

Sermon for 5 Epiphany (Year B)

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Wherever Jesus is, Things End Up All Right

Mark 1:29-39

After Jesus and his disciples left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.



Some of you here today may know that a little less than three years ago, I retired after a 40-year career as a priest: first in Massachusetts, then, for the last 23 years, here in New Hampshire.

One of the most beautiful and emotional times in those 40 years was when the folks at Trinity Church, Hampton, and Christ Church, Portsmouth, gathered to celebrate my retirement in 2021. Both they and we, that is to say, my wife, Cindy, and me, were in tears over the parting. Gifts were given, embraces shared, kind and complimentary words offered, but of all the gracious and kind comments made, the most moving, the most impressive was this: "Father Chip, we knew that no matter how bad things were, no matter how difficult things became, if you were present, somehow it would be all right." No priest could hear anything more uplifting and affirming than this.

Multiply that sense of reassuring presence a hundredfold and it begins to convey something of the assurance that those who were sick or poor or broken by life must have felt in the presence of the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ. When Jesus was around, these people just knew that things would be all right. Healing would happen.

Life comes to life in the presence of God:

- Elijah breathing life into a dead boy's body.
- Isaiah telling us to wait upon the Lord for renewal of strength.
- Paul doing whatever it takes to elicit the life-giving blessings of the gospel in the churchgoers of Corinth.
- Jesus healing the sick and broken.

Again and again, the message is the same: wherever God is, wherever Jesus is, life comes to life. Things will be all right.

Mark writes in this morning's Gospel, "That evening, at sundown, [the disciples] brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases" (1:32-34). What a blessing it must have been to be a beneficiary of the new life God brings through Jesus Christ.

The life-giving blessings of Jesus' touch are not limited to the narrow band of followers who knew him in the flesh two thousand years ago. We don't have to celebrate from afar. Look within. We too have joined the ranks of those first men and women who were touched by Jesus and given new life. For us this newness of life may not have come through physical restoration from infirmity, but it surely has come through spiritual restoration from sin.

And this new life places upon each of us an obligation not just to be beneficiaries, but also conduits – individual pipelines, if you will, through which the loving and life-giving spirit of Christ can flow into the lives of others in need. Paul understood this. That's why he became, as he put it, all things to all persons, so that he could offer to others what was offered to him, namely, newness of life in Jesus Christ.

It is incumbent upon us to follow this example. Wasn't this the duty that Christ was placing upon us over and over again in the Gospels? "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven" (Mt 7:21). And in one of his last parables, that of the sheep and goats, didn't Jesus promise God's reward to those who feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome strangers, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit the imprisoned?

We can convey life to others in the name of Jesus. What we must keep in mind, however, and it is crucial for us to do so, is that we can be effective only insofar as we ourselves remain connected to the source of life, God Almighty. After Jesus poured life into those who were sick and broken in Peter's hometown, Mark tells us he withdrew to a solitary place where he could be alone with God in prayer. Why did Jesus do that? He did it to ensure that God's Spirit continued to flow unabated into his soul, from where it could be dispensed to others as the need arose.

One of the great missionaries of the 20th century was someone whose name you may not have heard: Mary Reed. As a young woman she determined to bring life to the women of India in the name of Jesus. For eight years she worked under difficult conditions in Cawnpore, India, until her health began to collapse. She was sent to the Himalayas to recuperate, and while there she discovered a colony of 500 lepers living without help or support. Sometime later she returned to India, but within a year her health failed again, and she was sent back to America. Much to her dismay and to the confusion of the doctors, her health continued to fail until one day she realized what was happening. The pain in her finger, the spot on her face – telltale signs that she herself had contracted leprosy. Instead of decrying her plight she returned to India where she could work with a community of lepers and bring to them the life that Christ had brought to her. And so, in Chandag, India, a settlement and a hospital for lepers grew as a result of her efforts. A single woman. A soul filled to the brim with the life of Jesus Christ. A servant of Christ who brought life to those who were broken in body and spirit by a dread disease.

Perhaps you may think, well, that's a powerful story – but it's long ago and far away, and surely nothing I can in any way emulate or replicate. True, perhaps. But it doesn't take much imagination to see examples where even a small thing can bring about a realization of Christ's healing presence in our midst.

One such "small story" comes to mind: A teacher of first and second graders in Sunday School taught the children that we are Jesus' hands and feet in the world. Then she asked the children where Jesus lives today. The response was nearly unanimous, "Jesus lives inside us." One little boy was puzzled, however. Looking at the large picture of Jesus on the wall he said, "I'm small and Jesus is big. If Jesus lives inside me why isn't he sticking out somewhere?" Good question. Truth is, if Jesus lives inside us, if we are filled with his life, he *does* stick out somewhere, bringing health and well-being to others.

You see, wherever we who follow Christ is, Jesus is, and wherever Jesus is, all things end up all right. Healing happens. Life comes to life in the presence of God. Take a check of your life. Is there someplace Jesus is "sticking out of you"? May we be not just the beneficiaries of this blessing. May we be the instruments as well.