

# North Kildonan United Church

7<sup>th</sup> February 2021 ~Rev. Don Johnson

## “He Lifted Her Up”

*Isaiah 40: 21-31*

*Psalms 147: 1-11, 20c*

*Mark 1: 29-39*

*Guide us, O God, by your Word and Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover your peace, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.*

For those of you who enjoy reading novels, have you ever been tempted to quickly skip to the end of a book you have just started, curious as to where the story is heading? Say you have begun reading the first chapter and you have full intentions of finishing the book but you are wondering how the various characters will interact with one another and what the ending might be like. Some may say that is cheating while others believe having that advance knowledge helps in the enjoyment of the novel.

As we read through the gospel of Mark, having advance knowledge of how the story turns out is actually vitally important. This is because the last third of the gospel focusses on the final days of Jesus. By chapter 11, and there are only 16 chapters in this gospel, by this chapter Jesus and the disciples are about to enter Jerusalem.

Chapter 11, beginning the last third of the gospel, opens with Jesus instructing two of the disciples to go get the colt waiting for him. Now begins his entrance into Jerusalem, with Jesus astride the colt and the crowds crying out *"Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"*

We know that event as Palm Sunday and we see that day as the beginning of Holy Week, which will culminate in the trial and crucifixion of Jesus on Good Friday and the victory of life over death on Easter Sunday.

By knowing how the story, how the gospel will end, we are able to understand the gospel through the viewpoint of Christ's death and resurrection. Themes of discipleship and the call to bear the cross run throughout the gospel and the shadow of Christ's Passion often hovers in the stories. As I've mentioned before, this is a gospel written **in** perilous times **for** perilous times, intended for a persecuted church, a church called to the great missionary task of proclaiming the gospel far and wide, a church dependent upon the grace and strength of God.

That missionary task begins with teaching. Last week in our gospel Jesus visited a synagogue, where he amazed everyone by his excellent life-giving words. As those present said, he taught with authority. But there was more. As Jesus taught, an unclean spirit in one of the men disrupted the meeting. Jesus used his authority to drive out the unclean spirit, a spirit who declares Jesus to be the Holy One of God. Liberation from

that unclean spirit rescues this poor man from the power that had possessed him and his life could now begin again.

Restoration of life, to the life God intends-that seemed to be the intent of that account of Jesus' mission and ministry, as Jesus drives out from the man that which was holding him down, destroying his life.

Restoration of life is a theme in today's gospel as well.

Remember how today's gospel began: *"As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them."*

In bed with a fever. In our day that might or might not mean too much. If it is the flu, then there isn't a lot to worry about but if it is COVID then that's a different matter. In Jesus' day, a fever could easily be the prelude to death, it could be one symptom of a significant life threatening illness. As usual Mark doesn't provide many details but what he records is significant.

Jesus goes to her and quote *"lifted her up."* We will encounter that phrase again, at the end of Mark's gospel: *"As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here."*

*"Lifted her up-has been raised."* The phrase suggests that new strength is given to the one who is down, the one laid low by illness, or unclean spirits, or as the gospel ends, by death itself. Lifted up, raised to take their place once again in the world.

As one commentator writes about this passage: *"Illness bore a heavy social cost: not only would a person be unable to earn a living or contribute to the well-being of a household, but their ability to take their proper role in the community, to be honoured as a valuable member of a household, town or village, would be taken from them. Peter's mother-in-law is an excellent case in point. It was her calling and her honour to show hospitality to guests in her home. Cut off from that role by an illness cut her off from doing that which integrated her into her world. Who was she when no longer able to engage in her calling? Jesus restored her to her social world and brought her back to a life of value by freeing her from that fever. It is very important to see that healing is about restoration to community and restoration of a calling, a role as well as restoration to life. For life without community and calling is bleak indeed."*

Simon Peter's mother-in-law is raised from her sickbed, restored to health, so that she can get back to living her life.

But perhaps her healing has a deeper significance and meaning. The text hints that she was very sick, close to death. Today's translation of the Greek is rendered: *"He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up."*

When we hear that, it almost sounds like Jesus assisted the woman the same way as we offer a hand to another person to help them get out of a chair. Nothing too radical here. But the Greek verb has deeper meaning than that. It is better rendered as *"raised her up"*, the same Greek verb used for the resurrection.

What if this is about more than a healing story?

Perhaps the healing of Peter's mother-in-law is actually the first resurrection story in Mark, foreshadowing Christ's resurrection. We are in the first chapter of this gospel. In the final chapter, chapter 16, three women, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, are the ones who discover the stone rolled away from the tomb of Jesus and his body gone. They do find a young man sitting in the tomb, who tells them, as I quoted before: *"you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth...he has been raised, he is not here...tell the others that he is going ahead of you to Galilee."*

A woman in Galilee is the first to experience the resurrection power; three women will be the first to witness the fullness of Christ's resurrection when they enter the empty tomb. This raises the question. Is resurrection just about Jesus' death on Good Friday and being raised on Easter morning or is the power of Christ's resurrection alive in our world today, transforming lives and restoring hope where there is no hope?

When I was in theological college back in the 1980s, Jurgen Moltmann was one of the leading theologians of the day. His most famous book is The Crucified God, and his theology was greatly influenced by his experience as a German soldier during the Second World War. After the war ended, he was very aware that many of his fellow soldiers had lost all hope and as a result began to die. That loss of hope was further compounded by the unbearable guilt so many felt as news spread of the atrocities committed by Germans and others in the name of Germany, before and during the war, most often committed by those in uniform.

In Moltmann's case, he was a prisoner of war in Scotland and had been shown photographs of the concentration camps. Moltmann had little Christian background and no theological education, but when an army chaplain distributed copies of the Bible, Moltmann later wrote:

*"I read Mark's Gospel as a whole and came to the story of the Passion: when I heard Jesus' death cry, 'My God my God, why have you forsaken me?' I felt growing within me the conviction: this is someone who understands you completely, who is with you in your cry to God and has felt the same forsakenness you are living in now...I summoned up the courage to live again."*

That someone who understands us completely is the same one who walks with us every day, who calls us his beloved, who offers us his very self in bread and cup as sign and seal of his love for us. And we so long for that day when we are able to once again gather around our Lord's Table and celebrate that Holy Communion. This Jesus, crucified and risen, is indeed our Hope and Strength and Joy, our Resurrection and our Life.

We end with this blessing by Janet Morley.

*"May the God who shakes heaven and earth,  
whom death could not contain,  
who lives to disturb and heal us,  
bless us with power to go forth  
and proclaim the gospel." Amen.*