

Mark 2:1-12 (also, OT Deut. 30:15-20)

March 14, 2021

Maple Grove UMC

Rev. Chad Hale

Thank you, Pastor Patty, for inviting me to preach at Maple Grove. I am honored. I want to thank my sister, Cathy, as well, for her support for me and my work over the years. Brothers and sisters, it is a great joy to share this moment with you. Even though my presence with you is through the medium of video, I do feel the kinship and am grateful for your witness and your desire to grow more faithful to Jesus.

I also very much appreciate the Lenten title that you have been led to adopt, God's Resurrection Project. It's an inspiring title and set of themes: confess, mend, rise. God's Resurrection Project.

Let us pause and pray

Empower us now, O Lord Jesus, empower Maple Grove United Methodist Church, empower, empower. Honor the work to prepare for this moment by infusing the words with your Word. Thank you.

It is a daunting thing that you have been called to with this Project. What is it you are being called to? You, Maple Grove United Methodist Church, are being called to love one another as **Jesus** has loved us and love your neighbor as yourself and that takes Resurrection Power. Jesus said take up your cross, which led of course to death, but overall, in the church, in particular the white middle class church, we do not love one another that way, we don't really know what that means, and we're pretty sure we're not ready to die for someone, maybe not even share very much of our money with them. So, you're going against the stream here; it's a serious project you are working with. I commend you for taking it on.

There's a church building a little ways to the west of my home, which has a sign on it that says the name of the church is "The Perfect Church." I've never been part of what I would call a perfect church, so it is a curiosity to me. I've never seen anyone there, and I pass by fairly regularly, though I haven't stopped to visit. I have an acquaintance who stopped to see if anyone was there; he went around looking, looked through windows, etc., but could find no one. No activity at all.

So, it dawned on me, maybe that's how you get to be a Perfect Church. No people. No one around, no conflicts, no problems. Because, of course, if you have people, you've automatically got sinners and bingo—you're not perfect. It seems that to be a perfect church, you've got to keep everyone out.

But if we harken back to the picture of the church presented in the Gospel of Mark in today's reading, it is a dramatic contrast. There's seems to be a **lot** of people there and Jesus is right at the center. And with Jesus at the center of things, it is a bustling and thriving place. It's hopping, it's a happening. Jesus was poor himself and came to a poor, 3<sup>rd</sup> world country. People were happy when someone wanted to pay them attention; nobody cared about them, no one was

giving them attention. And along comes this guy who actually loves them and is healing them and spending time with them. So, in this picture, there is a lot of life. People are **breaking in**, tearing holes in the roof, knocking down the doors, as it were, to get inside. It's a wild and lively and wonderful scene.

I have to say, for my money, the picture in Mark is closer to the perfect church; it's full of folks and Jesus is at the center. I know it's the place I'd rather be. It is the very picture of life, the Resurrection Project in full swing.

Now, we've got to be clear and bear in mind that the folks being brought to the house and to Jesus are not being evangelized. They're not people being brought to Jesus to be converted, not Gentiles. These were Jews. They are already part of "the chosen people." But if they were already saved, so to speak, why were they flocking to Jesus? Clearly, they still had need; in one way or another they were poor, they longed for something more, they needed more and deeper salvation. They were not as alive as they would like, they wanted to be more whole, to be healed, to be forgiven, to be raised up so they could walk and run and work. They knew they had need. They were people who were poor—Remember that Jesus said he came to bring good news to the poor, and that was what they were experiencing. Here he was, a doctor who didn't charge them a cent and loved them and a Temple, for that's who he said he was, the new Temple, that didn't make financial demands to be in his presence.

I'm blessed to be a pastor to a congregation of people who are mostly poor. We are people in need. Nobody's putting on airs; we struggle. We're not talking about our fancy vacations and cruises or new cars. We don't have it all together. Every week, we come seeking, beseeching, asking for more, crying out for healing, for deliverance, and, we do see God act. We cry together, we pray together, we lay hands on each other. One thing about being poor is, you know you need and you don't have to hide it and you know you need Jesus and you know you need each other. We come with expectation, bringing each other to Jesus, lifting each other up, praying together. We are focusing prayer now during Lent on a woman who has persistent stomach ailments and for the addicted daughter of one of our members (the daughter doesn't attend the church), but the mother keeps crying out to God and asking the church to pray. So we have been, and unexpectedly, the daughter entered a rehab program (and she didn't know we were praying for her!). The woman with the stomach problems can't afford the first visit to this promising new doctor we've found and she has no insurance. So we've pulled together the funds for her to be able to at least get that first assessment and see what we learn. The church is making a way a way to carry her to this doctor.

It's not always quick that change or healing takes place, to be sure, in fact, it doesn't always happen at all, at least not in the ways we hope. This carrying each other to Jesus is a learning thing and a journey. Sometimes we get freed and raised up quickly. I remember one woman who was part of a small group I was in, who came to us with terrible allergies she could not get free of. She asked us to lay hands on her and pray, and lo and behold, the allergies left her immediately. Two years later she asked us again because the allergies had returned. She asked, we prayed, she was freed. Together we brought her to Jesus.

We had a young girl brought to us by her mother who said that warts were proliferating on her body in a very threatening and uncomfortable way. She said she had taken the girl to the doctor about it, but that the doctor had rather given up and was saying to her that he didn't know what else to do. She asked us to pray and we laid hands on her in our church service. Within two weeks, the warts had receded and never came back. Resurrection power.

Another woman in the congregation said she had something she had been carrying for years that she needed to confess. She was hiding something from us, feeling shame and guilt. We held a retreat and spent together and during that time she confessed to us she had killed a man in Vietnam when she had been in the service and the circumstances were such that it has weighed on her ever since. She got free; it still bothers her sometime, but she knows that we know and that we haven't kicked her out and we love her and she is forgiven.

Now, of course, the prerequisite to rising, to having Resurrection Power, is dying. But mostly, of course, we don't want to die. How do we die? We die by confessing our need that we want to hide; we die by admitting we need help and aren't self-sufficient. Because generally we're not going to get free to be raised up if we don't ask, if you don't participate. If you don't know you're poor, that you exist by the mercy of God, that you could be literally physically dead in a few seconds' time, and that you have needs, that death is close by and in ways has a hold on you, then you won't ask for help. Then we're held back from rising like a rock on the string of a helium balloon.

Remember, what Jesus said to the man in Mark was, "Your sins are forgiven." So what are the sins that make you and me sick or paralyzed in some fashion? What are the things that hold us back? Theangers that threaten to give us a heart attack or depress us and keep us down or lonely or whatever, that keep us from life. If we'll tell them to trusted brothers and sisters in the church, they can help us to get to Jesus, if we confess we have a need, then life can happen. But it's true there are people who are happy where they are—stuck in the middle, not fully dead but not fully alive. That's a problem for a lot of us middle class folks: we're too comfortable to rock the boat and afraid to admit we're poor and needy. Poor people don't have that problem. Everybody knows they're poor and needy. It's only folks like you and me that have money in the bank and an image to uphold, who need to look like we have it together, that can't admit we're poor and sick and paralyzed.

So, we have to decide for ourselves whether we want to participate in the Resurrection Project and in making Maple Grove a rocking place, and begin to take risks. In the church that's alive we're like both a party and an AA meeting, only we're not anonymous. We are all sinners who confess to each other. Even the people who carried the man to Jesus had needs. So, I say my name is Chad Hale and I have a drinking problem. Or, I'm Chad Hale and I don't want to forgive the man who raped my daughter, in fact, I'd rather kill him in a gruesome fashion; I'm Chad Hale and I can't forgive my parents for the ways they abused me and my siblings; I'm Chad Hale and I'm afraid I've got something wrong with my health but I'm scared to go to the doctor; I'm Chad Hale and I can't stand those liberal socialist leaning Democrats that voted for Biden; I'm Chad Hale and I hate those conservative fascist leaning Trump supporting Republicans; I'm Chad Hale and I struggle with pornography; I'm Chad Hale and I am worried about money and my future and feel like I need to hold onto every cent I can get; I'm Chad Hale

and I'm having an affair that I know is wrong, but I don't really want to get out of it; I'm Chad Hale and I'm struggling with some gender issues; I'm Chad Hale and when I'm honest with myself, I don't love my neighbor as myself, especially if they are poor or homeless and generally different from me—and I'm not sure I really want to; I'm Chad Hale and I'm also not sure I really believe there's a God and I don't really know what to think about Jesus; I'm Chad Hale and I neglect my wife and children because I'm too busy on my job; I'm Chad Hale and I don't really have faith that Jesus hears prayers and answers them; I'm Chad Hale and I don't really think the church is all that important; I'm Chad Hale and I'm full of grief and rage and anxiety, etc., etc. I could go on and on, of course, naming all of the ways death has a hold on me and maybe you, too, and holds me back and down. If we don't name them, and get them out, then we keep being paralyzed and unforgiven and alone and unfree and unhealthy and less joyful and peaceful, and it gets harder to conger up the courage to admit we're paralyzed or afraid or whatever and say to our friends, brothers and sisters, I need help. And you know what? That hurts not only you but it hurts the church, it keeps the community weak; you stay alone and part of you hidden. You have a good AA meeting when everyone is confessing and coming to the party. Your willingness to jump in the pool strengthens you and the community to be more alive and joyful and whole. The very dark matter you fear becomes grist for creating light. But if we get stuck in the old and think this is the way life is, we can despair that things can shift and, and maybe we spend lots of money on therapists, but we shouldn't discount the church, the place where Jesus is at the center, as a place of life and healing and joy and power and possibility.

But also, as we see from Mark, for the Resurrection Project to lift off and have power, we have to love on another and trust and care for one another. These brothers love their friend and were determined to get him to Jesus. Maple Grove can be a place of loving life if you want it to be. It can be like that picture. But it won't happen if we're judging each other and trying to one up each other, backbiting, gossiping, comparing who's a better Christian. Because we have to know that if we tell someone about our sins and our needs, they are going to respond with care and compassion and honor us and our vulnerability. We are sinners together. This is a community thing, a church thing. We need each other, just as we need Jesus. You remember the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. After he had done so, he told the church to "unbind him and let him go." Jesus raised him, but you and I have to help with the unbinding or the carrying or whatever is needed. Love one another as I have loved you. Think of the church as your family, as a new loving community, the beloved community.

Of course, not knowing your church that well, you may have a lot of people already who are carrying people to Jesus one way or another. Usually, in my experience, I find that the ones who are carrying people to Jesus are also the ones confessing, the ones who already have the most life. You may be doing all of this work to get free already and I hope you are. But if you're not, I can't tell you just HOW and to whom and where you do all of this confessing and mending resulting in rising. But I have a couple of thoughts and I know the Lord will lead you if you ask. First of all, there is power in small groups. In the early Methodist Church John Wesley had small groups where people would confess their sins of the previous week and pray for each other and love each other to health and joy by taking them to Jesus.

Secondly, an important way to get help with Resurrection Power, is to begin to hang around people who are not just like you, people that may threaten you, make you a little uncomfortable and invite them into your church family. In my case, poor people have taught me so much. Pray that they Lord would bring people in need to part members of your congregation. It might be a test, but it would bring you some life. I've got a pastor friend here in Atlanta who pastors a comfortable white church. He told me that a homeless African-American man had joined their church and it was kicking their butt. People didn't know how to treat the man. Some were trying to give him money; they didn't know how to relate to him as a person. Others were upset because one of ways they welcome people into membership was to give the new member a copy of the church directory, which had everyone's address and phone number, which a lot of folks didn't want him to have. Now see, isn't that funny just to think about. It makes me laugh. There was life being stirred up already, some of their stodginess and death being jostled, consciences being pricked. We immediately become aware our love has a lot of boundaries and then we just maybe we begin to be able to get freer, if we want to, and we begin to find a new and deeper joy and we begin to rise. I'm not talking poor people about as charity objects, but as brothers and sisters in Christ. Now I realize that may be something you are already doing. But if you're not, you might consider it. I'm not talking about trying to change people either; I'm talking about learning to love them and let them love me. The members of my food co-ops had an average income of under \$12,000 a year. One co-op member joined our church; her income is just over \$700/mo., so you can see she's not rolling in the dough. But she's great; she prays for my family every day. My folks need Jesus in a way that mostly us middle class folks do not, because they may not be able to pay the rent or buy a car or have enough food or pay the utilities or afford to go to a doctor. They HAVE to cry out to Jesus; they have to depend on Jesus. Their faith is stronger than mine and generally speaking I find that they aren't hiding as much as me and my middle-class friends. They'll tell me about their sins and struggles in a heartbeat, sexual stuff, mental stuff, you name it. So I get freer and more honest and less concerned to put on airs. And yes, it's true I have ways I can help them, just as they have ways they help and teach me, so we get to know and love one another have community together. Yes, my poorer brothers and sisters have been a great blessing to me.

All I know for sure is, if you as a church, or *even just a few of you*, want more Resurrection Power, ask Jesus and he will help you. In any case, seek and you will find. The scriptures tell us "You have not because you ask not." So ask. And tell Pastor Patty you want to take this seriously and put your strength into making Maple Grove an example of the beloved community.

As a church, I don't whether you have really have thought about it or not, but you have a really good name. Maple Grove United Methodist Church. Maple Grove: a stand of trees. Those who study such matters tell us that trees are communal, they look out for one another, they communicate and nourish each other. But that is you, Maple Grove—I'd like to think you are or want to be a community of people like trees—what do the Psalms say, trees planted by the water—who nourish and look out for one another, intent on taking each other to Jesus and wade further out into that Resurrection Power River.

May the Lord bless you and raise you up. Take seriously this Lenten calling that the Holy Spirit has given you and take seriously stewarding your own little patch, your little grove, of the Kingdom of Jesus. Take courage—find brothers and sisters to help pray for you to get you closer to the source of Life, or if need be, to get you closer to wanting to be free, and help to carry you to Jesus, and make yourself available to carry others in some fashion. You will begin to come alive just from making the effort. I am confident you will find joy in the journey. I would suggest that if you do that, you, Maple Grove United Methodist Church, will indeed be the perfect church.

So, I exhort you, my brothers and sisters, to follow Pastor Patty's lead into the Resurrection Project. She is passing along a powerful word to you from our good brother Moses —Choose Life!

Come Holy Spirit, Come Lord Jesus, come quickly.