

Mark 5:21-24,35-43
Independence Day 2021
July 4, 2021

July 4, 1776 was not the beginning of the Revolutionary War. The first shots had been fired on April 19, 1775 outside of Boston in the cities of Lexington and Concord. The American colonists objected to being taxed by the British Government when they had no representation in the British government. Finally, in 1775, things had gotten to a boiling point. It would take a little more than a year for the 13 colonies to come together and declare their desire to separate from the county of Britain. The final draft of that declaration would be signed on July 4, 1776. Even though war against England had already begun, July 4th, 1776 was a day of celebration. They would find that declaring independence would be much easier than actually accomplishing it.

By Christmas of 1776, things had begun to fall apart for the new nation. George Washington was commanding an army that was disintegrating before his eyes. Congress had fled Philadelphia where that declaration was made. Supplies were low. Most of the soldiers would finish their enlistments on December 31, and other didn't wait that long and simply deserted. George Washington's Army was about to be destroyed by British troops and German Mercenaries. The future of America was hanging on by a thread. George Washington needed to do something to change the direction of the War. So, on Christmas Day of 1776, Washington led a group of patriots across the Delaware River, through snow and ice, into New Jersey in surprise attack against the armies at Trenton. It was not a major battle. But it was a battle that once again gave hope to the patriots, and became one of those iconic events of the war. With that iconic image of George Washington standing in the front of a boat crossing the river in the snow and ice, things would slowly begin to change in favor of the colonists.

Have you ever felt like you were just hanging on by a thread? If you are the parent of a teenager, you probably understand. You are trying as hard as you can to raise your child faithfully that looks so much different than your high school years. There are times that you feel like that when you are taking one step forward, you feel as if you are going two steps back. It feels like you are just hanging on a thread. Maybe you find that you are trying as hard as you can to financially support your family, but it seems like you can never completely get ahead of the game. Maybe you more elderly in life and find yourself in a never-ending string of appointments with specialists. Maybe you or one of your loved ones have found out that they have cancer, and there is nothing that can be done about it. Have you ever felt that there is no way to catch a break, get ahead of the curve? You are hanging on by just a thread.

If so, maybe you can understand how this man named Jairus felt as he approached Jesus. **“Then one of the synagogue leaders, named Jairus, came, and when he saw Jesus, he fell at his feet. He pleaded earnestly with him, “My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live.”** This man had tried everything. But nothing seemed to change. All he felt was the life of his daughter slipping through his hands. The life of his daughter was ending, and he couldn't stop it. Mark doesn't give us the details. We don't know how long she had been suffering and the severity of her suffering. All we know is that she is only 12 years old, and she is at the point of death, and she is hanging on by a thread. Like any parent whose child is sick, Jairus is desperate to find someone who can help. Fighting his way through the great crowd, he finally reaches Jesus. With nothing but a plea for mercy, he falls down at Jesus' feet and begs him to heal her. He is hanging on by a thread.

That's what death does, doesn't it? Death brings fear. Death is the ultimate test of faith, the final frontier of our teachings, our hymns and our liturgy. It may seem easy to trust Jesus while we sit in church, sing powerful hymns and hear the joy that is found in the Gospel message. But how does it feel when you are sitting in the emergency room with your infant child is having serious health issues and there doesn't seem to be any easy answers? Or watch someone with dementia and see their mind slipping away? Or you stand there in the funeral with the lifeless body of your husband lying in front of you.

It's hard to face serious sicknesses and death itself. Why? We were not created to die, but live. But Death has reigned in this world since the forbidden fruit was eaten in the Garden of Eden by our first parents. It was then that fear took over with the sound of the footsteps of God in the Garden of Eden. Every day of our lives brings us one step closer to the words of God being fulfilled: **“For dust you are and to dust you will return.”** (Genesis 3:19)

Even as Christians, we often see death as the end, a loss, a time to mourn. Over the centuries, because of our great fear of death, we have tried everything to deal with death and grave in all kinds of ways. We have tried to ignore it. We try to control it. We try to negotiate with it. Yet, there is one thing that is certain, we will die at some point.

As this father begging Jesus for help, he gets the worse news that a parent can hear. **“Your daughter is dead,” they said. “Why bother the teacher anymore?”** As Jesus overhears what is being said, he turns to Jairus and says: **“Don’t be afraid; just believe.”** Believe what? Jesus was the last hope, the last straw for his daughter who was dying. His hope is crushed. I can’t even imagine what it must be like for the relatives or friends who have not been discovered in the collapsed condo building in Florida. Until the remains are found, there is always a little bit of hope.

“Don’t be afraid; just believe.” Those seem like hard words to follow. When your prayers seem to go unanswered and the doctors can do nothing for your loved one. When the doctor tells you that they tried everything, but it wasn’t enough. Your daughter, your son, your husband, your wife, your mother or father is dead. **“Don’t be afraid; just believe.”** When you stand at the grave of your departed love ones. You miss them so much. The wound of grief never really heals. The emptiness is never filled. The love is never forgotten. Jesus says to you: **“Don’t be afraid; only believe.”**

It is those words that bring hope to the believer in Christ. Because it is in the waters of baptism, that Jesus says the same words to you that he said to that little girl who died: **“Get up!”** It is those words that Jesus will speak over our graves on that day that he returns to this earth: **“Get up!”** Jesus’ words drive away fear.

As you watch this heart wrenching scene play out in our text, we need to remember that the night before he had calmed the storm on the Sea of Galilee. As death swirls about him on this next day, Jesus remains calm. And why shouldn’t he remain calm? He’s the expert. He’s the one stared death in the face and shouted its defeat, **“It is finished.”** It is on the cross, that he crushed death. It is in the empty tomb of Easter that we see all hope restored.

I’m not sure that those patriots who fought for freedom could see all the blessings that God would give to this new country called America. Give thanks to God for the freedoms that he has given us. Yet, also remember that through Jesus we have the best freedom that only God can give us – freedom from death. If you feel like you are just hanging on by a thread, and if that thread is Jesus, then know that that thread is enough. Remember the words of Jesus: **“Do not fear; only believe.”** Amen.