

The Helpers
Rev. Alida Ward
Sunday, April 28, 2013
Mark 2:1-12

Like a lot of folks did this month, David and I took advantage of the April school vacation to disappear out of town -- actually, in our case, to disappear out of the country.

And so it was that we were on the other side of the Atlantic on Patriots' Day, marathon day; six hours ahead of you, we were sitting in a hotel lobby in France that night, reading. It was quiet -- just the two of us and our books, and a sleepy desk clerk behind the counter.

Suddenly we heard the him exclaim; he pushed back his chair and jumped up, ran over to us, startling us. "Boston," he said, "it is near to your home? There were bombs -- the marathon, there were bombs, just now."

It had happened just then. And so he, we, spent the rest of that night as you spent that afternoon -- watching with horror, shaken and frightened. "This is personal," the president said later, and that's exactly how it felt -- David was born in Lynn, Massachusetts, lived in Melrose as a pastor; as for me, every summer had been in Boston; my brother, my cousins, my aunt and grandmother, all Boston. Both of us had stood at that finish line, we knew the exuberance and utter joy of being there. So, yes, personal. But it seemed it was personal for that clerk, too -- tears in his eyes, he said over and over "we must pry," by which he meant pray, but nobody was correcting each other's pronunciation.

What was strange about being so far away was not that we couldn't see the news -- we could -- in this day of iPads and wifi, it wasn't hard to get CNN and ABC and the Times online. What was strange was not seeing you, not knowing how you, each one of you, was feeling.

And so -- what else - I went on Facebook to try to find out. And that was a help -- I could feel it then, feel your hurt and confusion and anger.

But people being who they are, it wasn't long before folks started to post things to make each other feel better, take care of each other. And the post that started popping up all over was, of all things, an old quote from Mr.

Rogers. Yes, Mr. Rogers, whose children's show shepherded me through my childhood, and so many others.

And the quote, which someone had resurrected from years past, the quote was this: *When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, "Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping." To this day, especially in times of "disaster," I remember my mother's words and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers – so many caring people in this world."*

Look for the helpers.

What a blessing it was to read that, and then to look again, to look at the pictures and see all the people running *toward* the hurt, to look at the images and see people holding, healing, loving, people helping.

Look for the helpers.

Yes, **there** was the *comfort*.

There, for instance, was the man in the cowboy hat -- you saw him too, I know. Carlos Arredondo, who was there to cheer on marathoners running in honor of his own son, Alex, who had died serving in Iraq. When the blast happened, Carlos Arredondo ran toward the smoke, pulled away the barricades, and found Jeffrey Bauman, his clothes on fire, his legs shattered, unable to move. Carlos Arredondo put out the fire with his bare hands, tied the tourniquets around what was there was of Jeff Bauman's legs, found a wheelchair, and when he decided that wasn't fast enough, picked him up and carried him to the ambulance. "All I could think about was my own son," he said, "it was as if I could see him there."

Look for the helpers. I did -- we all did -- and there was our comfort. There was our hope.

The scripture story which Martha just read to us is all about helpers. It's the story of a paralyzed man who is healed by Jesus, it's a story of healing and miracle, but it's the way the healing happens that's the story, it's the way the miracle comes about that's the story, because nothing happens in this story without the helpers.

There was a man, the story says, unable to leave his bed, his mat on the floor, 'cause his legs no longer worked. And here's what happens. This guy's neighbors come hurrying over to his house one morning and they say, Jesus is in town, you know, that Jesus, the one we've been hearing about. He can fix you. We know he can. You just got to get to him,

How's that going to happen? says the man, pointing out the obvious -- he can't walk, he can't get there.

So they pick up his bed, these four neighbors, they each grab a corner of the mat, and they start walking. And then they start picking up the pace, because they can see that the crowds are already gathering at the house where Jesus is. And even though they're carrying him as fast they can, carrying their neighbor as fast as they can, they're still too late -- when they get to where Jesus is, they can't get inside, the crowds are too crazy.

So here's what they do. These guys, these helpers, they carry their neighbor up on the **roof**. Up on the roof, above where Jesus is, and they -- this is crazy -- they bust a hole through the roof, which must have been startling as heck to the folks below, and they lower their friend down to Jesus.

And here's the key line. When Jesus saw their faith, the story says, he turned to the sick man and healed him. When Jesus saw *their* faith -- the faith of those neighbors, the love of those friends, the courage and work and compassion of those four crazy guys, that's when the healing began.

What those guys did for their neighbor blew Jesus away. Even with rubble raining down on him from that hole in the roof, all Jesus saw was the faith of those 4 men, the passionate caring of those four men. All he saw was the helpers. And it moved him just as we were moved on April 15.

That scripture, it's about the helpers.
It was the helpers who brought the healing.

As you may know, although our trip ended up in France, David and I began our vacation in Serbia. Our daughter Brigitta is in Belgrade for four months, on a study abroad program, and we wanted to see how she was faring.

She is faring very well indeed, living with a Serbian family who greeted us with enthusiastic hospitality, and great quantities of meat, potatoes, and

beer. She plays field hockey three times a week with a men's field hockey club -- it's a guy's game over there.

And she's immersed in learning about the things that make for peace and how war happens, in a place that has known more of the latter than the former of late -- Belgrade is a place of loveliness and grit, bombed-out buildings all around, ancient tensions just below the surface, and sometimes above. In the midst of it all, Brigitta has met people of courage and faith and hope who do the work of peace. She was most deeply moved by meeting a group of young people, students from the *Youth Initiative for Human Rights*, whose calling is to bring together teens from Kosovo and Serbia, Muslim and Orthodox, to talk together and dream together of a peaceful future. I checked out their website when she told me about them -- last week, a great gathering of them ran the Belgrade marathon together wearing t-shirts quoting the youngest Boston victim, Martin Richards: "No more hurting people." the shirts read, "Peace."

Those young Serbs -- they are the helpers. Each person who daily works for peace, who embraces, reaches out, hopes and heals, they are the helpers.

And the truth is, the world is full of helpers. When you look for them, they are there. And they are our hope. They are the restorers of faith, the candles in any darkness.

I could end this sermon right here, echoing Mr. Rogers' words: Look for the helpers. But that's not really the whole point, is it?

The point isn't just to look for the helpers.

The point is to be the helpers.

We are called, each one of us, to be the helpers, to be the ones running toward hurt, to be the ones who carry others to healing, to be the ones who do the work of peace. We are called to **be** the helpers.

And this church, I can tell you, this church **is full** of helpers. I sat down on Tuesday with Greg Griffin, who pastored here for the two weeks we were gone. I just wanted a little debrief. And I loved what he said. You've got a deep bench here, he said; so much compassion, so much love, so much help.

I knew I served a wonderful church, but it's kind of nice when someone else notices too. Notices that this a church where everywhere you look, you see helpers.

David and I saw it ourselves again two days ago, Friday, when our community gathered to says thanks to God for the life of young Mikey Fedak. From Ben Steele and his fifth grade classmates standing bravely up here to share their memories of Mikey, to the kitchen full of church folks who had come to make sure everyone was welcomed and fed, all we saw was helpers, loving Mikey's family with all their might, carrying them in prayer. All we saw were the helpers.

And we see that in you all the time, all the time. We see that when you head to a shelter with a trunk full of food you've just picked up, because it's your turn to help with Fair Share Table. We see that when you sit down at a desk with a woman struggling to learn English at Mercy Center, and patiently help her. We see that when you join the prayer chain, and each day carry people to God in love. We see that when you take flowers to the nursing home, or stop by a home with soup and call someone you haven't seen here for a bit. We see it when you act on what you believe, go march in Hartford, work for peace and speak out for justice.

And next weekend, next weekend, when people gather from far and near to see the dogwoods and wander through our Festival, they'll see it too. They'll see what we are blessed to see every day -- a church full of helpers. They'll see you.

They'll see church people helping each other, and church people helping strangers. They'll see church teenagers helping out so that they can raise money to go help other people out, down in Appalachia. They'll see church people helping kids have fun and church people having fun helping everyone.

And they'll see that all of it, all of that working and playing and helping, all of it is done for the purpose of helping lots more people, all of it done to raise money not for us here, but to help kids in need, families in need all over the place. All the helping that happens here next weekend is to help more helpers do the work God has called them to.

Mr. Rogers, my beloved childhood guru, he had it right. When the world shakes and things go dark, look for the helpers, look for the ones who bring the light. And therein lies the comfort.

And Jesus, well, he had it right. Be the helpers. Be the ones who run towards the hurt, who carry their neighbors, who lift others in prayer and

lift spirits in hope, who work for the kingdom of God, dream bravely, live courageously, love passionately.

Look for the helpers, yes --and then ...*join them*. Amen.