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Date: December 1, 2013
Sermon Title: Rise Up, And Walk
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Mark 2:1-12

Mark 2:1-12

When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.' Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, 'Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?' At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, 'Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven," or to say, "Stand up and take your mat and walk"? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins' — he said to the paralytic — 'I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.' And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, 'We have never seen anything like this!'

I've just returned from India, where we celebrated the 30th anniversary of our mission work there, Friends of Christ in India.

Whenever I travel overseas, helpful church members give me excellent advice on everything from how to battle jet lag to how to make security check-in go smoothly. What they don't tell me is about re-entry, how to come back down to earth gently after being treated royally for two weeks, pampered and praised every step of the way.

Last Sunday I preached in a most amazing church. They applauded almost every sentence, even before the translator started translating! On another occasion, I was buried under so many garlands of flowers that you could barely see my face peeking out from beneath them. At one village, a band of musicians and long lines of dancers stopped our jeep a half-mile out of town, had us get out and march with them into town, with flower petals every step of the way. One night, when I returned to my hotel, a man came up and said, "Who *are* you?" It can go to your head!

But then you come home. First comes the plane ride itself – 19 hours. You start to look like a wreck and smell worse. Nobody at the airport or at Customs gives a hoot about who you are or who you were 24 hours earlier. Then I get home. We have two cats that really don't care who I am, and I have a dog that hates me. Then the phone starts ringing, e-mails come in, and the garlands of flowers have long since wilted. But some things last, including this sermon that I developed on this trip.

I've been traveling and preaching for decades, all over kingdom come, and I think I may finally have preached the perfect sermon. And when I say, "perfect," I say that in all humility because I have preached some real clunkers. I actually preached a sermon called "Streaking for Christ," in a silly attempt to be trendy, for those of you old enough to remember when "streaking" was trendy. I actually found a Bible verse for it; it seems the prophet Isaiah actually walked around Jerusalem naked for three years to make a point.

On another occasion, in fact, on my very first trip to India, I was taken to a remote village to preach. It was supposed to be a big, happy day, but when we got there, we discovered there had been a huge fire the night before. It destroyed 100 thatched-roof huts in the village, the fire leaping from roof to roof, decimating the village. They still wanted me to preach, so I asked for five minutes to rethink my message and came back with a great sermon on "fire in the Bible." Like when God appeared as fire to Moses; or on Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came as "tongues of fire" above the heads of the disciples. I bet that was a comforting sermon – all the ways fire does good in the Bible – for people who had just lost everything in a fire! So I'm perfectly capable of preaching a lousy sermon that makes me feel a little better about stumbling across a "perfect sermon."

When I say, "perfect sermon," I don't mean "perfect" in delivery or execution, but perfect in getting at the absolute heart of Christianity, perfect in reflection on the life and teaching of Jesus, perfect in relevance and application, perfect in Scripture.

The Scripture we just heard is a really lovely story. Jesus had come to town. He was headquartered in somebody's house. Everybody in town came out to see him. The place was packed to the rafters.

I actually preached this sermon at a little house church in India two weeks ago, started by a family connected to our FOCI work for years. Their kids grew up in our mission work, and the dad always wanted to be a pastor. He was a bricklayer, and when he retired, he just reconfigured his tiny house, knocked down the wall between two little rooms, painted it, built a pulpit and an altar and started a church in his house. That little house church, just like the one in today's Bible story, was packed to the rafters, every nook and cranny filled with people. And I told them this story about a little house turned into a little church one day when Jesus came to town.

Unfortunately, there was this one particularly little group who couldn't get into the house, couldn't squeeze in. The little group consisted of four friends who had carried another friend, a paralytic, over hill and dale, just to get him close to Jesus. Nobody knew much about Jesus at the time. This is a story from early in Jesus's ministry. There was no theology about him yet, no "Christology," as they call it, no idea of divinity or the second person of the Trinity, no talk of being God or Messiah. There was no church yet, no structure, no creed. But there was word of mouth. Jesus was some sort of "holy man," a wonder worker, a healer, a person possessed of special gifts or power. Like miracles. These four friends were lifelong friends of the paralytic. They had watched his suffering, his daily struggle to survive, the humiliation of having to beg, of having to be cared for, someone who gave real meaning to the word "invalid." In-valid, without validation, without purpose.

So, on a whim and a prayer, this particular day they picked up their friend on his mat, each buddy holding a corner, and practically dragged him to Jesus. Only to find their path blocked. Others had beaten them to it, curiosity seekers and spiritual seekers and other miracle seekers. They all got there first. The house was full. The way was blocked. The entrance closed. "No room in the inn," yet again. Except Jesus is on the inside this time, and these five friends are on the outside.

This is when people find out what they're made of, isn't it? You and I face this all the time. Something we've worked for, prayed for, hoped for, planned for. A relationship. A job. An idea. An event. You work hard to be on a team or be a starter, and you're not. You work hard for a promotion, and you don't get it. You work hard on a relationship or a friendship, and it falls apart. You work hard. And it's not happening. The path is blocked. This is

when we find out what we're made of. Disappointment or determination? What's greater in you? Discouragement? Disappointment? Determination? For these five friends, "not" wasn't an option. They climbed up on the roof of the house, probably some combination of wood, tiles, and slats. Strong enough to bear their weight. Weak enough to be moved around. In short order, they made a big hole in the roof, big enough to fit a whole person lying on a mat, and lowered him into the house, laying him on the floor at Jesus's feet.

The best Bible stories lend themselves to good imagination, so let your imagination run wild on this one! There's the buzz in the crowd, the energy of a packed house, the presence of Jesus in the midst of it, the great expectations of the day, the spiritual fervor, euphoria, and the noise! The spectacle, as up above, four determined friends tear apart the roof and drop down their paralytic friend ... at Jesus's feet. The reaction? Surprise. Indignation. Well done! Now what?

And here's where Jesus takes his whole life, his whole ministry, his whole purpose, his whole theology, his whole religion, his whole plan, and wraps it all up for us in two sentences. First he tells the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven." Then, he tells the guy, "Rise up, and walk." You might call it the "Good news" and the "Better News."

The Good News is "your sins are forgiven." You are no longer saddled with your past.

"Your sins are forgiven." You are no longer weighted down by guilt or regret.

"Your sins are forgiven." You are not as bad as all the "ex-es" in your life say you are. Ex-boss. Ex-friends.

"Your sins are forgiven." You are not the sum and substance of every mistake you ever made, every hurt or failure.

"Your sins are forgiven." That's the "Good News."

Then comes the "Better news": "Rise up, and walk." Get up off your duff. Forget the past. Now live up to your potential! God has a purpose for you. You have a purpose. The world needs you. No more lying about. No more excuses. No more watching life go by.

"Rise up, and walk." Get out of the house. Get moving. Get doing. Get living. Get loving. Get to it. This is where you decide who you are, what you're made of.

I'm going to develop this more for you in the months and years ahead because I really do believe this is a perfect summary of Christian faith: we are forgiven. And we've got great work to do.

Let me wrap this up with one more thought. Christians have long talked about "getting saved" or "being saved." Some Christians will even begin a conversation with, "Are you saved?" To be "saved," to know that Jesus has died for your sins, to know with assurance, "you are forgiven." But more recently, Christians like us, Greenfield Hill Church Christians, prefer a more provocative question: "Saved for what?" Your sins are forgiven. *Good*. Your past is over. *Good*. No regrets. No guilt. *Good*. You're saved. *Good*, but for what? For what are you saved? Let me put it this way. "Being saved," that's God's part. Doing something with your salvation, that's your part. That's the "Rise up, and walk" part.

I went to see the movie "Twelve Years a Slave," a true story about a Saratoga, N.Y., free black man in the 1830s, talented, erudite, successful, who was lured to Washington, D.C., and then sold into slavery. The movie is hard. Slavery itself is portrayed in all its awful brutality. The beatings and whippings are intense, the betrayals so stark. Yet, for me, the two toughest scenes were two Sunday mornings on the plantation when the plantation owner gathers his family and slaves for Sunday worship. He reads the Bible so powerfully, so profoundly, with great conviction. He is so surely saved. And wants his slaves to be saved. But saved for what?

The slaves are saved for cutting sugar cane and being beaten. The slave master is saved to do the beating and enjoy the profits. In other words, they got the "Good News" part, "Your sins are forgiven." But they miss the "Better News" part, "Rise up, and walk," do something good with your salvation. It's half Christianity, and half Christianity is no Christianity at all. There's no "Good News" without the "Better News." We are saved. We are saved for a great purpose. We are set free for a great purpose. Living out that great purpose is the "Christlikeness" we talk about so much in this church.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. The countdown to Christmas begins, 24 days from today. And we will celebrate the Christian story in a dozen ways. Christmas pageant and Christmas carols. Tonight's Advent dinner. The Women's Fellowship Silver Tea. The Deacons' Christmas Concert, and five, yes, FIVE Christmas Eve services! But let me add just one more element to your Christmas experience this year. It's a month, before Christmas. It's also a month before 2014, the new year. Use this month to think really hard not about your salvation, that's all set.

"Your sins are forgiven." You are saved. Now use this month to think hard, saved for what? The "for what" is your great purpose for 2014.