

St. Martin-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church

Keller, Texas

Sermon for June 27, 2021 ~ Proper 8B

The Very Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

In the first half of the Gospel according to Mark, the writer is concerned with portraying Jesus as “the one who is stronger.” One way he does this is by telling of several miracles that are tied together by at least four crossings of the Sea of Galilee. On the western side of this body of water there are the Jews. On the eastern shore, there are Gentiles. Jesus moves freely, comfortably, among Jews and Gentiles alike teaching, preaching, and performing miracles.

Among the miracles are the calming of the storm, the exorcising of the demoniac, the healing of the woman with a hemorrhage, and, the miracle about which we read in today’s Gospel, the raising of the daughter of Jairus. By this means, Mark is saying, “Jesus Christ is stronger than the cultural differences that separate people from one another, he is stronger than the forces of nature, stronger than the demonic, stronger than disease, and stronger even than our greatest enemy, death. Nothing in the universe is more powerful than him. The One who is stronger is on our side. He is for us. He commands the very power of God. He has come into the world, come to all people, come to remove all obstacles, come to include everyone in his saving, recreating embrace. That is good news. And, because of that, we have nothing to fear.

Remember that our word “religion” is derived from the Latin word *ligare*, which means to bind together. Our word “ligament” is from the same root. Religion, then, is supposed to tie things together. As Mark has so artfully tied together the accounts of Jesus’ obstacle defying ministry in the Galilean territory, so Jesus promises to tie our lives together and make us whole. When we place our trust in him, we do not need to be overcome by fear. We are tied to be fit, so to speak.

What fears are you grappling with today? Terrorism? Immigrants? The impact of a trade war on the global economy? Losing healthcare or Social Security benefits? Supreme Court decisions? Personal finances or health? Your employer? Your neighbor? A family problem?

I believe that fear is the basis for so many of our problems. It is the basis of anger, of prejudice, of a host of psychological disorders, of much disease, and it interferes with just about every relationship we have either with persons or with things. We are afraid of that which we do not know or think we know all too well. The Jesus of Mark’s gospel is greater than the greatest threat we know and his perfect love casts out fear.

One of the most courageous people I have ever known is the Pastor for whom I worked in my first appointment after completion of seminary. J. Kenneth Shamblin was Senior Pastor of St. Luke’s United Methodist Church in Houston for sixteen years. He left there to become the United Methodist Bishop of Louisiana. I heard him do and say many truly courageous things in the time I knew him. But before he came to Houston, he was Senior Pastor of the Pulaski Heights Church in Little Rock, Arkansas. He led that congregation in building a magnificent gothic edifice and when it was completed, he had television equipment installed and became the first church in Arkansas to telecast its morning worship services. On the first morning their service was to be seen on the television, Kenneth Shamblin mounted the pulpit and faced the task of not only delivering a sermon he knew would be carried to thousands of people whom he could not see, but also a sermon in which he publicly opposed the Governor of that state on the issue of the desegregation

of the Little Rock schools.

Because of that sermon and the subsequent statements Dr. Shamblyn made about the need for African American children to receive the same educational opportunities as Anglo children, his life and that of his family was threatened. He received obscene telephone calls and hate mail. He had to move his family to a secret location and live under guard twenty-four hours a day. This went on for weeks until he felt he was at his breaking point. One evening, he sat down on the steps of that beautiful church building, beaten, bruised, afraid, and contemplating ways to leave that situation. He felt helpless, hopeless, and very much alone. Just then, the Carillon began to play and the tune brought to his mind the words, "God is my strong salvation, what foe have I to fear? In darkness and temptation, my help, my light is near." It was as if God had extended a strong hand and a mighty arm to him in his weakest moment and lifted him up, empowering him to stand firm in his conviction. And, he and God weathered the storm.

When the professional mourners came to Jairus and told him his daughter was dead, Jesus spoke a stronger word to him, "Do not fear. Only believe." When he arrived at the house where the little girl lay, he entered that place which death had defiled and spoke a stronger word to her, "Little girl, rise up." His words are healing words, life giving words, strong words that save us and make us whole.

He speaks them to us today. If fear is overtaking you and causing you to hate, to hesitate, to hibernate, or to hyperventilate, he calls you to believe - to trust in him - to consider the possibility that there are other options, other viewpoints, other ways. If you are feeling the threat of your own mortality, if death is washing over you, if something or someone precious to you has been snatched from you, he speaks to you, "rise up."

My father who taught me so much about life also taught me about fear and about death. I was at his bedside when he died. It was one of the most terrifyingly beautiful moments I have ever known, equal I suppose to the experience of being present at the birth of one of my children. Birth and death have so much in common. Both are major transitions in which we do not really know for sure what lies ahead. When my father was dying, the people in the room were quietly singing hymns. His breathing calmed then slowed then ceased. And as he let go of my hand it was as if he took another hand and it was as if he heard the sound of another choir in another place. His confidence in the promises of Jesus Christ made it possible for him to die like that. He showed me what "Do not be fear. Only believe" actually looks like in the face of life's greatest enemy. Being there with him helps me deal with the issue of death as well.

It is at moments like this that we need to hear the words, "Do not fear. Only believe." "Rise up." These are words that bind our lives together. Bind our times together. Bind our relationships together. And bind all things together in a perfect oneness with the Shepherd and Lover of our souls. And, you know what? These healing words are news, good news, for anyone who needs to hear them. There simply are no limits to what God has in store for you and for me.