

A Day at the Beach

I think there are two types of people in Virginia. There are mountain people and there are beach people. Mountain lovers like the cool temperatures, crisp air, rushing streams, trees, apple cider, and wildlife. Beach people like the sun, crashing waves, heat, snow cones, and seafood platters. I guess they do not mind dealing with sand getting into shoes, totes, coolers, and into their swimsuits.

The people of the Bible also liked mountains and beaches. Many Gospel scenes are set on mountain tops. Jesus often goes up a mountain to pray. He takes the disciples up a mountain for the Sermon on the Mount. His transfiguration happens on a mountain and so on, but Jesus does not neglect beaches.

Beach settings also figure significantly in his ministry. Jesus calls the first disciples as they are working on their boats on the beach, he preaches from a boat on the seashore, and he cooks a meal for the disciples on the shore after his resurrection. He has been crisscrossing the Sea of Galilee encountering crowds on the Jewish side and the Gentile side. Today's reading has Jesus encountering a crowd on the beach on the Jewish side. He has entered an unnamed town that will provide him with several ministry and miracle opportunities.

The narratives presented in this Gospel lesson¹ are about two women in vastly different circumstances, and both situations are dire. One is a twelve-year-old girl who is ill to the point of death. Her father is at his wits end. The other is a woman who has suffered for twelve years with a bleeding condition. She has spent all her money on cures, none of which have worked. She is also at her wits end. It is important to note how the number twelve figures in these two accounts. Twelve signifies the twelve tribes of Israel. The implication is that these two women represent all of Israel in their illnesses and their persons.

Jairus, the girl's father, is a leader of the synagogue. Despite any reluctance he may feel in seeking help from this itinerant rabbi, he is putting all of that aside in the hopes that this famous miracle worker can save his daughter from death.

An unnamed woman with an ongoing hemorrhage is not only ill but a social outcast. She is no longer able to be a part of her community or family because she is considered ritually unclean. Having tried everything else she is willing to venture into the crowd hoping that Jesus can heal her. She is taking a big chance mingling with the crowd, but it is her only hope.

In Mark's telling these two stories become intertwined to great dramatic affect. Jairus comes crashing through the crowd that is tightly packed around Jesus. He is a man of stature in the community. The people would make way for him, but he does not wait, because time is of the essence. When he gets to Jesus, he throws himself on the ground at his feet and pleads for his daughter's life. Jesus recognizes the immediacy of the situation and starts for Jairus' house.

Then suddenly he stops and the action changes. He asks what might appear to be an absurd question, "Who touched me?" After all, he is surrounded by people

¹ Mark 5:212-43

jostling him as they walk along. Of course, someone touched him. “What’s the big deal.”

The big deal is that one person touched him with intent. That intent drew power out of him. It was the woman with the hemorrhage. She thought that she could get away with being healed without anyone knowing. She had stealthily infiltrated the crowd and touched the hem of Jesus’ robe. She thought he would not detect her touch, but he did, and she was caught.

Unlike most illustrations of this miracle, I think the crowd must have fallen back when they saw who it was. Anyone who touched the woman would be ritually unclean. That was what made the woman’s life so difficult. Because of her illness, people would not come near her. She was a pariah. Now she was within the crowd and had touched Jesus.

Jesus waited for someone to admit what they had done. The woman falls at his feet and “Tells him the whole truth.” Jesus does not shout that she had made him unclean. Instead, he commends her for her faith, and commands her to “go in peace; and be healed of [her] disease.” After twelve years she is restored to health and just as importantly to her community. She is made whole.

However, all this time Jairus must have been frantic. He had convinced Jesus to come heal his daughter. But just as they were making their way to his house the whole procession stopped to deal with this bleeding woman. Her hemorrhage may be bad, but his daughter was at death’s door. I imagine he was thinking that the woman could wait, but his daughter could not. Then just as they were about to get moving again some people came from Jairus’s house to tell him that his daughter is dead. His heart had to have been broken. He was so close to saving his daughter. Jesus on the other hand says, “Do not fear, only believe.” Thus, they proceed on to Jairus’s home.

When they arrive the mourners are wailing, and all are despairing at the girl’s death. Jesus asks why they are weeping and wailing. He tells them the girl is not dead but asleep. Those who had seen her corpse must have thought him mad as they laughed at him. Jesus shoos away all but the parents and his disciples. He takes the unnamed girl by the hand and says two Aramaic words, “Talitha cum.” They may sound like a magic spell but in reality, it just means “Little girl, get up.” She does get up and begins walking about. Her death is reversed, and the family is restored.

As so often happens in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus orders them to tell no one. Yet there was a crowd that knew the extent of her illness and that she had died. Even if the parents said nothing the crowd would certainly do so. It would not be long before the entire town and then the region was aware of this miracle, not to overlook the miraculous healing of the hemorrhaging woman. Jesus intended his miracles to take place in secret, but he was no more stealthy than the hemorrhaging woman.

As days at the beach go, this was an amazing one. It was much more than a suntan and a fish fry. But what do we make of it? The critical sentence is what Jesus says to Jairus and his household after the girl is reported dead— “Do not fear, only believe.” This gentle command is already made obvious in the healing of the hemorrhaging woman. She had lived in fear for twelve years, but now she screwed her courage to the sticking place, and she was ready to act because she believed that Jesus had the power to make her whole.

The Rev. Eugene LeCouteur
Emanuel Episcopal Church
Middleburg, Virginia

The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B
10:00 a.m.
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What have you been carrying for twelve years or more that you can offer up to Jesus? What immediate issue can you give to him so that it does not take your life away? There are many ways that Jesus heals whether by us reaching out or by taking our seemingly lifeless hand. There is hope when we believe that Jesus can make us whole. There is hope when we come to Jesus. There is hope because he will come when we call. Life is not a day at the beach, but when we look for Jesus or call out for Jesus, we find him ready to listen and ready to calm our fears. Do as the woman does and as Jesus commands, "Do not fear, but believe."