

Tracy Daub
2/4/18--University Presbyterian Church
Mark1:29-39

THE FIRST OF MANY

A woman's place is in the home. At least that was true in ancient Palestine. Of course, this belief is an archaic notion in today's westernized societies. And that may be partly why Mark's story about the healing of Peter's mother-in-law doesn't entirely sit well for some of us. Sure, we're glad Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law of her illness, but no sooner was she made well than it seems she was expected to cook and clean for a whole household of male visitors. It almost looks like Peter brought Jesus home to his house and that Jesus healed the mother-in-law *so that* she could get up and cook them all a big meal.

But a more careful examination of this story begins to open deeper appreciations of its meaning. Peter brings Jesus home and that is when Jesus learns that Peter's mother-in-law was ill with a fever. This was probably not just a bad head cold. This was likely something fairly serious. And in an era that lacked the modern medicine we enjoy today, such an illness could possibly lead to death. At the very least, illness cut a person off from society, not just because they might need to stay in bed, but because illnesses were seen as making someone "unclean." You didn't touch someone who was "unclean." You didn't go near to someone who was "unclean." Unless of course, you were Jesus.

It is possible that Jesus was told of the mother-in-law's illness in order to warn him off entering the house--to protect him from being defiled by the mother-in-law's impurity. But Jesus does just the opposite. Instead of keeping his distance, Jesus drew close to the woman, even

touched her, thus making himself "unclean" in the eyes of his society. And then we are told that Jesus "lifted her up."

This phrase, "lifted her up," is the translation of a Greek word that literally means: "raised up." Jesus raised her up. It is the exact same word used at the end of Mark's gospel when the angel in the tomb tells the women that Jesus "has been raised up; he is not here." In other words, we are talking about a resurrection. Sure, the mother-in-law was not yet dead, although she may have been close to death. But it was nevertheless a kind of resurrection in that not only was she healed from her potentially fatal illness but she was also restored to her community. She was no longer "unclean." She was no longer a person who had to be shunned. And thus, her life was given back to her. She was given new life. A resurrection.

What we have here is the first resurrection account. You might have thought that there was only one resurrection story in the gospels, but actually, there are many. This story today is only the first among many resurrections that take place in the Gospel of Mark. Turns out that the Gospel of Mark is chocked full of resurrections.

In chapter 2 people bring a paralyzed man to Jesus for him to heal. Again, not only is this man afflicted physically, but he too would have been affected socially by his condition. He would have been considered untouchable, unclean. Jesus says to this man, "Stand up, take your mat and go to your home." That phrase Jesus says, "stand up"--you know what? It is the same Greek word meaning "raised up." A second resurrection takes place.

One more chapter later, chapter 3, we come upon a story about a man with a withered hand. Jesus sees this man's condition. But there is a problem. It's the Sabbath day and no work is supposed to take place on the Sabbath. The religious leaders are looking on to see if Jesus will violate the rules. And Jesus does not disappoint them. Jesus calls the man to him, saying "Come

forward," and he heals the man's hand. But guess what? That phrase, "come forward," is actually our same Greek word again: Rise up. Another resurrection. Another life restored.

Chapter 5. A little girl has fallen terribly ill and her father comes to Jesus begging for him to heal his daughter. Jesus goes to his home but the family gathered there tell him it's too late; she's already dead. Jesus tells them the child is not dead but only sleeping, so we are left a bit confused. Is she really dead or not? What exactly does Jesus mean? It doesn't really matter in the end because Jesus goes to the girl and takes her by the hand and says, "Little girl, get up!" Anyone want to guess what Greek word is used here for "get up"? You guessed it: the Greek word "to raise up." Another resurrection.

Chapter 9 now. This time it's a boy who suffers from epilepsy. The boy's father is seeking healing for his child. The child has a seizure right in front of Jesus and then Jesus takes him by the hand--we see him do that a lot don't we--and he "lifted him up." Our favorite Greek word appears again. "To raise up." The boy is healed. He is given new life.

Here's the interesting thing. We thought that the resurrection was something that happened *to* Jesus. But as it turns out, Jesus undertakes a ministry of resurrection. Long before he has his own resurrection experience, Jesus has been raising other people from the dead-end places and conditions of their lives and giving them new life. And it all began with Peter's mother-in-law.

And having been raised, she serves them. Of course, this meant she prepared a meal, lit the stove, chopped the vegetables, stirred the soup, set the table. Later she would wash the dishes, wipe off the table, sweep the floor. These are the ordinary tasks we do when serving a meal. So ordinary that we don't think of them as anything special. They are just the stuff of ordinary life. The work of women, mostly. So the work is often undervalued.

But here's another interesting detail. The Greek verb used for "she served them" is the word used in the Bible to mean doing ministry. It is the same word we use in English for "deacon," only here it becomes a verb. So a literal translation would be "she began to deacon them." This word occurs three other times in the Gospel of Mark. It first occurs after Jesus was in the wilderness and angels came and ministered to him. They "deaconed" him. And then it occurs again when Jesus is talking about his purpose in life. He tells his disciples, "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." And finally it occurs when Mark tells us about a group of women who followed Jesus on this journeys and "provided for him when he was in Galilee." They ministered to him.

What we learn is that Jesus didn't command the mother-in-law to serve them. She began to serve them, to minister to them, as a response to being raised up from affliction. The mother-in-law becomes the example of discipleship. Because what is the faithful response after having been resurrected and brought back to life? Serving others and serving God.

The male disciples in Mark have a hard time learning this lesson. They struggle with what Jesus has been trying to teach them about discipleship. They seek power and prominence. Two of them come right out and ask Jesus to give them power and prominence. They want to rise up alright, but they fail to see that rising up means turning around and coming down to serve. To do things so ordinary and mundane for others--like washing dishes or chopping vegetables. Jesus tried to raise them up too. He tried to raise them up from their dead-end mind-set that life was about status and power. He wanted to resurrect them to new life by showing them that the only way up, is by coming down in humility and service.

Jesus calls his people, his disciples, you and me, to a ministry of resurrection. That is the role of Jesus' church--this church. That is the role of your life and my life. Our world is filled

with people who need to be touched and then lifted up from their hardships and pain. And the way we do that is through service--offering ourselves and our efforts in what may often be the most ordinary, even mundane tasks. You never can tell where resurrection can happen. After all, who knew that resurrection could begin in a kitchen?