

I have been feeling joy as we regather, but I am also feeling a certain amount of sadness and grief. Quite honestly, I feel this grief and sadness as I realize our community is not and may not again be what it was before Covid-19 hit. I long to again see life within the gathered community, the kind of life that only is felt and seen as we gather in-person as community. And so, I name for you that challenge, that feeling of emptiness and grief. As I do this, I remember the words of Robert Capon, a theologian and Episcopal priest, as he summarizes the main message of the gospel in one short paragraph. Capon writes, “Jesus came to raise the dead. The only qualification for the gift of the gospel is to be dead. You don’t have to be smart. You don’t have to be wise. You don’t have to **BE anything**.....you just have to be dead. That’s it.” I, along with each one of you and the greater church, not only need to hear Capon’s words, but also be reminded of his words as we go through this process of regathering. There has been so much death and we grieve so much that was lost, the loss of people’s very lives, and also the life of our Faith community as we remember it. But, let it be known: **Jesus came to raise the dead! The only qualification for the gift of the gospel is to be dead.**

Friends, that message comes through in all our readings for today. In Lamentations, the message is all about salvation. As we go through the challenges, suffering and grief that every one of us experiences at some point in time, we cry out to God and plead for salvation, for healing, and wholeness. We cry out, as did the writer of Lamentations, for the life, salvation, and **wholeness** that only God can give. And, in 2 Corinthians, we are told that we **know** the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ. Grounded in the generosity of Jesus Christ, and in the **salvation** and **life** we have received from God, the Christian community **has been raised to life**. And, having been raised, we are now **compelled** to be generous and share that life with others. Finally, we come to our gospel reading and we receive words that truly exemplify the good news Capon shares when he says *Jesus came to raise the dead!*

The story begins with this man, a leader in the synagogue, whose name is Jairus. Jairus comes to Jesus because his little **twelve-year-old daughter** is near death, and he begs Jesus to come and heal her. Jesus responds by going with Jairus to his home to heal the girl. However, on his way to the house, Jesus gets interrupted and the girl dies. The interruption is intentional on the part of the gospel writer because there is another story that Mark wants us to hear. This is the story of an older woman who **looks**

to us to be very much alive, but she is not. Mark tells us that she has suffered for **twelve years** with hemorrhaging. (Note the number twelve – she has suffered for twelve years, and the little girl is twelve years old. In Biblical literature, twelve is a number that meant completeness.

Remember the twelve tribes of Israel and the fact that there had to be twelve disciples.) Anyway, this woman's continuous issue of blood has made her an outcast. She is cut off from people and she cannot go to the synagogue to worship. In her heart she believes that she is cut off from God. She is as good as dead in her Jewish community. She is ostracized and considered unclean, untouchable. Yet, something propels her through the crowd. This woman really has guts. She longs to be healed and Jesus may be her last hope. So, from behind, hoping not to be seen, she sneaks a touch of his cloak, and Mark tells us she is **immediately** healed.

Now, if this were a movie, this would be the point when the camera would zoom in on Jesus as he asks, "Who just touched my clothes?" He then looks around and this woman comes forward, kneels, and tells him the whole truth. Jesus then reaches down to this woman and says, "**Daughter**, you took a risk of faith and now you have been made well... **you are whole.**" He names her **daughter** and says her faith has made her whole!

Yes, **Jesus came to raise the dead**. While this woman had looked alive, she was as good as dead before she touched Jesus. But now, she has been raised to new life. She has been made well and raised to wholeness.

The gospel writer now refocuses our attention on the other **daughter**, Jairus' **twelve-year-old daughter**. We are not given her name, but we do know her father was very important. He was one of the VIP's, one of the big wigs, at the synagogue. He'd heard hundreds of sermons and prayed thousands of prayers. But none of that matters because today he is face to face with death, the death of his child. And, because Jesus had gotten delayed by the woman in the crowd, when they finally reach the house of Jairus, the little girl **is** dead. Jesus walks in on the preparations for a funeral. People are crying, trays of food are being brought in. People are looking at this stranger, Jesus, wondering who he is and why he has come. And, when Jesus finally speaks, it is a pronouncement: "The child is not dead but sleeping." Sarcastically, the people who are gathered laugh him off thinking he doesn't know what he is talking about. They do not yet know that they are in the presence of God. In God's presence there is no death – **only life**. Anyway, Jesus crosses another unclean boundary, the boundary of death, as he bends down and takes the hand of the twelve-year old girl.

He speaks saying, "Little girl, get up!" And, to the surprise of those who are present, she gets up and Jesus tenderly asks them to get her some food.

Yes, **Jesus came to raise the dead.**

Friends, the writer of Mark's gospel wants **us** to know God is always reaching down to us and reminding us of the new life we have been given in the person of Jesus Christ. Presbyterian minister, author and theologian, Fredrick Buechner, when focusing on this gospel story and Jesus' power to raise the dead, writes:

Little girl. Old girl. Old boy. Old boys and girls with high blood pressure and arthritis, and young boys and girls with tattoos and body piercing. You who believe, and you who sometimes believe and sometimes don't believe much of anything, and you who would give almost anything to believe if only you could. You happy ones and you who can hardly remember what it was like once to be happy. You who know where you're going and how to get there and you who much of the time aren't sure you're getting anywhere. "Get up," he says, all of you - all of you! - and the power that is in him is the power to give life not just to the dead like the child, but to those who are only partly alive, which is to say to people like you and me who much of the time live with our lives closed to the wild beauty and miracle of things, including the wild beauty and miracle of every day we live and even of ourselves.

It is that life-giving power that is at the heart of this shadowy story about Jairus and the daughter he loved, and that I believe is at the heart of all our stories-the power of new life, new hope, new being, that whether we know it or not, I think, keeps us coming to places like this year after year in search of it. It is the power to get up even when getting up isn't all that easy for us anymore, and to keep getting up and going on and on toward whatever it is, whoever **he** is, that all our lives long reaches out to take us by the hand.

Yes, that God we know in Jesus is always reaching out to us to take us by the hand and raise **us** up to new life. The writer of Mark's gospel wants us to know that God is reaching down to **all of us as he did to the bleeding woman saying, "Daughter (Son), you took a risk of faith and now you have been made well... you are whole."**

So, as I reflect upon the challenge we now face as a Faith community, when going through this process of regathering as community, this story is truly life giving. **Jesus came to raise the dead.** While our community is not literally dead, we do face a challenge as we regather. And, just maybe we cannot really know Jesus as the one who raises the dead until we find ourselves truly feeling some of the emptiness, sadness and, yes, grief of this past year and a half. Maybe we cannot really know Jesus as the one who raises the dead until we find ourselves truly feeling a sadness and grief that we are **unable to fix by ourselves**, because it is in **that** place where **God brings forth life!** It is in **that** place where we discover the power of this Jesus who not only heals but even has power over death, itself. I do believe Robert Capon is right on, and his words are true for our Faith community. Yes, it is true! ***Jesus came to raise the dead. The only qualification for the gift of the gospel is to be dead.***

Amen.