

*“Taking Jesus Seriously”
by Pastor Mary Anne Biggs*

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

June 28, 2015

2 Corinthians 8:7-15 ~ Mark 5:21-43

One of my favorite television programs was the Mary Tyler Moore show, and hands down, my very favorite episode dealt with the death of Chuckles the clown. For those of you who don't remember it, here's a brief synopsis. Chuckles the Clown, the host of WJM's children's show had been asked to serve as grand marshal for the circus parade. Ted was delivering a live newscast when Lou rushed into the newsroom in shock and told the staff that Chuckles has been killed during the parade. He had dressed as the character Peter Peanut, and a rogue elephant tried to "shell" him, causing fatal injuries. During a commercial break, Lou ordered Ted to adlib a eulogy for Chuckles, with disastrous results.

The next day at the studio, the unusual circumstances of Chuckles' death provoked a wave of workplace jokes, especially from Lou, Sue Ann, and Murray. They continued in helpless laughter, with the exception of Mary, who was appalled by her co-workers' apparent lack of respect for the deceased. They tried to assure her that they meant no disrespect for Chuckles. Their reaction was simply an emotional release ... a response to humankind's fear of death ... "Everyone does it." Mary shamed them into uncomfortable silence by answering, "I don't."

At the funeral, the jokes continued until the service was about to start, at which time a final scolding by Mary encouraged all of the attendees to become properly somber. However, Mary alone began to giggle uncontrollably as the minister recounted Chuckles' comedy characters and comic routines. She tried to stifle her laughter, but couldn't contain herself as the eulogy was delivered.

Mary's co-workers and the other attendees were shocked by her laughter. The minister, however, asked the mortified Mary to rise, and assured her that her laughter was actually in keeping with Chuckles' life's work. "He lived to make people laugh. Tears were offensive to him; deeply offensive. . . . So go ahead, my dear. Laugh for Chuckles." At which point Mary burst into loud, helpless sobs.

The book of Ecclesiastes says that there is an appropriate time to mourn ... and an appropriate a time to laugh. But it seems to me that the time for tears and the time for laughter often get all mixed up. It does in our Gospel passage this morning. It is a tale within a tale ... it has been called "the miracle on the way to a miracle". The story begins with a desperate father pleading with Jesus and it is no laughing matter.

The man was named Jairus and he somehow made his way through the large crowd to Jesus and threw himself at his feet ... fell to his knees perhaps, or touched his forehead to the ground in front of him. He was a synagogue official of some kind ... an important man anyway, which was possibly why the crowd gave way enough to let him through. But he didn't behave like an important man. He behaved like a desperate man ... a man close to hysteria with fear, grief, and horror.

The reason was that his daughter was at the point of death ... only he didn't say "my daughter," he said "my little daughter." She was twelve years old, we're later told, so she wasn't all that little really, but to Jairus she would presumably always be his little daughter ... the way that ... even when they've grown up and moved away long since ... we keep on speaking of our sons and daughters as children ... because that is what they were when we knew them first and loved them first.

She is *dying* he says ... she is *dying* ... and then he says, "Come and lay your hands on her." You have to think that he has tried everything else ... physicians must have been called in ... medicines must have been given ... prayers must have been lifted ... all to no avail. She is dying. This is the only card he has left to play, and he plays it. "Lay your hands on her, so she may be made well, and live," And so they set out, this desperate father, Jesus and his disciples, and a large curious crowd, all pressing in on him.

The story is then interrupted by Jesus' encounter with a woman who has been ill for twelve years with chronic bleeding. In the midst of a hundred grasping hands, Jesus feels a powerful connection with one hand. The woman believes that if she but touches his cloak she will be healed. With everybody's elbows out, Jesus asks, "Who touched me?" And in effect, the disciples respond, "You have got to be kidding! What do you mean who touched you? Everybody's got their hands on you." They don't laugh out loud, but they don't take him seriously either. But Jesus takes this woman's faith seriously, and he heals her ... actually he tells her that her faith ... *her* faith ... has made her well.

They start out once again for the home of Jairus, but before too long they run into some people coming the other way ... who, with devastating tactlessness, come right out and say it. "Your daughter is dead." They have just come from his house, where she died. They saw it with their own eyes. There is nothing anybody can do about it now. They have come too late. "Why trouble the teacher any further?" they ask her father, and it is Jesus who finally breaks the silence by speaking,

"*Do not fear*," he says to Jairus. Don't be afraid. Don't be afraid ... "*Only believe*." And then he tells everyone to go home except for Peter and James and John. When the five of them finally get to Jairus's house, they find it full of people "weeping and wailing loudly," because this is *not* the twenty-first century ... but the first century ... and people apparently hadn't started yet saying things like "It's really a blessing" ... or "She is in a better world now" ... or "God needed another angel in Heaven" because for the most part they didn't believe in any better world but just some sort of limbo world under the earth where the ghosts of the dead drift like dead leaves. Instead, they wept and wailed because they didn't have it in them to pretend that the death of a child is anything but the tragic and unspeakable thing that it is ... and Jesus didn't say anything to make

them change their minds ... didn't tell them that it was God's will ... or anything incredibly thoughtless like that. What he did instead was to say something whose meaning is difficult to understand. "The child is not dead," he said, "but sleeping."

Was he speaking literally? Did he mean she had lapsed into some kind of coma? Or was he only trying to comfort her father with the thought that death is only a kind of eternal sleep? Who knows what he meant, but the people in the house seemed to think he was either a fool or a madman. They had been there when it happened. They knew death when they saw it ... and because the line between weeping and laughing is sometimes a very tenuous one ... they stopped their weeping and wailing and of all things *laughed* at him ... laughed because they didn't know what else to do, until Jesus finally "put them all outside," so that only the three fisherman friends along with Jairus and the child's mother were left there with him, and together they went on to the room where the child lay.

Then the moment of magic, if magic is what it was. Jesus speaks to the child. He reaches down and picks up one of her hands in his hand. "*Tálisha cum*," Jesus says in Aramaic. "*Talitha cum*," and you hardly need the translation to understand him. "Little girl" – *Talitha* - "get up," is what he said, and then according to Mark "immediately the girl got up and started to walk about At this they were overcome with amazement."

It was not just the child's life that had been given back, of course, but the lives of the mother and father, who stood there without words. The worst thing that had ever happened to them had suddenly become the best thing that had ever happened to them ... and you can imagine their hardly daring so much as to breathe for fear of breaking the spell. You can imagine her walking around the room touching familiar things ... a chair, a comb, a flower someone had left, a chipped plate ... trying to get the world back ... trying to get herself back.

For whatever the reason, Jesus asked them never to tell a soul what had happened ... maybe because he wasn't ready for the secret of who he was to be known yet ... maybe because he wasn't sure he knew the secret of who he was yet himself. Who can say? Then he told them to go get the child something to eat, and that is where Mark's story ends.

The question is ... what kind of a story is this? If the little girl had actually died the way the people who were there in the house believed she had ... then it is the story of a miracle as dazzling as the raising of Lazarus and bears witness to the power that Jesus had over even the last and darkest power of all. If she was only sleeping as Jesus said ... in a coma or whatever he may have meant ... then it is a story about a healing ... about the power of Jesus's touch to make the blind see and the deaf hear and the lame walk. Either way it is a story about a miracle, and we are left to figure it out somehow for ourselves.

Who can say for sure exactly what it is that Jesus did in that house where Jairus lived ... or how far down into the darkness he had to reach to do it ... but in a way who cares ... any more than her mother and father could have cared. They had their child back. She was alive again. She was well again. That was all that mattered.

Frederick Buechner say he pictures her looking something like the photographs we have of Anne Frank - a wry, narrow little Jewish face full of irony and wit and a kind of bright-eyed exhilaration. He pictures how it would be to have the child who *was* Anne Frank back again somehow ... the way she was before the gates of the concentration camp closed behind her. He pictures how one way or another, if such a thing were to happen, we would all of us fall to our knees. The whole world would fall to its knees.

Who knows what kind of story Mark is telling here, but the enormously moving part of it, I think, is the part where Jesus takes the little girl's hand and says, "*Talitha cum'* - "Little girl, get up" - and suddenly we ourselves are the little girl.

Jesus is saying to us old boys and old girls with high blood pressure and arthritis ... and to us young boys and young girls with tattoos and body piercings ... get up! 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 ... get up! You happy ones ... and you who can hardly remember what it was like once to be happy ... get up! 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 at all ... "Get up," he says ... all of you ... all of you ... get up! 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 the everyday lives we live ... and the wild beauty and miracle 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 ... whether we know it or not ... that keeps us coming back here week after week and 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 the living Christ ... who all our lives long reaches out to take us by the hand.

May we pray?

Gracious and loving God, sometimes we shake our heads in disbelief at the promises of the Gospel that seem too wonderful to believe. Yet when we turn to you, and let go of our fear, we discover the power of your healing love and live-giving presence. Help us to yet again believe ... help us to yet again "get up." Amen.