

***The Beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ,***  
**The Son of God.**

In the Name of Jesus Christ: Son of God, King of Heaven+.

It's been a blessing to me to have the opportunity to preach three weeks in a row for you on these Gospel texts of Mark. We've had the opportunity to delve twice into the parables and miracles that took place on one Very Busy Day, and we come now to the next entry in our text when Jesus comes "home" to Nazareth. Although it's relatively early days yet in his ministry, Jesus has already established himself throughout the country with his works and teachings. He is such a phenomenon that crowds of thousands follow him. He has stilled the storm and raised the dead - but he comes home to be met with ridicule and doubt, diminished and dismissed by the very community that raised him. This didn't seem to phase him too much - he simply responded with the observation that this offense was often taken whenever a prophet returned home to their own people. But what is written next is something that has puzzled me for years; "*And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.*" How could it be that our Lord Jesus was unable to make miracles happen there? Where did his power go? I've wondered to myself, "could hard-heartedness possibly be strong enough to trump or block his power?" We know that he performed miracles for those who believed in him. We know miracles occurred for believers who did not even require his active intervention. And we know that he performed miracles for those like Lazarus and Jairus' daughter who were unable to believe because they had already died. I grew up believing that Jesus as the Son of God simply worked miracles at will, that nothing could stand in his way, and that we as his people had no place in the equation. But our scripture tells us that Jesus was not able to do any deeds of power among people who would not believe in him: it seems that a crucial part of the equation was missing after all. Could it be that we fallible, flawed little humans have some part to play in the working of God's miracles?

We've been wrestling with some new concepts over the past few weeks. One is the possibility that our gravest sin, the worst fracture between ourselves and our God, is our love of independence, and our resistance to accepting our dependence on God. The other possibility is that the Kind of Heaven, our Lord Jesus Christ, during the time that he was incarnate as fully human, might not have been able to perform miracles any more than any human being could, but - as the one *perfect* human being - was *so perfect in his belief* that God's miracles could be worked through him. These possibilities have invited us all to stretch our minds and hearts in the ongoing formation of our understanding of God. And this is fantastic: the work of every faithful theologian is to struggle and stretch throughout our lifetimes, and to push at the boundaries of our comfort zones. We are created, after all, by a God who designed us with free will, with strong intellects, with the capacity to delve deeply into our faith formation, and I say it is a joy to God when we take nothing at face value, but instead really dig deep to uncover what is true for us.

As Americans, our forebears left everything behind for the sake of their belief, for the chance to come to a new land where they could be free and independent from a belief system that didn't fit. As Christians, we need to have thought out our own beliefs in enough depth that we can communicate clearly and intelligently in this post-Christendom world, so that we can stand up for the Lord we love. And as Episcopalians it is a real joy to me that we welcome all opinions to the table; we have always been a church willing to wrestle with the

hardest questions, to be the first to stand up for the dignity of every human being, and to "agree to disagree," as a family of God. So it is truly a fantastic thing to stretch our minds around new possibilities in our faith formation. But hang on to your hat: I think we have a new addition to our collection of possibilities, given our Gospel lesson today. We are told that Jesus is not able to work deeds of power for those with either no belief, or with active disbelief. Could it be that *our belief* might be a necessary piece of the working of miracles? Could we possibly matter that much?

Jesus said, over and over again: "*Do not fear; only believe.*" Now here's a thought for you. What if he meant it?

What if Jesus meant what he said? That sounds like the type of question C.S. Lewis might have asked in his book, "*Mere Christianity*," one of the most important books I read in my early faith formation. If you haven't read it, I would add that to your summer reading list, along with "*The Shack*," as two great additions to your work as theologians. So I ask again: if we believe that Jesus said, "*Do not fear; only believe*," then what if he meant it? Let's get down to the foundation of things here. We have these documents which we revere as Gospel accounts, documents which essentially agree on what Jesus of Nazareth said and did. So here's the question: do we think he *meant* what he said? Or, as C.S. Lewis would say, do we think he was just a crazy person? We are blessed with the freedom to choose what we believe, to say what resonates as being true for us. For me, I personally believe that Our Lord Jesus Christ meant what he said. And what he said was, "*Do not fear. Only believe.*"

So if Jesus is telling us that our belief in God matters so much that it is a key component in the working of God's miracles, if we are somehow partners in the manifestation of God's grace, then we have some radical implications, and huge responsibilities, to deal with. What are we holding back on? What are we afraid of? Is it less scary, is it safer, to suffer, and stay small, than to let God's light shine through us? I don't know, but I know I have a lot of thinking to do. In truth, the writing of this sermon had me so out of my comfort zone that I had to break regularly to pace and breathe and pace some more; in fact, my dog Luna let it be known that her rest was being seriously disturbed. The idea that through deepening our belief in God, we might have the potential to help in ways we didn't know, is a lot to take in. Now this does not mean that I think we might have some type of secret super-hero powers, or that we should consider ourselves to be somehow superior in our evolution compared with those who still think of themselves as worth very little. I am saying that we, as the fallible and limited and broken creatures that we all are, are valuable and beautiful and necessary beyond our imagining to the God who made us. I'm reminded of the beautiful words of Leonard Cohen:

*"Ring the bells that can still ring / Forget your perfect offering / There is a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in."*

So, if we believe Jesus, then our belief in God matters, in ways we might not be able to imagine. But belief is not something we can just dial up at will. We are thinking creatures with memories and free will and doubts and hurts. I invite you to explore your own heart and mind, and discover what your questions might be. Write them down. Pray about them; talk to God. And let's talk them through together. Helping you to grow in your faith formation is of deep importance to Father Jim and I, and it is our joy to walk the journey with you.

Mark's Gospel has been letting in a lot of light for us these past few weeks. His is the first

and the shortest of all the Gospels: 16 brief, intense chapters which begin with this sentence: *The Beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.* The *Beginning* of the Good News of Jesus Christ. Truly I think that here, twenty-one centuries after Jesus walked on the earth, we may be on the edge, at the *very* beginning, of understanding a glimpse of what Jesus tried to tell us: that our belief in God matters more than we know. That we believe in a God who made us, and knows us, and who holds the power in our lives: this I think we know. That God Almighty might actually love us and value us so much that our participation in the facilitation of God's power might sometimes be part of the equation, might have something to do with the reason for our creation in the first place: this is a radically new concept for me. It could answer some of our oldest questions; it most certainly opens up new ones. The fact that we do tend to degrade ourselves so, and stand by watching as others sink into the depths of hopelessness and self-abasement - this is all the more terrible if we are indeed created to be so much more than this, for the sake of the God who made us and who might actually need us - for the sake of God's work in the world. As we continue to ponder all these things in our hearts, let's hold ourselves to the high standard of being children of the Living God: at the *very beginning* perhaps, of understanding the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, whose power and reach is now, and ever shall be, beyond any possibility we can begin to imagine.

Amen.

The Rev. Julia A. Fritts

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