

Only Believe!

Ezekiel 34:1-16, Luke 8:40-56 (ESV)

March 20, 2005

“Do not fear; only believe.” What good news stands behind and underneath these two brave imperatives? Does it speak to us yet today? “Do not fear; only believe.” What great gospel undergirds these two directives? Is it of interest to you? “Do not fear; only believe.” What firm foundation upholds these two commands? Can you and I build our lives upon it? “Do not fear; only believe.” We will get to their implications in a moment. But there are prior questions. How can these be said? Who can say them? What does it mean that Jesus said, then and now, to them and so to us, “Do not fear; only believe”?

For starters, Jesus is the one who healed the woman and raised the little girl from the dead. That is what the gospel says. Jesus healed the woman whom no one else could heal, and he restored to life the little girl whom everyone else believed to be irretrievably dead. That is who he is. That is what he did. That is why he has the right and the authority to say, “Do not fear; only believe.” There is a cumulative effect to what we read here and to what we are taught here. The one who forgives sins, the one who calls disciples and names apostles, the one who teaches love of enemy, the one who commands the winds and the water, and they obey him, the one who casts out demons is now also the one who heals a woman of an otherwise incurable malady and who even raises a little girl from the dead.

After all, there were witnesses! The poor impoverished woman who had exhausted her resources and had nothing left to do other than turn to Jesus had to be known to her neighbors. The gospel says explicitly that she “declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him, and how she had been immediately healed.” This could not have been made up in contradiction of the living memory of the people. And what is more, it could not be suppressed. It could not be not told. They could not keep it quiet. So, why would anyone dare to contradict the word of this poor woman? Jesus healed her when no one else could.

Jairus, the ruler of the synagogue, was much more prominent and better known. By the time Jesus arrived, the mourners had gathered and were weeping at their loss. The little girl was dead. They all knew it. They knew it so well that they laughed at Jesus. By the way, when the gospel says that Jesus said that the girl was “sleeping,” that is a figure of speech. The point of the story is not that Jesus woke her up. Anyone could have done that. It says explicitly that “her spirit returned,” which means, of course, that it had already left her. The point of the story is that

when Jesus speaks even the dead listen. When Jesus calls, even the dead obey. It is not the case that they are capable of hearing. It is the case, instead, that the word of God creates its own hearing.

This means that there is hope for us, not hope in us or on our own, but hope for us and from beyond us, that God will so speak to us, raising us to new life. Do you think it made an impression on the mourners that there was no funeral that day or the next? Do you think they noticed? Do you think they quit laughing? Do you think they began to fear the one who said, “Do not fear”? More to the point for us, do you think the ones whose laughter was quieted would have allowed the story to be told this way if it had not happened this way? There were witnesses! It was incontrovertible. Jesus raised the little girl from the dead. That is who he is. That is what he did. It is up to us to deal with it.

In addition to his power in these matters, it is also his persistence in seeking out those whom he helped that is of significance. After the woman touched the fringe of his garment, Jesus sought out the woman from the crowd and refused to take “No” for an answer, despite Peter’s protests. Jesus sought out the woman from the crowd, and he was not satisfied until she spoke to him and he spoke to her. Jesus sought out the woman from the crowd so that he not only healed her but also brought her into conversation with himself and therefore into communion with himself. That was even more important than the healing.

And “while he was still speaking” to her, news arrived that the little girl had died. Jesus did not let bad news dissuade him. He did not let bad news turn him around. He did not let the doom sayers stop him. He did not let laughter shame him. Indeed, it was precisely in the face of bad news, just as soon as he heard it, that he said to Jairus, “Do not fear; only believe.” Jesus was determined to help that girl, and the bad news was not going to stop him. The mourners were not going to stop him. The father was not going to stop him. Death itself was not going to stop him. In fact, her death became the occasion for help even greater than healing. Jesus brought her back to life. Thanks be to God!

His power and his persistence combine to bring us to an even greater conclusion. No one but God can heal an incurable disease. No one but God can raise someone from the dead. No one! The fact that Jesus did both of these can mean nothing else than that God is present with and for us in Jesus Christ. This is the good news. This is gospel. This is the firm foundation. God is present with and for us in Jesus Christ. “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!” (Mark 11:9b-10 (ESV)). This is who Jesus is, God present with us and for us. This is what these stories mean. This is how and why he can say, then and now, to them and so to us, “Do not fear; only believe.” “Do not fear; only believe.” If I were to say, it

would mean very little. But when Jesus says it, and he does, it means everything. “Do not fear; only believe.” He has the right and the authority to say it, and he has the power to make it so. “Do not fear; only believe.”

Let me be entirely clear here. I believe that what Jesus did that day was in perfect fulfillment of the ancient prophecy we have read from Ezekiel:

For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness....I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak.

It all came true! It all came true in Jesus. God himself came in Jesus Christ to care for his people, seeking and saving the lost, healing the sick, raising the dead, comforting the distraught, giving faith to the doubting. That is who he is. That is what he does. It is still true today. “Do not fear; only believe.”

At this point, I must make an important, painful, and yet also hopeful distinction. I know this is hard for some of us to hear. The gospel we have read today is not a general promise of healing and life, at least not here in this world. The healing of the woman and the raising of the girl were particular actions indicating the power, authority, and therefore the identity of Jesus Christ. They are a way of telling us who he is. There were bound to have been other people that same day who were sick but who were not healed. There were bound to have been other people that same day who died but who were not raised. So the good news cannot possibly be that all sickness here will be healed or that all who die will be restored to this life. That is not what he did. We might wish that were the case, but that is not the case. That is not what is being said here. That is the painful part. The good news here, demonstrated by this particular healing and this particular raising from the dead is instead that God himself is with us and for us in Jesus Christ. That is the truth. That is the important part.

And it is on the basis of this important part that we come now to the hopeful part. In that God is with us and for us in Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ is the one who can and does heal us of our greatest sickness, the sickness of our sin. He seeks us out, finds us, and restores us to relationship with himself. In that God is with us and for us in Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ is the one who can and does promise us eternal life not in this world but in the next. He seeks us out, finds us, and restores us to life

forever beyond the power of death. Forgiveness of sin and eternal life might not be exactly what we first wanted. But forgiveness of sin and eternal life are exactly what we most desperately need. Surely we realize that now. That God in Jesus Christ does in fact provide them to us is good news beyond our deserving, beyond our dreams, beyond our imagination. Disease and death do not have the final word about us, or about our loved ones, or about who we are. God has purposes for us beyond this life. There is life beyond death. There is community beyond brokenness. Thanks be to God!

“Do not fear; only believe.” Given the important, painful, and hopeful distinction we have just made, and given the gospel we have affirmed, now let us turn to the implications of these imperatives for us. What do these mean for us today?

“Do not fear.” The one who can and does forgive our sin urges us to face life with confidence, poise, and equanimity. The one who can and does forgive our sin tells us to live without fear. More than that, the one who has the authority to tell us this does also, by this very telling, actually give us the courage which he commands. If I were to tell you that, it would mean very little. But when Jesus tells us that, he gives what he commands. He relieves our fear. Fear eats away at our lives. Gospel courage, which we might also understand as faith, makes it possible for us to live. This is good news.

“Only believe.” The one who can and does promise us eternal life urges us to face the future with faith, trust, and commitment. The one who can and does promise us eternal life tells us to believe. More than that, the one who has the authority to tell us this does also, by this very telling, actually give us the faith which he commands. If I were to tell you that, it would mean very little. But when Jesus tells us that, he gives what he commands. He engenders faith. Fear and doubt eat away at our lives. Gospel faith, “a firm and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit,”¹ makes it possible for us to live. This, too, is good news.

“Do not fear; only believe.” We have heard the good news that stands behind and underneath these two brave imperatives. “Do not fear; only believe.” We have heard the great gospel that undergirds these two directives. “Do not fear; only

¹John Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. from the 1559 Latin ed. by Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols., in *Library of Christian Classics*, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), cited by book, chapter, section, and, in parentheses, volume and page, 3.2.7 (1.551).

believe.” We have seen the firm foundation that upholds these two commands. Now, can you and I build our lives upon it? “Do not fear; only believe.” We have answered the prior questions. We have learned how these can be said. We have learned who can say them. So, as Jesus Christ said to Jairus then, so also does he say to us yet today, this glorious Palm Sunday: “Do not fear; only believe.”

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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