

ONE

## A STORY OF HOPE FOR ALL

*Immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement.*

—Mark 5:42



☞ Two biblical women who were receivers of Christ's resurrection hope are found in the Gospel of Mark. Both are nameless and referred to by disease or family relation. Yet they are remembered for their faith and resurrection. The healing stories found in Mark 5 are great individual narratives of a bleeding woman and the daughter of Jairus. In addition, these stories have profound implication for all people and in a deeply powerful way for women.

Ched Meyer's book *Binding the Strong Man* reveals the socio-cultural dynamics inherent in the coupling of the healing of Jairus's daughter and the woman with the blood flow.<sup>1</sup> Meyer's work opened my eyes to the importance of reading this passage as one story with authorial intentions regarding tensions, symbolisms, and commentary. A comparison of the two stories has clear implications for the powerless (hemorrhaging women) and the powerful (Jairus and by relation his daughter).

The indirect request by touch through the outstretched hand of a woman who was accustomed to being denied is dramatically contrasted with the direct request of Jairus, who was accustomed to asking and receiving favors. The bleeding woman reaches out from behind Jesus, indicating some sense of

her worth and some sense of her desire to remain anonymous. Jairus meanwhile approaches Jesus directly while bowing before Him. His entrance still speaks about his sense of standing in the community and personal self-worth.

Another contrast is found when we note that Jairus calls out to Jesus to heal his daughter, indicating his love as a father and intimate connection. On the way to Jairus's home, Jesus stops, and after healing the unnamed bleeding woman, He calls her *daughter*. This woman who had no known family and no apparent commitment of love received words (overheard by her community) that indicated God's love and intimate connection.

These comparisons are heightened by the drama of the long pause taken between the request of the powerful and the attention given to the powerless. All of this has much to say to us about who needs resurrection (actually the poor and the rich) and who is included in the good news of Jesus Christ (all of us). There is also a clear statement being made about the judgments we often make about who is worthy of our attention and who is not. This is a particular struggle for those who have come from privilege and power. While I will speak to the challenges women in leadership face in society, I must never forget that I, too, have been formed by values that are not reflective of God's kingdom and must be shed.

The conviction of this passage continues to challenge me as I recognize how often I shut out or devalue my own version of the rejected bleeding woman or ways I can adopt limited expectations for myself or others. It has been heartening in a variety of settings to ask people to serve as biblical detectives and think about what is common between the two stories, what is distinct, what connects to other things we have read in the Scriptures, and what the implications might be for personal application.

There are, of course, some pieces of information that can quickly be named by the students. They note the common number twelve. Twelve years of bleeding, twelve years of age,

twelve disciples, twelve tribes of Israel. With some digging they note the reference of Christ to the bleeding woman as *daughter* and the other healing being the *daughter* of Jairus.

They also comment on the parallel rising of the women. One is raised from her knees (unworthiness) the other is raised from her death bed (a death bed of relative luxury). As they continue the discussion they notice the comparison of a woman who has nothing to a young girl who seemingly has everything, but as we press in to the passage, several things can be seen to happen. One is that the students begin to see that stories they may consider known and familiar have exciting new aspects for them to discover. They also see themselves as capable of using their good minds to do the work of biblical interpretation.

Additionally, some of the female students begin to grapple with what this story has to say about how Jesus values women, calls them to life, and moves them from the fringe of society and the religious community into the very center of these groups. Jesus makes clear that while society may continue to push women to the fringes, they have a central place in God's unfolding kingdom, which has come and is coming through Jesus himself.

Mark reveals Jesus as the catalyst for the coming of God's kingdom. This kingdom invites those who have been outcast and disenfranchised to a new understanding of themselves as valued and belonging. The values of God's kingdom include honoring, loving, and raising up daughters of God. The power of Christ brings healing and restoration to community of those who have been shut out.<sup>2</sup> These women both embodied the very definition of *unclean*. One was continuously bleeding, the other a corpse.<sup>3</sup> Jesus' affirmation of one woman's touch and His reaching out to the other marks His ministry as a counter-cultural movement.

While we may need reminding of just how unexpected Jesus' actions were, those in power at the time were certainly taking notice. Jesus' stubborn ministry to the fringe members of

society gave rise to increasing conflict with the authorities. This building conflict ultimately led Him to Jerusalem. The resurrection that is offered to us is founded in Jesus' loving sacrifice, which calls all to belonging in the kingdom of God.

These are important words for women in leadership to hear. When we are not heard by others, God hears our voices. When our work is not recognized, or is diminished or denied, God celebrates our obedience. One colleague shared her frustration during staff meetings. She would offer a suggestion for a new program idea, and initially it would be ignored or dismissed. But when a male staff member would pick up the idea, it would be affirmed—most often without acknowledgement that she was the original source. While she needed to find a way to name the experience to her supervisor, she did find comfort that the many good ideas were implemented and that ultimately God knew and valued her contribution.

When others tell us that our leadership is inappropriate, unbiblical, and destructive to the family, our affirmation from God remains. When one of my friends was in the midst of breaking through a barrier in our denominational leadership system, there was much debate. Among strong supporters, there were also those who questioned her abilities and even her "right" to the position.

During this time of transition she had a dream in which she was driving along the turnpike when a state trooper pulled her over. He checked her license and vehicle registration and called in for her driving record. Her anxiety built while she waited for him to return. Finally he came back and with a look of disbelief across his face handed her back the license and registration. He said that she checked out, was legitimate, and then he waved her on her way. From there she traveled through different environments; desert, forest, and finally a city that she had never been in before.

There she met a man who walked and talked with her for miles and miles. When she looked into His face, she could not

determine His features but saw that His eyes were ageless and had wisdom beyond comprehension. She knew even in the midst of her dream that it was the Lord. Upon waking, she sensed God speaking into her heart that she was His legitimate choice for this position and was not to allow the questions and doubts of others to dissuade her. She also knew that God had promised to be with her on the journey.

Over the years I have met many women who, upon responding to God's call, were told by family, church, and others that they must have heard wrong. Even more difficult was when people close to them insisted that not only were they hearing wrong but also that their very testimonies were an aberration to God. Thankfully, God kept speaking and calling them to live out their life's call. Often God provided key people who interrupted the shaming language of others. These people who prayed with them, who offered wise counsel, affirmation, and hope, were vital to the renewal of their call.

God invites the desperate to call out for wholeness beyond physical healing. When Jesus says to the hemorrhaging woman, "Your faith has saved you,"<sup>4</sup> He affirms her larger desperation. Her pain, though certainly physical, was also emotional, spiritual, and psychological. However, out of such desperation was born a fearlessness that bore the fruit of salvation for this woman. She initiated this encounter. She reached out for healing uninvited. All the resources of this world had failed her, but she was sure that if she could just touch Jesus' clothes, a miracle could happen.

Out of her reckless act a healing power poured out of Jesus and changed her life. It is interesting to note that when Jesus asked, "Who touched me?" His words made clear that this healing was not some magical happenstance because someone simply bumped into Him. At the moment of her touching Him a large crowd was already penning in on Him. Many people inadvertently touched Him. It was the particular touch of a person of faith—however desperate—that was distinctly healing

and salvific. Fear could have kept this bleeding woman captive, but desperation moved her beyond that fear to an act of faith.

Desperation is never a comfortable place for any of us to reach. And yet it is in this place that we can be open to the work of God in new ways. In the Evangelical tradition we celebrate the wonderful testimonies of people who were desperate due to addictions, empty pursuits, relational brokenness, and personal distress. However, when this desperation is not born of personal sin but rather the frustration of gender limitations, there is little if any celebration. Instead, the common reaction can be a bit like the utter befuddlement of the disciples in the story when they could not figure out why Jesus would stop to look for the one who touched Him.

When the news of the twelve-year-old girl's death reached Jesus and Jairus, Jesus responded, "Do not fear, only believe" (Mark 5:36). He was again making an important connection to belief in God's saving ways through Jesus. The breakthrough for many women has been found when male members of the system see their own daughters' pain because of limitations that have been set forth. I have heard some refer to changes made in church polity to include women in leadership "the daughter clause." It is in the close range of loving relationships that we often are willing to make room for some group we would otherwise have shut out. Jairus might not have cared much for the issues of resurrection for all women, but he knew he was willing to call upon Jesus on behalf of the one he loved, his daughter.

Fear is often the enemy for women called into areas of leadership. It can hold women captive who have gifts and graces that are desperately needed in our world and our churches. Fear without action can be a jail, a place where a woman can know that something is wrong about the way she is living but is unable or unwilling to envision any other possibility than being stuck in the current situation. Some women discover new wholeness out of desperation when their circumstances or in-

ner chaos leads them to believe they will die if they do not reach out by faith and ask God to fulfill His resurrection promise in and through their lives. Like the bleeding woman, they often don't know what the ramifications of the power of Jesus will bring in their lives, but they know "If I but touch him I will be healed." And they dare to reach out for the wholeness that stops the bleeding and reinstates them to a place of value and belonging.

Sometimes I call the origins of this holy desperation a *holy discontent*. This is a discontent regarding life's present situation. Again, this is not a story of a rebellious child like the prodigal found in Luke 15, who wakes up to his situation and heads home. It is the story of the daughter of a rich leader who has been lulled to sleep with comforts that can cover the deeper need to know the resurrection life in its fullness. Yet she begins to push back the comforts, recognizing that she is called to more than this. This stirring of the Holy Spirit can be disconcerting. It is the kind of stirring that messes up a lot of people's plans.

When a woman begins to discover gifts for leadership and a calling to use those gifts in various settings, the family systems can become very unsettled. This discomfort often increases as the woman's role expands in her workplace and can make new demands on her immediate family. The initial conversations with husbands who had generally been supportive found this new vision for their shared future disconcerting. These men had not envisioned their wives living life this way, and they knew it would demand some changes in their plans. This demands patience, forgiveness, and prayer on the part of both spouses. Personal growth in a marriage demands flexibility from both partners.

Larger family systems will struggle with these changes as well. Families who have had a traditional mind-set that women were primarily support systems for the men to flourish struggle with a new paradigm where the husband may make personal and professional sacrifices for the woman to flourish.

Family systems may be more understanding of a cross-country move for a man's career as opposed to a woman's career. Stories around tables of women with leadership careers refer to family members who roll their eyes when the women assert themselves or poke at them with words like "Aren't you full of yourself?" when they talk about their work.

This leadership growth has added anxiety for family systems when the woman refers to a call to pastoral leadership. Not only did the family not see the daughter, sister, or wife as a leader, but they also had never envisioned any woman as a pastor. One friend reported a conversation with her husband, who initially could not imagine sitting under a woman's preaching for his spiritual care, let alone his wife's preaching. Another friend talked about her mother's insistence on recognizing her husband's call and ordination while ignoring her daughter's. Ultimately family systems can be quite content with how things have always been. A woman's growth and change in the system can be disconcerting and quite virulently resisted. Systems do not always celebrate the resurrection life of its members.

As with many new ideas or ways of being, it can feel very uncomfortable, and the discomfort can sometimes be interpreted as a sign that it is wrong. In the Christian community we have often used *internal peace* as the ultimate litmus test. Peace and a sense of rightness are eventually important to our discernment process, but it is a faulty primary indicator of life direction. We can feel peace because of ignorance or become quite unsettled because God is doing something new. A woman who is called to live out her gifts and strengths in leadership must be obedient to that call. The distress it may cause for others is secondary to obedience. Clearly it is vital to allow space for significant others to pray, adjust to new futures, and discern with the one called to new leadership roles. It is also important that the journey in marriage is not about only one member exercising his or her gifts. Many women and men are learning



to hear new ways God is calling their spouses to live out their resurrection lives.

Holy desperation, holy discontent, and holy callings make new ways for us to reach out to touch the hem of Christ's robe. These same stirrings also serve as important impetus for people to reach out to God on behalf of those they love. In response to these outstretched prayers the healing ministry of Christ flows in places we were not even aware were broken. This woman knew she needed the blood to stop flowing, but she may not have realized how much she needed Jesus to call her out before the community and affirm her as *daughter*. Jairus knew his daughter needed a healing touch as she laid her weary head down for the last time, but he may not have realized how much she needed Jesus to call her out of her comfortable home to new life.

I love to hear my friends talk during those times of stirring. Each journey is distinct yet similar. There is a beautiful sense that God is taking them to new places, and in those times it is important to recall the words of Jesus: "Don't be afraid; just believe" (Mark 5:36, NIV). Often they will begin some sort of educational process and name where it will *not* lead. They offer limiting comments such as "I am taking this course to help me lead small groups, but I'm not going to be a pastor" or "I am getting education to be a better counselor but only for part time work" or "I am developing this new skill just for this project, not so it will become a profession." I think these kinds of statements are often an unconscious shield against the eventual life change that deep in their hearts they know is coming. And yet the simple act of obedience to what we can see of God's call opens all of us up to new directions and larger changes than we could have imagined.

Some women receive healing as they reach out in desperation. Yet others receive it when the touch of God seems to wake them from a deep sleep. The daughter of Jairus is a passive character due to illness. In her dormant state she represents many of us who fall asleep in this life, allowing parts of ourselves to

become dead. There is great symbolism for budding life when we think of all that is happening in a twelve-year-old girl.<sup>5</sup> The daughter of Jairus would have been considered at the age of marriage and therefore a potential source of life in marriage and children. This potential for life has an important parallel to many women called to move beyond their limited understanding of themselves and other women. So many have impending possibilities to be the source of life when their gifts and talents are fully offered to God and they are given space to flourish.

The loss when a woman is not able to live out the fullness of her calling and life is not just personal. There is community growth and fruitfulness that is lost as well. In my own church the percentage of women given ministry leadership opportunities in the church dropped from a high of approximately twenty-five percent to a low of one percent.<sup>6</sup> When one recognizes the results of a sociological shift of an institution that once encouraged women to one that has restrained women, there is grief over the evident loss.

It is important to mourn not only the personal stories of restriction but mourn as well the churches, missions, and compassionate ministries that may have been born or grown had the women called during those times been given opportunities to serve. Florence Nightingale spoke of similar realities in her church experience: "I would have given her [the church] my head, my heart, my hand. She would not have them. . . . She told me to go back and do crochet in my mother's drawing room."<sup>7</sup>

Women continue to voice this frustration. In 1853 Phoebe Palmer, a Holiness evangelist called the Church "a sort of potter's field, where the gifts of women, as so many strangers, are buried."<sup>8</sup> She went on to pray, "O Lord, how long before man shall roll away the stone that we may see a resurrection?"<sup>9</sup>

I regularly hear women talk about their frustration regarding their personal and professional growth that is not recognized or valued by their local churches. They feel as if there is so much they could offer that is largely ignored.

There is holy discontentment, and there is unholy contentment. At times we are quite settled in our understanding of who God is and who we are in relation to God and others, but a restrained vision for God and ourselves causes us to miss out on the adventure of fully following Christ. Life devolves into surviving but not really living. This is not the life Christ came to bring to all who follow Him. This is not the abundant life Jesus proclaimed. As people who are living in cooperation with the Holy Spirit, joining in the divine work of God every day, we know there is no such thing as status quo. But we sometimes settle for something less, because it is so easy to settle for comforting levels of safety. Yet at some point, if we are left to limited visions for our lives, we can become increasingly angry, depressed, or bored. This can create great unfocused angst in a Christian woman's life. She might struggle over the limitations and wonder if this safe place she has lived is the best place to live after all.

I have seen these different emotions expressed by women in the Church. Pastors sometimes call them "church bosses." They become protective of the little they can claim as their own, whether that is a particular church program, the color of a Sunday School classroom, or even the role definition that has hemmed them in. They are ready to fight over little things because they have already lost so much. The alternative to this anger is a boredom that causes them to walk away from their church. Either way, they miss out on the fullness of the resurrection life offered through Jesus Christ. Thankfully, Jesus keeps entering, showing up in our place of deadness, and takes us by the hand, calling us to rise up. If we respond to God's commands, amazing miracles can happen. This call might not be to a leadership position, but it's always a call to be more and share more in the life-giving work of God in our world. The rising up of the daughter of Jairus is a call for all of us who have fallen asleep to the point of death to open our eyes, to awaken. Rise up, daughter. There is more for you to do.