

# Keep Your Feet on the Ground and Your Heart in the Sky

A sermon based on Mark 1:29-39 and Isaiah 40:21-31

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I have discovered, when preparing a sermon, that it's best not to tell others about it until the idea is well enough along that it can withstand the scrutiny of questioning comments, both critical and well-intentioned ones. An idea in its early stages is a vulnerable thing, doubly so when held by someone as shy, retiring, and insecure as myself! I don't even share my sermon ideas with Dorothy until they're sufficiently robust to withstand the light of day!

Imagine my horror, then, when two individuals who work elsewhere in this building on Fridays caught sight of the working title for this sermon, and proceeded to heap laughter and derision upon it! The working title is the same as the one I printed in the bulletin, not because I have gained confidence in it since Friday, but because I was too shattered by their response to venture forth with another one!

One my detractors said that my sermon title reminded him — or was it her — of the old joke about keeping your "nose to the grindstone" and your "shoulder to the wheel," and then trying to work in that position! Another implied that only in Saskatchewan, where the sky is omnipresent, could such a title have the ring of truth! And so I come to you this morning a broken man, not at all sure that this sermon will "fly," yet drawn by the promise of Isaiah that we "shall mount up with wings like eagles!" (Isaiah 40:31)

## The Lure of Flight

The prospect of flight has always been alluring to earthlings. When a century ago Orville and Wilbur Wright tinkered with their flying machine, it was more than a technical challenge. Sons of a United Brethren bishop who had pronounced from his pulpit, and in the periodical he edited, that human flight was both impossible and contrary to the will of God, the boys were not only able to prove him wrong — probably a pleasure in itself — but were also able to revel in the experience of freedom, control, power and escape from restraint that flying represents to so many.

An Old Testament proverb lists, as one of several things beyond understanding but wonderful to behold, "the way of an eagle in the sky". (Proverbs 30:19) Amelia Earhart, the first woman to fly across the Atlantic (1928) and to fly it alone (1932), said that "the lure of flying is the lure of beauty. ...that the reason flyers fly...is the aesthetic appeal of flying."

Hanna Reitch, a German test pilot describing her first helicopter flight, said, "(The) technicians standing below grew ever smaller as I continued to rise straight up, 50 metres, 75 metres, 100 metres. Then I gently began to throttle back and the speed of ascent dwindled till I was hovering motionless in midair. This was intoxicating! I thought of the lark, so light and small of wing, hovering over the summer fields."

Beryl Markham, raised in East Africa, flew mail, passengers, and supplies to the remote corners of the Sudan; Kenya; Tanganyika, now Tanzania; and Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, in the 1930s. The first person to fly solo across the Atlantic from east to west (1936), she wrote, "I learned ... to put my trust in other hands than mine. I learned to wander. I learned what every dreaming child needs to know — that no horizon is so far that you cannot get above it or beyond it." (*West with the Night*)

The image of flight is an attractive metaphor to aviators of the spirit. Madeleine L'Engle, a spiritual writer and not a pilot, as far as I know, wrote, "In our dreams we are able to fly ... and that is a remembering of how we were meant to be." (*Walking on Water*) St. Therese, a hardy mystic who lived in the 16th century, said, "When there is pain and trials in life, great souls soar on their wings high above the clouds, where everything is so calm and peaceful and the sun is shining." The eagle's flight is an image that has inspired people of faith through the centuries.

### **Just Another Day in the Life of Jesus?**

The prospect of being lifted out of earthly restraints is an attractive one, but our flights of fancy are more often than not just that. Our spiritual trajectories do not always resemble the graceful flight of an eagle. Georges Clemenceau (1841-1929), the French statesman and prime minister during the last part of the First World War, was loath to fly and was heard to admonish the pilot before one particular flight, "Fly very cautiously, very slow, and very low." A flight pattern that probably resembled the flight of a partridge more than that of an eagle!

If our reading from Isaiah inspires spiritual soaring, our reading from Mark's Gospel feels more like the low, slow, cautious flight of the partridge. It lacks momentum. At first glance there doesn't seem to be anything remarkable about our Gospel lesson. In contrast to the high flying Isaiah, what with the weary walking and running, the faint-hearted empowered, the powerless strengthened, and earthlings soaring like eagles, Mark offers only a simple story of a private healing, followed by Jesus' withdrawal and his desire to move on to the next town. It's not unreasonable to think about his ministry, "Is this thing going to fly?"

In some ways, the story of the healing of Peter's mother-in-law isn't much of a story at all. She had a fever but Mark doesn't tell us why. She probably had a name, but Mark doesn't tell us her name; she is simply called Peter's mother-in-law, though most of us probably didn't know Peter was married. It's not much of a story: Peter's mother-in-law is sick; Jesus comes and heals her; she gets up and serves dinner. It's a bare-bones story of a private healing by what almost appears to be a reluctant healer.

Some people are very attracted to healings and miracles, dramatic or not. A long, long time ago, a traveller journeyed all over the world searching for God and came to a village that had a special air of peace and tranquillity. The traveller said to the village elder, "I really like it here and I'd like to stay. But before I do, I need to know: Does your God work miracles?" Replied the elder, "Well, it all depends what you think is a miracle. There are those who say that a miracle is when God does the will of the people, but here we say that a miracle is when people do the will of God."

Even as a miracle story, our gospel story is not all that dramatic. Simon's mother-in-law is on her bed, suffering from a fever, when all these house-guests arrive. One can imagine what Simon's mother-in-law may have thought when they arrived — "Oy vey!

What a son-in-law I've got! First he quits his fishing job! Now here I am in my sick bed and he brings friends home for dinner!" — I imagine that was her reaction, but it's only my imagination. There's very little detail in this story.

If healings impress you, consider that this is already the second one mentioned in chapter one — the second of many — but later that day, when he heals others, he seems cautious about it; we read, "...he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him." (Mark 1:34) After that, we are told, he withdrew to a "deserted place," sufficiently deserted that Peter and his companions couldn't find him. And when they did find him and told him, "Everyone is searching for you" (1:37) — as if to convey the importance of the opportunity at hand — Jesus said, "Let's go on to the neighbouring towns...." (1:38) There's no recognition of the opportunity at hand or of any anxiety Peter and the others may have felt about locating him; Jesus wants to move on.

Some have said that what Mark is trying to do is present a typical day in the life of Jesus. Just an ordinary day in the life of Jesus, involving himself in the ordinary lives of people. A composite day, if you like, in Jesus' ministry — a portrait of a busy man with a seemingly never-ending stream of people coming to him with problems to be solved and afflictions to be cured. He heals, he prays, he pushes on to preach the gospel in the next town.

Perhaps. Another suggestion might be that the story is not as innocuous as it may at first sight appear. It's a very understated story, but it contains hints of powerful themes. First of all, we are told that Peter's mother-in-law had a fever. The Talmud — the commentaries on the Old Testament Scriptures — laid out methods for dealing with fever. A knife made of iron was tied by a braid of hair to a thorn bush. Then, on three successive days certain verses from Exodus were read, and then a certain magical formula was pronounced. Jesus, however, appears to have completely disregarded all the paraphernalia and readings deemed necessary for a cure. He simply "took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then," we read, "the fever left her...." (1:31)

The fact that Jesus' power and authority were much more effective than the Talmudic formula may have raised a few eyebrows! They would have been raised even more by the fact that Jesus took Peter's mother-in-law "by the hand," for Jewish law did not allow one to touch someone with a high fever. Furthermore, consider that this healing took place on the Sabbath! (Matthew 12:10; John 7:23) It was the second healing Jesus had done on this Sabbath day, while the people who came to him for healing later that day were at least sufficiently circumspect, and patient, to wait until after sundown, the official end of the Sabbath.

There is underneath this seemingly innocuous, unexciting story an undercurrent of intrigue and danger. Mark begins his Gospel with the dramatic entrance of John the Baptist, who foretells of someone "more powerful" than he. (1:7) Jesus receives the very blessing of God, as evident in the descending dove at his baptism (1:10). His strength is sufficiently robust to withstand severe temptations (1:12-13) and his message sufficiently compelling to attract several fishermen to join his fledgling ministry. (1:16-20) I would guess that fishermen are apt not only to keep their feet firmly on the ground but also have sufficiently sturdy sea legs to stand firm in the midst of a storm!

The power-and-authority theme emerges ever more strongly during Jesus' synagogue appearance in Capernaum (1:21-28), with widespread recognition of his power, his authority, and his new approach. The underlying theme of the first chapter is power, and

we know where that's going to lead, what with John the Baptist losing his head early in the Gospel. (1:14; 6:16)

Like a sermon idea that has to be ready before it's shared, it could be that Jesus was not yet ready to take on those whom his power threatened. His withdrawal to a deserted place lent him an opportunity to pray, but it also bought him some time to avoid confrontation. His desire to move on to the next town may have been fuelled by a desire to prevent his ministry being shot down prematurely. Indeed, Jesus went on to the next town, and "throughout Galilee," Mark tells us, summarizing in just one verse (1:39) an itinerant ministry that must have taken weeks and months. We can see the tension building, however, even in the first chapter, and it's certainly not unreasonable to think, "Is this thing going to fly?"

## **The Whole Gospel**

There is another element implicit in this story and in the stories that follow that intrigues me, and that has to do with the nature of the gospel itself. It's not very explicit and one could miss it unless one looks for it. It has to do with the wholeness of the Christian gospel, the inherent unity of the various facets of the Christian gospel. (William Barclay, Commentary on the Gospel of Mark)

There is, first of all, a unity of words and actions. This would be a rather unnecessary observation were it not for the fact that we often separate them. We talk of those "on the front lines," who "do" things, and then there are their advisors and the policy makers whom, I take it, are usually well back behind the front line. We talk of "activists" as if they have no policy that drives them, and we talk of "strategists" as if there is scarcely any danger that they may have to implement those strategies! In a church such as ours, where the policy is the priesthood of all believers, everyone is an advisor, but that doesn't mean that they'll always be there to do something when something needs doing. Meanwhile, the doers often have little patience with the meetings that are so necessary to a priesthood-of-all-believers type of church!

The words Jesus used to accompany his acts of healing were few, but they were enough to let us know that this was not an act of magic but an act of God! The New Testament makes clear that the words of faith, without works, are useless (James 2:17), but it also makes clear that we are to give an answer to anyone who asks a reason "for the hope that is in (us)". (1 Peter 3:15) The unity of Jesus' words and actions, word and deed, is important to the Church's ministry and witness.

Secondly, the gospel that Jesus proclaimed and demonstrated respected the unity of soul and body. A health professional says that she can remember a time when each different bodily pain was the domain of a different health professional. If someone came to the hospital with a pain in their shoulder, she, as a physiotherapist, was not permitted to discuss or to consider in any way a pain in any other part of their body. No one ever really considered that there might be a link between multiple pains in one body.

The Church has too readily bought into this fragmentation. No doubt we can think of Christians and Christian churches that proclaim the gospel as if the body doesn't matter. Other Christians stress the social gospel — as if there could even be a Christian gospel not social in nature — but churches can get so consumed with the material needs of people that we forget to address their spiritual needs.

We are both soul and body. Jesus treated people as whole beings and was concerned for their well-being in its most comprehensive sense. It's no accident that Jesus, who pointed to the eternal things of God was also known as the Great Physician. It's also not accidental that the church through the centuries has been at the forefront of medical advancements, hospitals, and clinics, even as we pray for the spiritual healing of people. Ours is a holistic concern — for body and spirit in their essential unity.

In the same way Jesus represented a unity of earth and heaven. He wasn't so concerned with heaven that he ignored our earthly needs, but neither was he so concerned with our earthliness — our creatureliness, or grasshopper-liness, to use Isaiah's words (40:22) — that he did not try to imbue our existence with the eternal. Jesus' dream was of a time when God's will would be done on earth as God first envisioned it in heaven!

### **Flying with Two Wings**

This week my friend, Jacques Fauchet, told me about a French priest who welcomed Russian refugees to France in the 1930s and 40s. It was this priest's first exposure to the Eastern Church — to Orthodox liturgy and life. He found it fascinating and it inspired his own efforts to work for Christian unity. He likened the unity of the two parts of Christendom to breathing with two lungs. I like the image. It's not impossible to breathe with one lung, but one can breathe more easily and freely with two lungs.

Perhaps the inherent unity of the Christian gospel could be portrayed with a similar idea, transferred to a different image. Holding the various facets of the gospel together might be like the two wings of the eagle. An eagle may be able to fly with one wing — I don't know, I've never seen one do so — but it certainly flies much more easily, freely, and gracefully with two wings.

To keep your feet on the ground and your heart in the sky may seem puzzling to those who are paradox-challenged, but it's no more mentally taxing than, say, the biblical injunction to be "wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (Matthew 10:16), another marriage of creaturely imagery with imagery of the sky. What could be more earthbound than serpents slithering on the ground, or more heavenly and graceful than the sight and flight of doves?

Similarly, our congregational flight pattern will be more beautiful and graceful if we fly with two wings — if we honour the multi-dimensional nature of the gospel and the Church. I remember a church member who used to binge on whatever aspect of church life interested her. If she joined the choir, everyone should drop what they're doing and sing in the choir! "Why aren't they singing in the choir?" she'd ask me. "Don't you think the choir is important? Other churches do a lot more with their choirs. Why don't we?" she'd ask. When the next year she became fixated on a different group in church, I heard precious little about the choir anymore. A new binge was underway. I admired her passion, but it inspired in me a passion for moderation.

May we as individuals and as one body — a single flight crew, if you will — fly the balanced and graceful flight of the eagle, or as another lover of the sky expressed it — the poet, John Gillespie Magee (1922-41), who flew with the Royal Canadian Air Force many years ago and was the son of missionaries to China:

Oh, I have slipped the surly bonds of earth  
and danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings.  
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth  
Of sun-split clouds — and done a hundred things  
You have not dreamed of — wheeled and soared and swung  
High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there,  
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung  
my eager craft through footless halls of air.  
Up, up the long delirious, burning blue  
I've topped the windswept heights with easy grace,  
Where never lark, or even eagle, flew;  
And, while with silent, lifting mind I've trod  
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,  
Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.  
("High Flight," 1941, Poetic Experience, 1955)

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All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version.