

Take Up Your Mat and Walk
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Mark 2.1-12

My great-aunt Gladys had never flown before; so when she decided to take a trip to the Grand Canyon she invited me to fly with her. On the plane, because she was a little nervous, she took out her rosary and silently prayed as we lifted off.

A couple of mischievous guys behind us thought they'd have some fun with my aunt. One said, "I sure hope there are no Catholics in Arizona. On my last trip to Ireland, the place was lousy with Catholics; I'll never go back."

The other guy said, "Mexico is just as bad. I was just there and you can't take a step without tripping over a Catholic; I'll never go back."

Finally, my aunt turned around and with a gentle smile, she said ever so sweetly, "Why don't you both go to hell; there are no Catholics there."

Careful with that joke, it's an antique. Of course I don't believe in a place called Hell. Though plenty of people have had hellish experiences, and the gospels show Jesus trying to liberate people from their personal hells. We see that very sort of thing today.

At the end of chapter 1 in Mark, a man with a skin disease comes to Jesus and begs him for help. Jesus reaches out his hand and touches the untouchable man, and Mark says, "Immediately...the man was cured."

Jesus doesn't want a lot of press, so he asks the guy not to make a big deal of this spontaneous remission.

But the guy tells everyone he meets...sometimes the news is just too good to keep to yourself.

And Jesus gets a reputation as a healer and crowds start to follow him wherever he goes.

That leads us to chapter 2, where Jesus returns to Capernaum and crowds continue to gather.

On this occasion, Jesus is sharing the word of encouragement, as is his way, to a packed house.

The house is so full, no one else can enter.

Then some people come along, bringing to Jesus a paralyzed man; and when they can't get to Jesus because of the crowd, they remove the roof above him...

OK, so Jesus is popular. When Deepak Chopra gives a lecture, he packs the house, too. There are always people who need a little help, and when they hear that someone can make them feel better, give them hope, inspire them, encourage them...they want some of that.

Whenever someone is selling hope, there will always be a market for it. My medicine cupboard is full of bottled dreams...potions and tinctures and snake oil that promise I can sleep off the pounds, wash away the grey, annihilate wrinkles and fine lines in only a few days, brighten my smile, remove all pain, help me get a good night's rest, make me smell like spring rain, pills to grow hair and crèmes to remove it, I think I even have a lotion that is meant to make me taller. The world always needs hope, and when someone is offering it, there's bound to be a crowd showing up to get it.

Of course the house is packed. Now some unscrupulous charlatans take advantage of people's pain and offer promises they can't possibly fulfill, toss out answers that are far too easy for the complex problems of life. But there are also the sincere heroes and helpers and healers who are doing everything they can to give genuine hope to as many people as possible. Jesus was the genuine article...you can't keep that a secret, and the crowds keep growing.

Some people have brought a friend to see Jesus who seems to be paralyzed. They can't get in, so they hoist this guy up to the roof, tear a hole in the roof and lower him down. Security! Do they plan to pay for that damage? They have a grand idea, but have you noticed that people with the heroic gestures and the grand ideas are very seldom the ones who stick around to clean up

the mess!?! Yes, these guys have faith, but I also hope they have the number of a good contractor because, hello, there is now a hole in the ceiling!

But, of course, the bible is written in the language of myth and metaphor, story and allegory, image and idiom, prose and poetry. The point of the story, and remember, I insist that Mark is something of a playwright...he's giving us truth on every page, but we must never limit truth to mere facts...the bible isn't journalism, its literature (sacred literature to be sure, but so much more than dry details and trivial tidbits).

The point is someone is stuck. He needs friends to help him. He needs community to help him get unstuck, mobile again, moving in the flow of life again. He has friends who are willing to help him, and they bring him to an even larger community where people are being taught to believe in themselves and to summon hope from deep within. They find a way to enter such an empowering, healing community...that's the message of the roof top entrance today.

Once they make their dramatic entrance, Jesus tells the guy on the mat that his sins are forgiven, so we might imagine that mistakes, fears, clinging to the past, negative attitudes, pessimistic thinking...somehow the habit of missing the mark has immobilized this person.

I've been there; have you?

Rehashing something that happened 20 years ago?

Walking around feeling sorry for myself, and then angry that no one notices, or when they do, feeling embarrassed as they offer pity?

Jesus has a word for that kind of self-imposed no win situation...he calls it sin, missing the mark, seeing life in a distorted way and not living as fully as is actually possible.

Whatever has immobilized the man on the mat, Jesus says, "let it go. Release the past to the past. It's over. Be here, now! Embrace the possibilities that exist now. Get up and start moving, start living your life again. Stop letting yesterday paralyze you today."

When I tested HIV positive, I called a friend of mine who is a minister. I gave her the news over the phone...I think I wanted her to help me play the martyr, the victim...she was too smart for that. I've been living with the virus for 18 years, and medicine and optimism and luck...who knows what all has contributed to my longevity; but I remember her initial response. She said, "Oh, honey; that's just information."

She didn't promise me a cure. She didn't promise me a miracle. She was doing funerals every week just as we all were in those days. But she knew that whether I lived 7 more weeks or 70 more years, the quality of that time was largely dependent on my own attitude. She wasn't going to enable me to waste time being stuck. If I had a short time, then I had no time to waste. If longevity was possible, then there was no point sabotaging it with undo negativity. The initial shock, fear, regret...all that was normal. But eventually, I needed the voice of hope telling me to release what I could so that I could take up my mat and walk.

Your sins are forgiven.

Jesus' critics say, "Who does he think he is, forgiving sins!" Well, actually, what he did was pronounce the forgiveness of sins. That's what priests do; priests affirm God's forgiveness. Jesus is daring to do what priests do; he is owning his own authority. He can affirm someone. He can minister to someone. He can encourage someone. The ministry of encouragement isn't a privilege of the priestly class; it's the mission of every compassionate person.

And so Jesus says, "whatever is holding you down, holding you back...it's over. It's just information. Give yourself a break. Start over. Take up your mat and walk." Jesus isn't glorifying himself; he's comforting the one who is hurting. He's trying to release the person from his mental anguish, his personal hell, so he will be free to move into wholeness, hope, and happiness. He

wants the guy to be unstuck, so he can experience joy no matter what the circumstances of life may offer.

You are not your past. You are not your mistakes.

You are not your diagnosis. You are not your bank account.

You are not the loss, the betrayal, the failure you experienced.

You are not the judgments others have made about you.

You are not even the judgments you've made about yourself.

Let all that go...that's what it means to say, "your sins are forgiven." And once you get that, then the next step is possible...get up, start over, give joy another chance. Take up your mat and walk."

We all get knocked down sometimes. But we can also get on our feet again. Maybe we can't do it by ourselves; but then again, we don't have to. This is our gospel story today, and this is the good news. Amen.

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My past is not my future.
I am more than the circumstances of life.
I am free in this moment to rise up and move forward.
My hope is renewed.
I am strong, joyous, and blessed.
Thank you, God!
Amen.