

Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner
June 28, 2009
Mark 5:21-43

The Older Sister

I hope you don't mind if I take this time to tell you a story this morning. It is one that I have wanted to tell for a long, long time. But it is one that I am just now free to tell. I'm the big sister, Jairus' other daughter. You don't read about me in the way Mark tells the story, but I was there. I was a part of that one moment in our lives that changed us forever.

My little sister had been sick for a long time. We never really knew why she fell so ill. Back in those days, it could have been anything – something that she ate or drank, childhood cancer, a number of other diseases. We did not have preventative medicine, diagnostic tests, immunizations, or any of this other newfangled stuff that you all have. And because of that reality, childhood was a dangerous time of life. You always felt lucky to make it through it because so many of your friends and family did not.

We thought my sister would be one of those who did not make it. She was twelve. She was very, very sick and no one—not my parents, not the doctors—no one knew what to do to save her. And we were some of the lucky ones because we had resources. My father, Jairus, was a leader in the synagogue. He was one of those who helped to manage things, who kept things running smoothlyⁱ. It was a position that carried respect and helped us live more comfortably than many others. So my parents did not spare any expense in trying to figure out how to make my little sister well. But regardless of how much money we spent or how many doctors poked and prodded, she continued to get worse and worse.

Finally, on the night before we met Jesus, she became completely non-communicative. My mother just sat and wailed. It was the most horrible noise that I have ever heard. It comes back to me every once in a while. You know how the prophet Jeremiah says “A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children...” That was my mother.

Her wailing alerted the neighbors and people started to gather. The mourners began to line up outside so they would be ready. That is one thing that happened back then. A very public show of mourning was the way to honor a family.ⁱⁱ But I must admit that on that night, I did not feel one bit honored. Rather, I felt very angry. How dare they line up outside my home like she was already dead! How dare they start to weep and wail like her story was already over! The crowds also angered my father, Jairus. He, too, was not ready to be done. Not at all. He paced around the house, muttering to himself. He went on and on like that until he heard the news about Jesus' arrival.

We had all heard rumors about Jesus. We knew that he had healed some people—even in the synagogue and on the Sabbath, making some of those Pharisees madder than hornets. But Jesus did not seem to care who he angered. He must have felt that his ministry was worth the risk. I sometimes wonder if he knew how much of a risk it was. I guess he did. For Jesus cured all kinds of people. One touch of his hand or one word from his mouth and they were healed – restored – saved. So everybody was talking about Jesus. We knew that we were probably not supposed to – especially people like my Dad—people who were supposed to protect the religious system, manage it and keep it running smoothly. But, given all we had heard, you could not help but talk about him. And wonder. And secretly hope.

That must have been what drove my father to do what he did. Hope. Because once he got word that Jesus was coming through town, he rushed out of that door too fast to say goodbye. We did not know what he was going to do, where he was going to go. I rushed out after him, wanting to make sure he was okay. I followed him as he went straight to the place where Jesus' boat had landed on shore. And I

watched as he waded through the great crowd of people—this teeming mass of need. Some people saw him coming and helped to make a way for him. Like I said, my father was respected then. People honored him as one of their leaders. And that respect and honor were why some people gasped as they watched what he did next. Even I was shocked by his behavior. Once he got to Jesus, he threw himself at Jesus' feet and begged for him to come and heal my sister.

I had never seen my father do anything like that before. In those days, if you threw yourself at the feet of another person, your gesture meant that you recognized a huge difference of social rank and honorⁱⁱⁱ. So when my father, a leader in the synagogue, a person of huge respect and honor, threw himself at the feet of Jesus...well, you knew that tongues would wag. But my father did not care what people said. When I asked him much later about what he was thinking on that day, he said that he was just thinking that he wanted his daughter to be well and restored back to the family. And he also said that he just knew that Jesus would do it. He could not explain how he knew back then. He just did. And he was willing to give Jesus his life if it meant that my little sister could have a chance at new life.

I was too far away to hear exactly what my father said to Jesus, but I saw Jesus reach down, take my father by the arm, and pull him back up until they were looking eye-to-eye. Then I saw Jesus nod and gesture to my Dad to lead the way. As my father and Jesus started walking, the crowd started walking with them. People were yelling for Jesus and crying out to him. I was a little scared. I had not seen so much pain before. It was everywhere. But I just wanted Jesus to hurry up and get to my home. So you can imagine how frustrated I was when that other woman butted into our time for healing.

She had gotten right up behind him to touch his clothes. I then watched as she tried to get away as fast as she could. But before she could escape, Jesus stopped. Again, I was too far away to hear exactly what was said, but I watched as she did what my father had just done. She fell at Jesus' feet and bowed her head to the dusty ground. And then, Jesus bent down again, just like he did for my father. But this time, he did not just bend down to grasp her arm. He got down on her level, cupped her face in his hands, and looked at her.

The crowd was just as shocked at Jesus' behavior as they had been at my father's. This woman had been unclean for 12 years. Everyone knew it. She had lost all of her family and all of her friends due to the purity codes. But Jesus stopped what he was doing, bent down, touched her, and pronounced her saved, restored. Someone told me that he even called her daughter. It was a striking enough event that my frustration with the delay diminished. Well, it diminished until we got that news.

From my distant vantage point, I watched as some men came up to my dad to tell him something. I then saw all of the blood drain out of his face and I knew. I knew it was too late. I screamed and ran to my father's side just in time to hear Jesus say "Do not fear, only believe." I wanted so badly to trust him. So I decided to try.

We got to the house and Jesus told the crowd to stop weeping and making such a racket because my sister was only sleeping. They laughed at him. I was stunned but Jesus paid no attention. He took my father, my mother, and me into my sister's room. And Jesus went over to my sister's bed and bent down, just as he had done for my father and for that woman. Then he took her little hand in his and he told her to get up, to rise up. That was all he said.

I had expected some elaborate prayer, maybe some kind of ritual, at least some reference to God's healing power. But Jesus just acted like it was his power too. "Little girl, rise up." And she did. She started walking around like she had done before she had gotten so sick. I was stunned. My mother was stunned.

But my father ran to her, tears streaming down, and took her in his arms. And he kept thanking Jesus again and again for bringing her back to us. And Jesus smiled and I could tell he enjoyed that moment of restoration just as much as we did. And I have to be honest with you – I felt a power and a presence that day that I had never felt before. It was palpable in the room. I wanted Jesus to stay there forever. But he could not stay long, he had to keep going. And as he left, he told us not to tell anyone and to give my little sister something to eat.

That was the last time we saw him alive. We followed Jesus' instructions – we never spoke of it ourselves. But the word got out. Everyone outside knew what had happened. And because everyone knew, our lives totally changed. My father “somehow” lost his position as a leader in the synagogue. Apparently, it quickly became time for someone else to get a chance at leadership. And many of the other women did not know how to relate to my mother anymore. So many of them had lost their own children that I think it was painful to see my mother whose child had been saved.

But it was my sister's life that changed most of all. People honestly did not know what to do with her^{iv}. What do you do with someone who has been saved from the clutches of death? People were both in awe of her and afraid of her. So we stayed pretty much to ourselves for quite a while, which frankly was okay with us. Because we would not have traded one single thing for our old life. That day, our whole family had been saved, restored, by Jesus' power and presence. We were not the same people anymore. And we did not want to be the same people anymore either. But our salvation definitely carried a social cost. We could not take it lightly, nor should we. We were new creations and we wanted our lives to reflect that grace.

Many years later, my sister became sick again. I kept vigil by her bedside, just as I had done in her childhood. But I have to tell you, it was different. Now, I know that part of the reason it was different was because she was not a child any longer. She had lived a full life. Had loved deeply. Had been given the most profound gift anyone could have received—new life—a gift we all shared because of her. So her dying was different this time.

But it was also different because of him, because of Jesus. She was not afraid anymore. She did not want to die but she was not afraid to die. Because we knew Jesus. We knew what he had done for us all those years before, and we knew that he was not finished with us yet. Our salvation, restoration, healing was still ongoing with each day. And because of that grace, we knew that when my little sister once again took that last breath here with us, she would be taking a new breath in God through him. And we trusted with every fiber of our being that when that moment came, she would also hear those long-ago words again: “Little girl, Rise Up.” But this time, her rising and her healing would be forever.

ⁱ Boring and Craddock. The People's New Testament Commentary. Louisville: Westminster JKP, 2004.

ⁱⁱ Malina and Rorhrbaugh . Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels, 2nd ed. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid 167.

^{iv} This idea of what happens after she rises was inspired by singer/songwriter Darrell Scott and his song “Lazarus Dies Again.”