

“C.O.V.I.D.²”

Christ, Our Victory in Disease & Distress

Mark 5:21-43 ¹

Have you ever been in a real mess with no way out? I can think of several such moments, and one of the most memorable happened in October of 1975.

October is not a good time to be in the North Atlantic. It's cold, and it's stormy, and ships pitch and roll a lot. Nevertheless, there we were, participating in a NATO exercise not far from Iceland.

The weather was awful, and we were pitching and rolling so much that there was no way to refuel. Refueling at sea is dangerous in calm weather; but in a storm, it's impossible.

Hour after hour, though, we were obviously burning fuel, which meant that, hour by hour, we were becoming more top-heavy and in increasing danger of capsizing . . . an event that can just ruin your whole day. As the Main Propulsion Officer, the fuel tanks were my responsibility, and on a ship, just like in your car, getting water in your fuel is something that you never, ever want to do.

In extremis, though, a ship can take sea water into its fuel tanks to increase ballast and reduce the risk of capsizing; and on this fateful day, the Captain called me to the bridge and told me to make preparations for ballasting our fuel tanks. Our Captain had been at sea for well over thirty years, and if he was worried enough to ballast fuel tanks, I knew we were in serious trouble.

By God's grace, the flotilla came into the lee of the Faeroe Islands, and the sea became calm enough to refuel before we had accomplished the seawater ballasting. As I tell this story, what desperate situations are coming to your own mind?

We don't have to look far to find a current example, do we? The global COVID-19 pandemic has the entire planet in “a real mess with no way out,” and I've chosen “C.O.V.I.D.” as the title of this message. In this case, though, the word is an acronym for Hope: “**Christ, Our Victory in Disease & Distress**”; and our Scripture this morning is of that sort.

In this morning's text, Jesus has returned to the west side of the Sea of Galilee after stilling the storm and healing the Gadarene demoniac. He and His disciples were now back in Jewish territory. On the east side of the lake, Jesus had been asked to leave. Here, great crowds greeted him.

As the large crowd watched to see what Jesus might say or do next, suddenly the crowd fell back as one of the most prominent men in town rushed up to Jesus and fell down at His feet—just as the demon-possessed man had recently done on the other side of the lake. Mark didn't record the names of many people besides the disciples, but Mark did tell us that this man's name was Jairus, and that he was the “ruler” of the synagogue.²

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on 4.19.20, during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Parallel passages are Matthew 9:18-26; Luke 8:40-56.

² Two other such men are mentioned in the New Testament: Crispus and Sosthenes, both in Corinth (Acts 18:8, 17). “Jairus” is the Greek form of the Hebrew name, “Jair,” which means “God will Awaken,” a name that fits especially well here. (Numbers 32:41; Deuteronomy 3:14; Joshua 13:30; 1 Chronicles 20:5).

The synagogue was the cultural and religious center of a Jewish town, and the “ruler” of the synagogue, like today’s “president” of the synagogue, was the most powerful and influential person in the synagogue leadership. The “ruler” of the synagogue was not a rabbi. He was an administrator, elected from the board of elders to manage the buildings and worship of the synagogue. The ruler selected those who were to read and pray in the services, and he invited those who were to preach. Thus, Jairus would have been one of the most important and most respected men in the community.

Jairus was at the top of the “pecking order,” and for him to so publicly humble himself before this itinerant preacher and miracle worker was amazing beyond words. Falling on his knees before Jesus, Jairus pleaded desperately, *“My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live”* (Mark 5:23). The word Jairus used for “be healed” is the word from which we get the word, “salvation,” and it seems more than a little strange that Jairus made this plea himself.

Important people generally sent their servants on such errands, and it seems incredible that Jairus would leave his daughter’s deathbed.³ It may be that Jairus’s family and friends objected to making an appeal to this young itinerant preacher. Maybe Jairus came to Jesus himself because no one else would go.

In Luke’s account of this encounter, he tells us that this girl was Jairus’ only child, and that she was about twelve years old. That meant that the girl was on the cusp of womanhood, which made her impending death all the more bitter.

None of the Gospel accounts tell us the nature of the girl’s illness, but they all emphasize the urgency of the need. In response to Jairus’s impassioned plea, Jesus agreed to go with him, and then the story became even more interesting.

The crowd, now even more curious about what Jesus might do, followed along as Jesus walked with Jairus toward his home. Like a crowd at a ball game, they pushed and pulled, pressing against Jesus from every direction, when Jesus suddenly stopped and asked, *“Who touched my clothes?”*

Jesus’ disciples were incredulous, as we would have been ourselves. *“You see all these people crowding against you,” they said, “and you ask, ‘Who touched me?’!”*

So here’s the deal. There was a woman in that crowd who had had some sort of hemorrhagic illness for a dozen years.⁴ We don’t really know what sort of bleeding she experienced, but if you’ve ever been anemic, you can imagine how awful she must have felt . . . yet her situation was much worse than that.

According to the Law of Moses, such bleeding was defiling, rendering the woman an outcast, much as lepers were. For anyone to touch her, or to touch her clothing, or to touch anything she had touched, would cause them to become ceremonially unclean, so this poor woman lived in a world of ostracism, loneliness, and fear.

³ Matthew’s account says that the girl was already dead, which could account for Jairus’ willingness to leave her to seek Jesus’ aid (Matthew 9:18).

⁴ The Talmud gives no fewer than eleven cures for such a trouble, some of them mere superstition. See also Mark 6:56 and Acts 19:11-12. She apparently began to suffer this illness about the time Jairus’s daughter was born.

As was true for lepers, it was her responsibility to avoid all contact with others, which meant that no other human had likely touched her—at least intentionally—for a dozen years. No hugs, no handshakes, no embraces. She had spent all the money she had on medical care, trying to be healed, but she had only become worse, and now she was completely destitute.

And this woman, like Jairus, had come to the desperate conclusion that Jesus might be able to help her. She was not supposed to be in the crowd at all, but perhaps she had disguised herself so as not to be pushed away. She would never have dared to ask for Jesus' help outright, but because it was commonly thought that the clothing of healers also possessed healing qualities, she thought that touching Jesus' clothing might heal her illness.⁵

Hoping against hope, she managed to get close enough to touch Jesus' outer garment, and in the very moment that she touched it, she knew that she had been healed. And at that very same moment, Jesus stopped and asked urgently, "*Who touched me?*"

Actually, the poor woman hadn't touched Jesus Himself at all. She had touched one of the four tassels on the lower fringe of His robe, tassels worn by every Jewish man.⁶ And at the instant that she touched that tassel, the flow of blood immediately dried up, and "*she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease*" (Mark 5:29).

But not only did something happen to this woman. Something also happened to Jesus. He could tell that "*power had gone out from Him,*" without any action on His part.

So why didn't Jesus, God in human flesh, know who had touched Him? Well, Jesus was fully and completely God, and at one and the same time, Jesus was fully and completely human; and we have only the most rudimentary understanding of what it means to say such a thing. Maybe He did know who it was, but He didn't see her at once, because she was trying to hide.

But now, knowing she had been found out, the woman fell at Jesus' feet, trembling with fear. Perhaps she was afraid of the scorn of the crowd. Maybe she was afraid of being scolded for delaying Jesus, for stealing power from Him, or for contaminating or infecting Him in some way. I really think she was afraid in the way the disciples had been out on the lake: "***Who IS this man, that even the blood in my body obeys Him?***"

And so, even while on an urgent life-saving mission, Jesus took notice of this interruption and insisted on meeting this woman face to face. There were doubtless several reasons for this.

First of all, since only the woman herself could testify to the reality of this miracle, Jesus was doing for her what He would later do for Simon Peter after his denials—Jesus was reinstating her to the community. He publicly blessed her, declared her healed, and restored her to a "touchable" condition. It was also important that she and everyone else know that it was the power of God, transmitted through her faith, that had healed her, not some magical misunderstanding about His clothing.

This healing encounter has the feeling of an intimate one-on-one conversation, even though it was an interruption of something very important and even though it took place in the middle of a noisy crowd. It was as though there was nobody there except the two of them; and it

⁵ See Luke 6:56; Acts 19:11-12; also Acts 5:15.

⁶ These tassels were required by Numbers 15:37-41 and Deuteronomy 22:12. The idea was to identify a man as a member of the people of Israel and to remind him of his responsibility to obey the Law of Moses. Like any article of religious clothing, they could also become mere show without any real meaning to the wearer (Matthew 23:5).

reminds us that sometimes what we ourselves perceive as “interruptions” to our lives may just be the Main Event. As this part of the story ends, Jesus calls the woman, “Daughter,” which is the only time He is ever recorded to have spoken so.

The two main characters interacting with Jesus in this passage occupied opposite ends of the economic, social, and religious spectra. Jairus is a man, a leader of the synagogue; and as a man of distinction, he has a name. He is well-bred, well-groomed, well-respected, and well-heeled. Jairus has honor and can openly approach Jesus with a direct request, though he does show appropriate deference.

By contrast, this poor woman is nameless, with her malady rendering her ritually unclean. Far from social power, she is at the mercy of those who make the rules and the money. She has no public honor and is reduced to slinking about and approaching Jesus from behind, thinking that she must pilfer her healing.

The only thing that these two persons share in common is that they both have heard about Jesus, they desperately desire healing, and they have run out of options.

Mark’s descriptions of these two people show us that being male, being ritually pure, holding a high religious office, and being a person of means provides no advantage in approaching Jesus. On the other hand, being female, impure, dishonored, and destitute are no barrier to receiving God’s help.

In God’s Kingdom, “nobodies” become Somebodies. Health, wholeness, and salvation are not extended to just the lucky few who already have so much of everything else. The only thing that prevails with Jesus is faith—faith that enables everyone, whether honored or dishonored, clean or unclean, to tap into the merciful power of Jesus that brings both healing and salvation. All are equal before Jesus, including you, and including me.

Yet, as important as all this is, while these things were happening, the ambulance motor was running, the lights were flashing, time was passing, and Jairus’s daughter’s desperate condition worsened. Can you imagine what Jairus was thinking? *“Wait! I was here first! I was in line first! This can wait! My daughter is dying!”*

And, even as Jesus was speaking peace and healing to this woman, messengers arrived from Jairus’s house with the dreaded news, *“Your daughter is dead. Why bother the teacher anymore?”*

The hopelessness that must have overcome Jairus in that moment is something with which we are more familiar than we want to be. “Where there’s life, there’s hope,” we say. But once death comes, we agree with King David after his infant son died—*“I will go to him, but he will not return to me”* (2 Samuel 12:23).

We can well imagine the despair that suddenly crushed Jairus’s heart. Even so, it had been faith that brought Jairus to Jesus in the first place, and now Jesus challenged Jairus to continue in faith: *“Don’t be afraid. Just believe.”*

And so, with a fragile but persistent faith, even under such dire circumstances and with such meagre hope, Jairus offered no protest when Jesus proceeded toward his home, now suddenly filled with the rowdy mourning customary in such moments. As they moved along,

Jesus dismissed both the crowd and His disciples, with the exception of Peter, James, and John,⁷ and the four of them went along with Jairus to his home. As a prominent citizen, Jairus's home would have been larger than the usual one-room affair, and the mourners had already arrived, shrieking and wailing loudly.

Jewish mourning customs were very vivid and very detailed,ⁱ and even the poorest family was expected to have "at least two flutes and one wailing woman," so a man such as Jairus would probably have had to hire more. The scene was loud, chaotic, heart-wrenching, and completely predictable . . . until Jesus arrived.

Jesus spoke to the wailers and asked, "*Why all this commotion? The child is not dead, but asleep.*" Now the fact of the matter is that the girl was indeed dead, and they all knew it, and they laughed at Him.⁸ **What they didn't know is that Jesus wakes the dead as easily as we wake the sleeping.**

Because of their unbelief, Jesus put the mourners out, and then He took the girl's parents and His three disciples with Him to the girl's bedside. Jesus simply took the girl by the hand and said just two words to her: "*Talitha cumi!*" The girl was instantly restored to life and to strength, to the complete astonishment of everyone present—except Jesus, of course.

You probably know that the common, everyday language in those days was neither Greek nor Hebrew, but Aramaic, and *Talitha cumi* is Aramaic.⁹ The words mean "Little girl, get up!" and Mark translated them for his readers, who probably spoke Greek.

We might wonder why these Aramaic words were preserved. They were most likely preserved because Mark had gotten the words from Peter, *who was there*, and who had heard Jesus say them. And Peter had probably never been able to think of that moment without hearing those words in his mind. The moment was indelible. Peter was unable to think of these words in Greek at all.

Talitha cumi. No potions, no incantations, no appeal to outside powers. Just two ordinary words: *Talitha cumi.* And it was so.¹⁰

Well, what do we make of all this during COVID-19 Quarantine? Does this have anything to do with us?

First of all, I encourage you to take the time this afternoon to read Mark 4:35-5:43, part of which we've examined this morning. There you will be reminded that Jesus is Lord . . . over storms and weather, over demons and spirits, over diseases and distress, and over both life and death.

As you reflect on these accounts, I invite you to consider once more Who this is, before Whom nature, spirits, disease, and death prostrate themselves. The man and the woman we have considered this morning may have come to Jesus last, but they discovered that while Jesus

⁷ Peter, James, and John were also the only disciples to witness the Transfiguration (Mark 9:2-13), and they were the ones He took with Him into the agony of Gethsemane (Mark 13:32-42).

⁸ This quick change from grief to laughter was a clear indication of the artificiality of the grief of the professional mourners.

⁹ Other Aramaic phrases occur at Mark 7:34, 14:36, and 15:34.

¹⁰ This was the first record of Jesus resurrecting someone from death. There will be two more, in Luke 7:11-17 and in John 11.

may sometimes be our “last resort,” He is never our “least resort.” When Jesus is present, no situation is ever hopeless. **It is never too late for Jesus.**

The fact of the matter is that everywhere Jesus goes—both then and now—He leaves behind a trail of transformation: fishermen leave their nets; the sick are healed; storms are stilled; critics are confounded; hunger is relieved; the dead are raised. And it is the same today.

My friends, **what we do in a crisis shows what we really believe about God;** and this man and this woman chose to act in faith, a faith that reached beyond what they could actually see. They did not exercise “generic” faith. They did not have “faith in faith.” They exercised faith in Jesus.

Now it will be no news to you that evil, sickness, and the deaths of children continue unabated in our world today. Those with sturdy, biblical, Jesus-honoring faith still hear the words, “Your dear one is dead.”

The situations we consider today do not remedy or explain the evil in the world around us, but if God actively intervened to remedy every trouble we encounter, we would never have to live by faith—and it is by faith that God wants us to live.¹¹ As it is written, “*the righteous will live by faith*” (Romans 1:17).

My friends, just as this woman and this man had to believe in Jesus beyond what they could see or understand, so it falls to us also to live by faith in Him. **It is just as true today as it was on that long-ago day that the touch of Jesus can make us whole. And it is still true that all we have to do is to reach out to Him.**

At the same time, we do need to “reach out.” God fully respects our freedom to trust Him or not. And let me note once more that “having faith” is not about having faith in faith. *Having faith is about having faith in Jesus.* Commitment is required.

We can look at an airplane all day long, marveling at its size, its power and complexity, and being amazed that it is able to actually *fly* . . . but we don’t actually have faith in that airplane until we choose to get on it while it reaches for the sky. Long ago, when Joshua led Israel across the flooded Jordan River and into the Promised Land, the river did not stop flowing and the way across appear until the feet of the priests who led the way were actually in the water (Joshua 3:15-16).

And we need to remember that sometimes, the water may not stop flowing. Sometimes the coronavirus gets us. As Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego said to Nebuchadnezzar, “*The God whom we serve is able to save us from your blazing furnace; but even if He does not, we will not serve your gods and worship your statue*” (Daniel 3:17-18).

My friends, for Jesus, no one is ever lost in the crowd, no matter whether we are great or small in the estimation of our neighbors; and still today, Jesus is Lord over nature, over demons, over disease, and over death. Even so, it is quite often the case that what we think God ought to do *right now*, God chooses to do at some later time; and what we would prefer to put off, God chooses to handle right away.

When we are perplexed, when the viruses continue, we do well to remember that only God really knows what is best for us. Only God has the Power to accomplish what is best for us. And

¹¹ See also Acts 3:16; Romans 3:25, 28, 4:13; 2 Corinthians 5:7; Galatians 2:16, 3:11; Hebrews 11.

only God has Love that uses that Power to bring about what is best for us. Like this woman, and like Jairus, we just never know ahead of time what Jesus can do.

Wait! Listen! He is calling your name! Will you come to Him?

ⁱ Jewish mourning customs were vivid and detailed, and practically all of them were designed to stress the desolation and the final separation of death. The triumphant victorious hope of Christian faith was totally absent.

Immediately after death had taken place, a loud wailing was set up so that all might know that death had struck. The wailing was repeated at the graveside. The mourners hung over the dead body, begging for a response from the silent lips. They beat their breasts; they tore their hair; and they rent their garments.

This rending of garments was done according to certain rules and regulations. It was done just before the body was finally hidden from sight. Garments were to be rent to the heart, that is, until the skin was exposed, but were not to be rent beyond the navel. For fathers and mothers the rent was on the left side, over the heart; for others it was on the right side. A woman was to rend her garments in private; she was then to reverse the inner garment, so that it was worn back to front; she then rent her outer garment, so that her body was not exposed.

The rent garment was worn for thirty days. After seven days the rent might be roughly sewn up, in such a way that it was still clearly visible. After the thirty days the garment was properly repaired.

Flute-players were essential. It was laid down that, however poor a man was, he must have at least two flute-players at his wife's funeral.

When death came, a mourner was forbidden to work, to anoint himself or to wear shoes. Even the poorest man must cease from work for three days. He must not travel with goods; and the prohibition of work extended even to his servants. He must sit with head bound up. He must not shave or "do anything for his comfort." He must not read the Law or the Prophets, for to read these books "is joy." He was allowed to read Job, Jeremiah and Lamentations.

He must eat only in his own house, and he must abstain altogether from meat and wine. He must not leave the town or village for thirty days. It was the custom not to eat at a table, but to eat sitting on the floor, using a chair as a table. It was the custom, which still survives, to eat eggs dipped in ashes and salt.