

Being Down, Being Lifted, Being Saved

Mark 2:1-12

Tappahannock Presbyterian Church

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So let's set the scene here, always a good thing to do. I bet you didn't know that Jesus had a house in Capernaum, did you? Most translations say something like the NRSV says, "it was reported that he was at home." But the original language literally says that he was "in house." Now about the house: It was one of those flat-roofed houses with a roof made out of sticks-thatch-and-mud. You'd make a general frame out of large branches, then you'd cross-weave some smaller branches. Then you'd fill it up with thick thatch. Finally, you'd pack dirt on the thing in layers, and let it dry; then you'd pack on more, on and on. It would get so thick and hard that people could go up there and walk around on it! Some homeowners put tiles over the last layer of dirt, so that rain water would run off, instead of soaking in and making it mud. On each side of the house were ladders, so you could get up on the roof.

The house that day was incredibly crowded. You couldn't even get through the door; people were just hanging out the windows. People were standing around outside trying to hear. The word was out; people came from all over to see and hear this guy Jesus. They probably hoped he'd do some miracle. So Jesus was preaching along to this huge group, when suddenly, there was a commotion on the roof. You can bet it wasn't Santa and his reindeer! Unknown to Jesus, some people came, carrying a paralyzed man aloft on a – what? The word *κρᾶβαττον* in the Greek could mean a lot of different things; at its most basic, it means a small, cheap bed. For them that meant a kind of mat; it was definitely a poor man's bed. We tend to think that it was stiff and easy

to lower, like a stretcher, but the text doesn't say that. It could very well have been kinda floppy and flimsy and hard to manage. These guys grabbed the ladders, and carried their paralyzed friend up onto the roof! What were they gonna do up there? I don't think you could hear Jesus any better through the roof! The answer comes soon enough. The text says they "removed the roof above him." Literally, they "unroofed the roof!" Right above him! That's a lot of work! That's a lot of sticks and dirt. Can you see Jesus, concentrating on his preaching, and all of a sudden he starts getting showered by dirt and sticks? Is this really any way to introduce yourself to the Son of Man?

I'm sure Jesus wasn't really perturbed; I'm sure he saw two things: first, a way to fulfill the hopes of this man and his friends, but second, **a chance to glorify God**. And maybe third, and related to the second, and maybe most important, a way to show everyone who he really was.

You all will get to hear me talk about the "Miracle Story scheme," or something like it, over and over again. I think it's important for knowing what the bottom line is in some of these stories. Think of three "P's" – Presentation, Pronouncement, and Proof. The problem gets presented to Jesus, either somebody needing to be healed or exorcised, or something like a crowd needing food. That's "P" number one, the *Presentation*. "P" number two is whatever words Jesus says; that's the *Pronouncement*. Jesus heals by saying something, since he is the living Word. Finally, there is some *Proof* that the thing really took place – that a person is really healed, a demon cast out, a crowd fed. Here's why I'm telling you this: anytime the story doesn't fit that nice pattern, pay attention! Your Gospel writer is trying to tell you something. Sometimes with

these stories, we get a setting at the beginning, to tell you who was there, where it was, and so on. And there's usually a reaction from the crowd at the end, because Jesus usually did these things in front of crowds. But the Presentation, Pronouncement, and Proof are the things to watch.

So – the problem has been presented. It's time for the pronouncement. You know what to expect, something like this: "Get up, take your pallet, and walk!" But that's NOT what Jesus says. Instead, in response to the faith of those men, and of that paralytic, he says, "My son, your sins are forgiven." Uh-oh. Something different is happening here. And right here Mark introduces the scribes, sitting there, listening carefully. You know the scribes: they're the Scripture experts, the right-hand men of the Pharisees. They were, essentially, lawyers. And they were thinking "law" as soon as they heard Jesus say, "My son, your sins are forgiven."

You and I bring a lot of things to our reading of the Bible, because we know the whole story. You have to set that aside, though, and try to read Mark or any other Gospel as if you were hearing it for the first time, like you were back there in the first century. These scribes weren't necessarily hostile! – not yet. And they WERE right about the law. Jesus was claiming a power that belonged to God. It was a risky business; the penalty for blasphemy was death. Why would Jesus go there? Because he was about to make some powerful points. Jesus knew what was in their hearts, those scribes. He always knows what's on our hearts. Those scribes needed to know that God was still very much alive, not bound up in some book of the law, but present, alive, NOW. They needed to know that he was standing right in front of them.

So that's what leads Jesus to do what he does, to not go right into pronouncing the man's healing. He knows he's created an issue. Now he moves to take advantage of it. "Which is easier," he says, "to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and take your mat and walk'?" This one is tricky! Jesus means, which one is easier to *get away with*? You can't see forgiveness of sins; you *can* see if someone's been healed. We're marching on to the healing and proof! But Mark wants us to take a little side trip to talk about *sin*.

In that day and time, everything bad or harmful was related to sin. That's what they believed. You had a disease, or got born with a deformity, or got struck by lightning, whatever, it was because of somebody's sin. Might not have been your sin – might have been a parent or grandparent or even a brother or sister or cousin. Somehow, the bad that had happened to you was payment for some sin, sometime, somewhere. We know today that God isn't that kind of God. But those people that day in Capernaum didn't know it yet. What's more, their system of sacrifices and offerings and all that, to try to get God's forgiveness, wasn't very satisfying. People didn't have a relationship with God characterized by love; it was really about fear. Jesus saw an opportunity here to do a couple of things: to begin doing away with fear as the motivation to love God, and to identify himself as God, the one who forgives sin.

And if he removes the sin, what has he done? Besides getting rid of the "cause" of this man's paralysis, as they believed, Jesus will be offering him *salvation*. I bet you didn't know that the same word in the original language means healing, making whole,

and *saving*. If Jesus can pull this off, this man will not only be able to walk again, he'll be right with God; he'll be "saved."

I know the scribes were probably perplexed about what Jesus meant. They hadn't figured this all out. Jesus now moves on to the pronouncement and healing: "But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sin' – he said to the paralytic – 'I say to you, stand up, take your mat, and *go home!*'" So what happened? "IMMEDIATELY," he stood up, took his bed [or mat or whatever], and *walked out of the place right before their eyes!* He might have been dancing, he might have turned a backflip, who knows? The proof that something divine had happened was right there. Talk about being lifted up! In this story, we do get a reaction, and you should note it because it's important. "They were ALL amazed and glorified God, saying, 'We have never seen anything like this!'" ALL. Every one of them was amazed – and that included those scribes. The original says they were literally "beside themselves" with excitement; the word in the original is the one we get our word "ecstatic" from.

You know what? We all have times in our lives when *we're* down, when *we* need to be lifted up. That's what life in this world is: a series of ups and downs, it's like a roller coaster. And not in a good way! You and I have probably experienced mostly ups; a good life does that. But when you hit a down time, and we all do, that's what dominates your thinking. We probably never have it as bad as this paralytic; but it might almost feel that bad, that's how far down we can get. And when we get down that far, it can even influence our faith in God. We need to be saved from the influences of this world.

See, us Christians sometimes operate under the illusion that our lives are supposed to be perfect. And if they're not, we've done something wrong. Does that sound a little bit like the old way of thinking, that sin causes bad things to happen? We should pay attention to this healing from Mark 2. We should take great hope from it. Hope is the one thing that keeps us human beings going. Hope is that belief, that faith, that no matter how far down you've gone, you'll be "up" again. You can probably remember the down times in your life pretty easily: loss of a loved one, times of huge debt, a bad sickness or a time of chronic pain. The list goes on and on. You *can* almost feel paralyzed, sometimes, by the depths to which you have sunk. But if you're able to maintain hope, then you can function in the midst of being down. The message from Jesus is: your faith will make you well. You will be "lifted up."

That applies to groups of people, too – like families, or churches. Families go through down times. Think about when a child has troubles in school. The whole family suffers. Or when a family member is sick – if it's a bad enough sickness, the whole family is down. If a member of the family does something awful, maybe even something criminal, the whole family is dragged down. That's when faith is absolutely necessary, because it gives us hope. We're talking about not just individuals here, but about the relationships between individuals. There has to be hope, or the relationships will suffer. In some families, in some churches, even, things happen that damage relationships. And a whole family – or a whole church! – can be paralyzed, unable to function. Hope is the thing that lifts up, that carries us on in life. Hope is the thing that comes from faith. We do have faith that there will be a better day.

So what do you do, when you're down and you have no hope? You either accept it, and keep on going down, or you can *do* something about it. If you're a believer, then what you do is turn to the one who always lifts you up: God. For you and me, on *this* side of the cross, we have certainty about this: God sent his Son for us, so we always have God with us. That means we always have hope. If you have faith, you always have hope. If you have a relationship with our Lord Jesus (which is what faith is), you always have hope. From what I have seen and heard so far, this church family has a powerful relationship with our Lord Jesus. I know you do, because I know there have been times when you've been down. I've heard your history, or at least a lot of it. You wouldn't be here today, growing, moving forward, unless God had lifted you up. In the down days of this family of faith, God was lifting you up, giving you hope. Here's the thing: In Jesus Christ, there is always more than enough hope. There's more than enough hope to keep us all going; there's more than enough hope to share with all the hurting people in the world. If we offer that hope to everyone we can, we can bring a large number of them to faith. Listen to what the Psalmist says:

"Truly the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love, to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine. Our soul waits for the LORD; he is our help and shield. Our heart is glad in him, because we trust in his holy name. Let your steadfast love, O LORD, be upon us, even as we hope in you."

If we bring people that hope, then they will be healed – completely. You and I are the hands and feet and mouth of God in this world, to so many who need to be lifted up.

If I am so fortunate to have you elect me to become your Pastor, then together you and I will begin lifting up and healing this world. I will be proud to be with you as together we lift, as together we heal, as together we save, our part of God's world.

Let us pray: O Lord, we know that in our lives we'll be pulled down, because we live in this world. But we know that we don't have to go to great lengths to come to you. We don't have to climb up on roofs or do other risky things; all we have to do is turn to you, and we will be lifted up. Lead us to celebrate our "lifted up" status, and after we celebrate, lead us on to those who need lifting up; this we ask in the name of the one who was lifted up on a cross so he could lift up the world, Jesus our Lord, AMEN.