

Who is this man?

Mark 5:21-43

July 1, 2012

Twelve years ...

Twelve years is a long time. It's a long time to be sick. It's a long time to suffer, to suffer without end and without relief, to suffer from chronic severe bleeding that robs you of energy and joy and life.

Twelve years a long time to be deprived of any kind of a normal existence, to have your entire existence controlled by the disease, to spend every waking moment devoted to trying to find some way to ease its miserable effects, without success.

Twelve years is a long time to be alone -- just you and it, just you and the disease that is your life.

Twelve years is a short time. It's a short time, a too short time, to have lived. Twelve years is too short, much too short of a time to have lived, when you are just emerging from your childhood, just beginning to realize the wonders and possibilities of being an adult, of being a woman, when almost all of your life, almost all of your life that really matters is still ahead of you.

Twelve years is a short time to live. Twelve years is much too soon to die.

Twelve years ...

It is a sad irony that binds this woman and this girl to each other. When the one was born, the other became sick. When life began for one, life ended for the other, any kind of a life worth having. And when one died, all too soon, life went on -- and on and on! -- for the other in all its agony and misery.

Mark weaves their stories together as part of the larger tapestry of the first half of his gospel, a purposeful retelling of selected events and sayings from Jesus' life, all focussed on a single question: Who is this man?

Who is this man who came out of Nazareth, was baptized by John, and announced that the kingdom of God was near? Who is this man who speaks to the people, not in plain language, but in parables, who heals people of their maladies and diseases, who frees them from the demons that bind them? Who is this man who calms a storm? Who is this man who heals a woman of her chronic bleeding and raises a young girl from death?

What do these stories, these two particular stories that Mark weaves together, have in common?

They both concern women, a woman and a girl, both deprived of womanhood, both deprived of the fullness of life.

Neither come into Jesus' presence easily. One has to fight her way through the crowds pressed in around him just to reach him, just to reach out and touch his cloak, and the other has to wait for him, to wait too long for him, as he is delayed by the crowd and delayed by his attention to the one who reached out to touch his clothes.

And both stories concern lost causes. The bleeding woman consulted doctor after doctor, she used up all her money seeking relief. The implication may be that she had money, that she had resources enough to access the best available medical care, but even with the best care money could buy, she didn't get any better. She only got worse.

And Jairus' daughter was dead. It was too late for her, too late even for a healer. Jesus shouldn't be bothered any more. He should go back to whatever it was he was doing, because she is dead.

Like Luke and Matthew, Mark must certainly include these stories to draw attention to Jesus' concern for those the rest of society overlooks or casts aside: people sick or poor, aliens, women. But more to the point, Mark retells stories that elicit amazement, astonishment, wonder: Who is this man?

Who is this man who does what no human being can do? This man whom the wind and waves obey? This man who cures a woman for whom the best of physicians could do nothing? This man who raises a young girl from death?

Who is this man? That is the critical question Mark's gospel poses, the critical question each of us must answer. Once it is answered, the rest will follow. Once it is answered, we will follow!

Who is this man? Who is this man who speaks to a storm and heals diseases and raises the dead? It's about these miracles, if that's what you want to call them, but not just about them. They are not done for public show or for public consumption. Jesus calmed the storm with just his disciples in the boat to see it, and Jesus took only a select few, her parents and three disciples, into the room where the dead girl lay. After he raised her up, he explicitly told all of them to keep quiet about it.

These wonders are not meant for show, but meant as signs, as signs of the kingdom, as signs of the king. Because that is the answer to Mark's question! Who is this man? Peter will say it: You are the Messiah! God's chosen One! The King!

King of what? King of whom? King of the sick, and king of the well. King of the poor, and king of the rich. King of the Jews and king of the Romans. King of this world, and king of all worlds.

Jesus is no magician or wonderworker. He is king, the living embodiment of the kingdom of God. When he says the kingdom of God has come near, it has, because it has come near in him! And the kingdom of God is about ... this. It's about ... us. It's about this world and the people of this world that God loves so much!

What does king Jesus do? He protects from a storm! He brings relief to a suffering woman! He gives a little girl back her life! He doesn't come saying: "I have come to take you away from this world of woe." He comes saying: "I have come that you may have life, life is all its abundance!"

When Jairus' daughter got up from the bed and started walking around, what did Jesus say? "Give her something to eat!"

Give her something to eat. It's my favorite part of the story. In this extraordinary moment, a moment that left everyone in the room utterly amazed, Jesus is worried about a hungry little girl, because God cares about hungry little girls! Because God cares about every little thing, and about every big thing, that makes our life less than what he intends for us.

I know there are things -- some smaller, some larger -- that make your life less than what God intends for you. And I know you have lost causes. I know that because I do. It may be an illness no doctor can cure, a storm from which you have no protection, a relationship that has died. It may be a situation or a person or this world as a whole before which you feel utterly powerless.

We are. We are, in the end, utterly powerless. But Jesus is king. Jesus is the One in whom God dwells and from whom life flows. He calms storms and heals diseases and raises the dead and feeds hungry little girls. He offers you ... life.

So never give up! Never lose heart! Never lose faith! I don't know what Jesus will do for you, or when or how, but I know who Jesus is, and I know how much Jesus loves you, and I know what Jesus wants for you, and I know Jesus will never leave you. I know that Jesus will give you what he gives to all those he loves -- his life ... his life in you, his life for you, his life with you.