, at sundown, after the Sabbath was over, the whole city gathered around the door of this house. Those sick, possessed by demons, desperate for cures, for touch, for hope, came to the door. And Jesus cured many who were sick and cast out many demons. Can you imagine such a scene? Health and hope restored, pain and suffering ended, body and mind freed. Watching from the door, Simon's mother-in-law surely caught this snapshot of this kingdom of God that she had heard whispered about. The kingdom of God where wholeness reigns and sickness is defeated. And it was happening right outside her porch.

Late into the night throngs of people came and Jesus touched them and lifted them up. And after the crowds had left, the watching disciples' eyes giving over to rest, the darkness of

the night giving way to the earliest hints of light, Jesus goes off to a deserted place, to pray. Away from the noise, away from the joy, away from the amazement, he finds a moment to be restored himself. But this peaceful dawn moment is quickly interrupted by desperate disciples hunting him like an animal that must be captured, saying, “**everyone** is searching for you.”

But instead of gathering up this things, finishing up with a quick Amen and heading back to the house, Jesus says, “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came to do.”

Go on? Leave this place? The whetted appetites of the people now ripe for listening and following Jesus. Why would we leave now?

But they go.

Mark’s narrative and therefore our attention quickly goes, too – we move on and follow the plot as Jesus moves throughout Galilee teaching and healing.

But before we too quickly go, let’s linger here a moment in Capernaum. Although perhaps we missed it the first time hearing it, there is a subtle word that changes the scene we have just witnessed – many. Jesus cured many who were sick with various diseases. Many. Which is more than a simple word choice if you are not one of the many, but part of the few. Not all were cured, which is why there were many still hunting Jesus, still searching for him, clinging to hope as they clung to his robe. And he moves on. And we are left. The people of Capernaum quickly forgotten. Here we are in this seaside town, with this population of folks I think most of us can identify with. Here we are standing with those who have just been left behind.

It seems as if the kingdom of God is heading out of Capernaum, out of our neighborhood, out of our lives. And yet we are still broken, still in desperate need of touch, of being lifted up, of healing. Our eyes watch the road until the silhouette is no longer visible and then we still look a little longer not knowing where else to turn.

His last words echo in our aching ears, “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.” The first part was so upsetting, carrying such feelings of abandonment, that we may have not even heard the second part...*So that I may proclaim the message.* The message. What could this message possible mean for us? We who are left unhealed, alone, eyes fixed on an empty horizon?

Mark has already told us what Jesus’ message is. Jesus’ first words in the gospel declare, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, repent, and believe in the good news.” The kingdom of God has come near? Where? Perhaps near for a moment, but now gone. Repent and believe in the good news. Repent essentially just means to turn. But where to turn? Jesus is gone. We cautiously move our bodies and hearts, turning into the unknown, and then we see it – what we are turning toward – each other. The message proclaimed testifies that indeed the kingdom of God has come near – in Jesus, yes, but also in our neighbor, in our community, in ourselves. Turn and believe in *this* good news.

Jesus has not left us alone, but has left us each other to turn to. And the work of the kingdom of God becomes our work. And the ministry of healing becomes ours.

This is precisely what we see in Simon’s mother-in-law. She is lifted up and responds with ministry of service, nourishing, and dare we say, healing. The kingdom of God has come near. And it is putting us – healed, broken, hopeless, scared, empowered, holy – to work.

We have been lifted up – in baptism, in hearing the good news, in being nourished at the table, in the reality and hope of the resurrection. So what now is our work of healing? Where are we being called to be the kingdom of God? Where are we turning? Who is turning to us?

We are all charged with this mission – whether we stay in the house providing hospitality for those who gather at our door, or keep the community grounded in prayer; whether we live as one of those on the move proclaiming the message or staying in Capernaum living the message; whether we have been healed, or find ourselves still broken.

We may not feel worthy. We are surely imperfect. Many days we feel less than lifted up.

Our unnamed minister, Simon's mother-in-law, provides good company. Lifted up as she was, she will still get sick, will still get tired, will still die. Because being lifted up is not only what happened at the empty tomb on Easter morning, but also what happens to Jesus on the cross. This is as much a part of our reality as the people of God as is the hope of resurrection. We live in this tension together.

Today at Resurrection we are installing our Church council leaders, ministers with us in the gospel – healed and broken, scared and hopeful, being lifted up in the darkness of the cross as well as in the hope of the resurrection. Their job is to help us to be the kingdom of God, to live out our calling as people of God in service. We are entrusting them to this ministry, even as we are committing ourselves to it as well.

And so we gather together, feeling the nearness of the kingdom of God and knowing that it still lies beyond our reach. But also knowing that the one who is on the move will continue to be on the move within and among us, lifting us up even as we seek to lift others, healing us even as we seek to be forces of healing in our world. We wait and watch for Jesus – the one begging us to simply turn and believe in the good news that is all around us.