

Getting Up, Coming from Behind, and Turning Around

Background

Mark's Gospel takes us on a rapidly moving journey. It begins with Jesus being proclaimed as The One by John the Baptist, then baptized with a divine annunciation, his choosing disciples, and then immediately embarking upon a ministry of preaching and teaching, spiritual deliverance, and healing the sick.

Mark shows us Jesus doing other things as well, like publicly announcing to people that their sins are forgiven (before Calvary, so there's something else at work here). Mark shows us Jesus dining with sinners and the organized criminals of the day called tax-collectors; violating the Sabbath regulations and challenging the authorities in public; redefining family—the core unit of life that ordered religion, economics, politics, social relations—Jesus says: my mother and brothers, my family, are not my kin or my blood, but those who do the will of God.

Mark presents a Jesus who transgresses the norms of his culture.

Jairus

In our passage Jesus is at the shore and a crowd forms around him. From out of the crowd comes the first person we're introduced to in this story, a leader of the synagogue.

What you know if you're living in first century Palestine, is that the leaders of the synagogue, just like the leaders of the Temple, serve at the pleasure of Rome.

It's a situation where everybody in the area is Jewish, but some Jews have sprawling estates, while most of the other Jews are struggling to hold onto their land or have already had their land taken.

The rulers were all connected; were all a part of the machinery that trampled and bound up in all kinds of ways, the kinds of people that Jesus was out in the world working to set free.

The synagogue leader comes out of the crowd, and since he is an important person, Mark tells us the leader's name. It is Jairus. (Though, he refers to him in the rest of the story as “the leader of the synagogue.”)

Jairus comes to Jesus and the scripture says, “he begged him repeatedly” to go lay hands on his little daughter, and heal her. And then scripture says, “So Jesus went.” So. Jesus. went.

This is a curious way to describe the meeting between these two. The leader repeatedly begs Jesus. Jesus doesn't engage at all with the leader. This is unusual. Here's how.

In the first chapter, a man comes to Jesus for a healing and we learn that Jesus is “moved with compassion,” and then performs the healing. In the second chapter, Jesus “sees [the people's] faith” and then performs the healing. In the third chapter Jesus himself calls to the paralyzed man to come forward for healing. And so it goes, up to the point, right before our passage where Jesus talks to the possessed man, whom he'd freed of his Legion demon.

But here, Jairus appears, and Jesus went. There are no words, no feelings, no thoughts, attributed to Jesus with respect to Jairus.

Jairus is often understood as a loving father, but perhaps something else is also happening here.

We know that Jairus is connected to the synagogue, which is supposed to be about God, but tends to be more about Rome. Jairus is connected to structures of power and hierarchies of power that place him in authority over people's lives and well-being, in particular that of his daughter.

What is her name? We don't know her name. Furthermore, we don't need to know her name because it's Jairus's name that matters. Mark is making it very clear that Jairus's daughter matters only because Jairus matters.

Jairus represents the father, the husband, the eldest brother, the boss, the leader and the head of the institution. The patriarch. Who has a "little girl" a "little woman" that he is responsible for.

Jairus wants to, and does, go get help, he finds the solution for his sick daughter's problem. He comes to the head of the line because he can. He says come now to my house, because he can. He says go and lay your hands on my daughter's body, because he can.

What Jairus is looking for is an intervention for one life, while he stands representing a system that denies life to many.

Just like so many of us. We're important in the system. Our livelihood, our security and our dignity is granted to us by the structure of the worlds that we live in. When the death, and decay that is a part of the system touches our lives, and our loved ones, we don't say, "this entire system is fundamentally a system of death." We simply don't want the death that is a part of the system to touch us or those we care about.

We want Jesus to heal our girl. To help our girl.

To not let our girl lose her house when the rains come and winds blow through the township.

To somehow help the people whose lives are devastated by cyclones, like the one this week in Mozambique and Malawi, whose lives do not contribute to the ecological devastation that causes such disasters.

We want Jesus to give our girl strength, and protect her, when the train is out and the taxis are overfull and it takes time and toil and trouble for her to get from there to here.

We are Jairus when we want things to be different, but we do not want things to be changed.

Jairus begs Jesus, and Jesus does not engage Jairus, he does not engage this person who represents kinship of blood ties that Jesus does not accept; who represents hierarchies of power that Jesus rejects; who represents systems of death that Jesus lives to work against. Later, after a teaching episode involving a broken woman, Jesus will engage Jairus, but not now.

Jesus does, however, go. To help the dying girl.

Jairus's Daughter

So let's talk about this girl, Jairus's daughter. What we know is that the girl is 12 and is sick. Being 12 means, that she was not an infant nor was she a matron. She is a young girl--of the

age of puberty. Which for that time meant the age of betrothal and childbirth. She is of the age of early adulthood, at the beginning of her life as a woman.

For comparison, scholars don't think that Mary was much older than this young woman, when Mary became pregnant with Jesus. Mary and Jairus' daughter are in the same season of life.

When we talk about Mary no one ever refers to her as a little girl, or as a child. We talk about Mary as an adult woman.

Yet Jairus's daughter is referred to consistently and repeatedly, as "little girl" as "child." It's even given special emphasis, in another language, "*Talitha kum!*", which is translated, "Little girl".

This is significant, when we consider it in connection with what was wrong with this girl, and the fact that we don't actually know what that is.

All throughout Mark when there is a person in need of healing, Mark tells us why. Peter's mother had a fever. That man had a paralyzed hand. That one was blind. This other one had a *serious* skin disease. Mark always comments on the sickness before the cure.

Except with this young lady.

What is her condition? When did it begin? How long has it been going on? We don't know.

Maybe Mark does not tell us what is physically wrong with this "little girl," because there is nothing that *is* physically wrong with this girl.

Maybe this girl, who is the daughter of Jairus, the head of the synagogue, who is now 12 years old, has started to think about the fact that she is on her way to being married to someone, probably also a leader at the synagogue, who is maybe just like her father.

Maybe this girl has begun to take a good hard look at her mother, and the other women in the synagogue, and maybe she begins to see with blinding clarity the constraints, the lack of life outside the home.

Maybe this girl was confronting the refusal of any path other than her mothers'. She can't study Torah, she can't be a citizen and participate in the world. She can't paint, or write stories, or sell bread at the market. Because She is a girl, whose father is the head of the synagogue.

And, because we know now what happens sometimes, and we're talking about these things more, it occurred to me that maybe this girl, who has become of marriageable age, has started to realize that she likes girls. That she is a lesbian--with a father who is the head of the synagogue. Which means that she is an impossibility. There is no way for her to be in the world.

Maybe her 12-year-old, well-off, young adult, trapped, self, became sick at heart. Maybe she gave up, because who she is, and what she wants, *the possibility*, is not allowed. Her flourishing in the world, the way she was created to be and to flourish in the world, is not allowed.

The frustration of being enmeshed in the system that denies you life, freedom, agency and power is real. The pain of living in the world without being allowed to come alive is real. None of us should ever get to the point where we feel like living in the world is so impossible that we'd rather simply lay down and die.

This passage is telling us that patriarchy of Jairus, and the sickness of Jairus's daughter are two sides of the same coin. Mark wants us to see, not the coin, but its double-sidedness. The front of the coin—the leader of the synagogue; and the back of the coin—the sick daughter, dying daughter, of the leader of the synagogue.

This order of life, patriarchy, male so-called headship and dominance, hurts women, limits women, kills women. And we women, participate in it and allow it.

Because we don't have a choice, we think. Because that is just the way things work, we think. Because we like the men to be in charge, we think.

Some of us are adults in the culture, but still "little girls" in our relationships. We are reliant upon a father, a husband, a brother, or some other man—any man will do—to lead us and be the head of us. A man to stand up for us. A man to speak up for us. And especially, a man to take financial care of us.

Some of us have no desire whatsoever to think about taking responsibility for ourselves financially. Other people are our age, younger, are single mothers and are doing it. But not us.

Some of us are waiting for a man to give us permission, to do the thing, or be the person that it's in our heart to do and be.

A man to tell us that we are good enough, smart enough, that we are beautiful--because unless a man tells us it can't be true.

We're waiting for this man, any man, to define our lives for us.

When Jesus comes into the room, he takes the girl's hand and says, "little girl, get up." Don't lay there on that bed, inside this house, inside this culture, and let it kill you . Get up! Claim your life! Live! And she does.

What we must hear today, during this Women's history month, is that when we wait for the men with power to go and get our freedom, or find our healing for us, our healing and our freedom will eventually come, but we will die, while we wait. We will need to be resurrected.

Jesus's Daughter

The pivotal figure in this narrative, is the woman with the vaginal bleeding. She comes between the dominant and the dominated and she offers us another perspective.

Mark is *doing* something when he interrupts the story of the important man, to turn our attention to the story of a dishonorable woman.

Jairus begs Jesus to go to his house, Jesus goes with him, and the crowd followed.

This woman was in the crowd that is gathered around Jesus. She's there because she's ill and in need of healing. Her body will not stop bleeding. It's been bleeding for 12 years. She's been to doctors and they cannot help her. She has spent all she had trying to get well. But instead of getting better, her condition has gotten worse.

This means that this woman is, first, unclean, not only physically, but more importantly, spiritually. Her uncleanness means she must be separated from the community. For twelve years she's attended no festivals, no gatherings, no celebrations, no feasts.

She forfeited her family relations, since an honorable family cannot have as a member a perpetually unclean woman.

Her low status as a woman, her even lower status as an unclean woman, is lowered further still by her being a woman outside of patriarchal authority. There was no father, no husband, no uncle, no brother, no leader, to speak up for her.

Biko might as well have been talking about her:

Sick woman, weak woman, poor woman—Bleeding woman, you are on your own!

This is a woman who has no physical, familial, community, political, or financial hope. At this point, in the eyes of her culture she is one of *them*; completely without dignity.

She is firmly on the periphery of society. And the law *mandates* that she stay there. That she stay in her place of lesser being. Over there, with the other dishonorable people. She must stay away from the rest of us; we who have the right to participate in society. She must not even let any part of her body touch any part of our bodies. Lest we too become unclean like her pitiful self.

We know so well about assigning people to an area, a geography of place and race, and making it unlawful for them to leave that space, don't we?

Well, this outcast, segregated, dishonored, poor woman had one astonishing thought. And that thought was: NO. She will not accept that she has to stay in her zone over there, outside the zone of being. She knows that she is not outside the zone of being; she is a person, she has a life, and she must be allowed to live, which means being with others.

She thinks to herself, I will get this bleeding to stop. If I can just touch the bottom of Jesus's robe, that's all I need.

So she goes to see Jesus.

Even though there's a crowd, and she's in a weakened condition, and a crowd can run right over you if you are not able to keep up. It doesn't matter. She goes.

This is the Galilee area, which means this is a Jewish crowd, which means it's a crowd of men. It doesn't matter. She goes.

When she gets there, Jesus is not alone. He's walking with someone. It's the head of the synagogue. This bleeding unclean woman does not care.

She comes from behind Jesus; stealth, sneaky; and she reaches out and touches the bottom of his robe. She feels power immediately flow into her.

The healing is so sudden and complete that she is stunned.

So is Jesus. He's turned around from where he was on his way to. He asks a seemingly silly question, "Who touched me?"

And this woman who took power from Jesus without permission is frightened. Is she frightened because she's confronting a level of power that she never imagined? Or is it because she's worried about the consequences of what she's done. Maybe both.

In spite of her fear, she boldly tells her story: bleeding, 12 years, yeah, I touched you, healed.

Now there's two reactions to this. One the text does not show us, and one it does show.

What the text does not show us is our undoubted indignation. We people of the establishment who follow the rules. Us thinking:

How dare she leave the zone of dishonor and come among decent honorable people in her condition?

How dare she be in a crowd with men! It's totally improper.

How dare she approach a man! Disgraceful.

How dare she talk to a man? Outrageous.

How dare she touch a man? Scandalous!

This woman must be crazy.

This is what the text does not say, but we know how we are.

How the text reads the situation is very different than how we read it. Mark sees what we do not.

In this whole Gospel, Mark uses certain words only when he is talking about this woman, or Jesus. Only about these two does Mark use the word "body" and mention the word "blood." When he says that someone "suffered many things," he's talking about Jesus, and this woman.

It's like they're mirrors. Especially in the descriptions of their meeting in this moment in time; in how Mark describes their flows. She's flowing blood and he's flowing power.

Just like this woman, Jesus is unable to control the flow that leaves his body. Just like her flow of blood, his flow of power is something with physical properties.¹ In the moment when she touches the robe, she feels in her body her flow of blood stop. And in that same moment Jesus feels his flow of power start.

The way Mark tells the story, this lowly dishonored woman is connected to Jesus in a way no one else is.

This woman, who refused to accept the labels that were assigned to her, or her place of subjection, *believed*, against all evidence, that her desperate, tragic, and hopeless situation could be changed, and that Jesus would change it, if she only got close to him and reached out her hand.

This woman transgressed against the rules, just like Jesus, to assert her dignity, and claim a place in the world, like Jesus was busy helping others to do.

Jesus honors this nameless, kinless woman, by giving her a name. He calls this woman, and only ever this woman, Daughter.²

He tells her that it is she, her exercise of faith, that has resulted in her healing. He tells her that her daring has made her free.

She's free from the symptoms--her bleeding, and from the cause of indignity--internalizing what the culture says about her value and worth.

She is free.

¹ Candida R. Moss, "The Man with the Flow of Power: Porous Bodies in Mark 5:25–34," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129, no. 3 (2010): 516, <https://doi.org/10.2307/25765949>.

² Robin G. Branch, "A Study of the Woman in the Crowd and Her Desperate Courage (Mark 5:21–43)," *In Die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi* 47, no. 1 (November 29, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v47i1.649>.

Closing

As we hear these words, may we believe for ourselves, reach out our hands, be freed daughters and sons of Jesus, as well. And may our example of freedom set other people free.

Amen.