



# MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

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## **"Upside Down Healing"**

*A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church*

*On March 4, 2023, from Matthew 9:18-26*

Feminist theologian Mary Daly once famously said, "If God is male, then male is God, and the concept of a divine patriarch will oppress women as long as he is allowed to live on in the human imagination." Abandoning a male image of God is easier said than done because we've been conditioned to see God as an old white man with a long flowing beard like Zeus. It is difficult to free ourselves from a male image God in our minds because Jesus was, by all accounts, a man and like billions of other Americans, many of us had that famous Warner Sallman portrait of Jesus that hung on the wall in our homes. You know the one where Jesus is turned to the side looking up at a bird in a tree or possibly God in the sky; looking holy with those classic European features and the long brown hair shimmering like gold in angelic light.

We all know that is not what a Palestinian Jew from Galilee looked like, but it doesn't make it any easier to shake the image of a male God embedded in our minds. Even though Jesus never talked about what it means to be a man, his maleness is still a factor that impacts our image of goodness and godliness. On the other hand, throughout the gospel we find Jesus consistently breaking ties with the patriarchy of his day. He refused to take the traditional path for a man of getting married and having children, and in the first century a Jewish man who did not have a wife by the age of 30 would have been considered very strange.

Also, unlike other Jewish teachers Jesus had women disciples like Mary Magdalene and others who were financing his ministry. He transgressed purity codes, patriarchal laws, and gender norms by talking directly to women, healing women who were sick, praising women for their faith, eating with sex workers, inviting women to anoint his feet, and empowering them to preach the good news of God to their people. Not to mention, without women like his radical mother Mary and the Marys' who went to the tomb on Easter morning, we wouldn't know anything about Jesus and there would be no Christianity at all in the first place.

So how did a story of a man who broke ties with the patriarchy in his day and consistently empowered women become a religion dominated by men that has subjugated women for 2000 years? I know what some of you are thinking— "It's Paul's fault!" Well, feminist and womanist scholars have revealed that Paul was something of a radical egalitarian for his day as well, but people have certainly misused the writings of Paul to oppress women and many others.



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But it's not just Paul. The gospels have been misinterpreted and misconstrued as well. So, this Lenten season and Women's History Month we're looking at stories of women in the gospel of Matthew that challenge our assumptions, break down binaries, and overturn the patriarchy.

In the last year we've seen women's reproductive rights ripped away by the Supreme Court, setting the fight for gender equality back fifty years. A Pew Research study last year found that women still earn only 82% of what men earn for the exact same jobs. You might say, "How is that legal?" Well, the Equal Rights Amendment that was fought for by first and second wave feminists and passed by Congress in 1972, wasn't ratified by enough states by the deadline, which means that equal rights for women is still not yet the law of the land. And honestly, that barely scratches the surface of the enormous challenges women face today.

Life in first century was also difficult for women. They were considered the property their fathers or husbands, married off at an early age, required to bear children, unable to survive without subsistence provided by the male in their household. They were looked down upon and subjected to harsh laws that governed their lives. The death of a husband left women destitute, hence the many calls throughout the Bible to care for widows in their distress. Women had very little autonomy or control over their lives, and when they took control or asserted their autonomy it was incredibly dangerous. Men typically responded with violence and cruelty. So how did women get what they needed? They often had to risk their safety and sanity to take what they needed or persuade a man to get it for them, which is how women became so much more resourceful than men.

Matthew 9 is the story of two women—a twelve-year-old daughter of a leader of the synagogue (that Mark calls Jairus) and a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. The daughter lived for twelve years as the privileged child of a prominent leader in the community and became ill. The other woman suffered for twelve years in agony, ostracized, and humiliated by the community, and had finally mustered up the courage, grit, and determination to take hold of her healing. As the leader of a prominent "synagogue" in Myers Park who has a thirteen-year-old daughter, I relate to Jairus. There are no lengths I would not go to help my daughter if she was in need of healing. There is no mountain I wouldn't climb, or river I wouldn't cross, or money I wouldn't pay, or physician I would not find to help my daughter, so I can feel Jairus' pain.

Which is why I believe there's something missing here. After Jairus plea to Jesus on behalf of his daughter, we never hear from him again. How could that be? We never hear what he thinks about the fact Jesus has stopped to interact with this other woman while his daughter is dying. We never hear what he felt about his daughter dying while Jesus was busy healing this other woman suffering from hemorrhages.



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We are never told how Jairus felt or reacted—and I can't accept that. What father in their right mind would have said nothing about Jesus taking time to heal this other woman? What father would not have advocated more forcefully and furiously to overcome this interruption that cost his daughter's life? Why didn't he say anything?

I would not have been as quiet as Jairus, and I wish we had a record of his reaction where Jairus expressed himself like a 21<sup>st</sup> century man and mansplained the woman who interrupted up to Jesus. It would make the story feel more human. It might sound something like, "Ma'am. Excuse me, ma'am, um I was here first and I asked Jesus to heal my daughter before you did, and unlike you my daughter is dying, and as you can see I'm the leader of a prominent synagogue (haven't seen you in a while), and I don't know what you're doing but you can't come up behind a man and touch him without his permission, so if you could just kindly back off so I can get Jesus to my house in time to heal my daughter and you know he can see you later."

The fact we hear nothing from Jairus is incredibly strange. Did he stand idly by while this woman swooped up behind Jesus and interrupt his daughter's healing? Was Jairus fuming in silence? Did he say something horrifying that neither Mark or Matthew was willing to record? Herein lies the radical part of this story. Even though Jairus' plea for Jesus to heal his daughter is what starts this story, he quickly fades into the background until we are left with only the women and Jesus—two daughters in need of healing and the Great Physician. And here's the crazy thing, as soon as Jairus is out of the picture Jesus gets busy healing and saves both women's lives, transforming this story of healing into a story of resurrection.

It reminds me a lot what happened at the empty tomb. The women went out early at dawn to anoint the body and found nothing, then ran back to find the male disciples like Peter who ran to the tomb then left befuddled. But the women lingered and it's not until the men are out of the picture (are you hearing me church?) that the risen Jesus shows up. It's almost like the resurrection could unfold until the men had gone home and are out of the way.

When Rev. Mia McClain was called to be the first woman pastor of the Riverside Church in DC, someone asked me, "Ben you've had three associate ministers who have gone on to become the first woman pastor in the history of a Baptist church, Lauren, Chrissy, and Mia. How did you help these women get to that level?" I said, "Help? They didn't need my help! All I did was get out of their way." There are times when those of us who identify as men simply need to get out of the way so miracles can happen, so healing can happen, so resurrection can happen, so God can happen, so women, transgender, and non-binary folks can rise up. Sometimes, as men, we need to get out of the way so Jesus can show up.



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Once Jairus was no longer the center of the story—once his privilege was out of the way, Jesus showed up and started healing. So maybe Jairus is a model for us privileged men. When two or three women are gathered in need of healing, we need to take step back and decenter ourselves, get out of the way, and patiently wait our turn. You say, “Well what about what Jairus needed? What his daughter needed?” Jairus got what he needed. His daughter was eventually healed, but not until Jesus attended to the woman with a hemorrhage. Jairus had to wait for Jesus to heal another woman. He had to walk all the way home, hear the flutes playing, see the funeral procession, listen to his family crying, and experience the crowd making a commotion. Jairus had to learn his daughter had died, and yet in the end he still got what he needed. He just had to wait to get what he needed, and because he waited, he got more than he bargained for—more than healing; he got a resurrection.

Part of the reason patriarchy rears its ugly head so often is that we live in hyper-competitive “dog-eat-dog” world that teaches us from an early age that there’s only so much to go around and it’s every “man” for themselves. We men think “I have to get what’s mine before you or there won’t be anything left.” It’s one of the lies that props up the patriarchy, and we are all victims of it regardless of our gender—this lie we call scarcity. Scarcity is a patriarchal lie that tells us there is not enough—not enough money, land, housing, education, or health care—not enough love, grace, justice to go around. The lie of scarcity tells we live in a cutthroat society where there are only enough resources for some people so others will have to go without.

This patriarchal lie is so deeply ingrained in our society and our collective psyche that we have now internalized it as individuals to the point where many people now believe not only that there are not enough resources to go around but that they as human beings are not enough—not good enough, pretty enough, skinny enough, sexy enough, smart enough, strong enough, young enough, funny enough, or interesting enough. This patriarchal lie of scarcity has convinced us of the false belief that our world is deficient and we are deficient as well. But that is a load of baloney! Our world is not deficient and there are no such thing as deficient people.

We serve a God of abundance, who Created a world of abundance, and invited us to live lives of abundance, and while there is not enough for everyone’s greed, there is enough for everyone’s need. There is always enough to go around like the feeding of the 5000, and even leftovers if we are willing to share. There is always enough healing to go around and enough time for everyone to find healing, but there will not be enough if the privileged always get healing first. If Jesus had ignored the woman hemorrhaging because Jairus got to him first, then only one daughter would have found healing. But Jesus stopped and he made time for her and still had time to raise Jairus’ daughter because there is always enough healing for everyone so long as the privileged are willing to step back and wait for others to get their chance.



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But the beauty of this story is that it shows us women don't need to wait around for privileged men to figure out the divine logic of abundance. That's why I love the woman in this story. She didn't care what was going on with Jairus or that he was a powerful religious man. She had been bleeding for twelve years, ostracized from society, looked down upon and rejected, yet she had the audacity to believe in herself—to believe that she was enough and that she deserved healing. She had the audacity to believe her social status should not keep her from healing. She had the audacity to believe touching Jesus was enough to save her. She didn't wait for Jesus to come to her; she went to him and had the audacity to believe touching even the hem of his garment would be enough to save her. Do we have the audacity of this woman?

She took a risk. She took a chance. She went on a leap and a prayer. She hoped against all hope. She believed against all unbelief if she could touch just a string on the end of Jesus cloak she would be healed. And her faith was rewarded! Jesus' words to the woman are a powerful force that eviscerates the lie of scarcity and testifies to the truth that everyone of us enough. Jesus said to the woman, "Take heart, daughter, your faith has made you well." Jesus called her "daughter," he named her his beloved child, he made her a part of his family, he included her in the community, he praised her faith, and made her whole—because she was willing to interrupt the patriarchy, come up from behind and take the healing she needed for herself. In this patriarchal society, sometimes you have to come up from behind, through the back door, and around the way to get your healing, and that's just what she did.

This woman's audacity and Jesus' response means that no matter what you're going through right now, you are enough. No matter what sickness you have, you are enough. No matter what troubles you have in life, you are enough. No matter what you look like, you are enough. No matter what you think of yourself, you are enough. In her book *The Sun and Her Flowers*, Punjabi poet Rupi Kaur says, "the greatest lesson every woman should learn is that since day one she's already had everything she needs within herself, it's the world that convinced her she did not."

In this late pandemic moment, when Covid is still hitting people hard, our health care system is broken, smart phones are changing all our brains, excess screen time is making our children sick, and social media is making our young people depressed, when oppression is bearing down on so many, and we are divided against one another as a society, everybody is in need of healing. Yet like Jairus, those of us who've always had access to healing need to stand aside so others can find their way in. Because it's not just about my healing, or your healing, it is about everybody's healing.

We have a tendency as human beings to feel neglected simply because someone else is getting attention. That's the lie of scarcity eating away at our humanity. Yet inside this story there is vision for an alternative community—a family where everybody is enough, and everybody gets what they need.



A church where everyone can find healing—a community where there is enough time, attention, and love for everyone—a beloved gathering where there is a place for everyone and a role for everyone— young and old, black and white, gay and straight, male and female, trans and non-binary.

But for us to create this kind of community, people like me—the Jairus’ of the world—we who’ve been the leaders of the church for years need to step back and prioritize the people who are just showing up in the middle of our story like the woman hemorrhaging with an urgent need and figure out what it means to put their healing first.

That is what the church is for, what it means to be the church, and what it means to be an inclusive community of abundance, to put others first. “Do not look to your own interests,” Paul said, “but put the interests of others first so you can have the mind of Jesus Christ” who turned the world upside down when he said, “the first shall be last and the last shall be first.” Are we brave enough and selfless enough to put the last first and the first last? If we are then the promise of this story is the same as the promise of the entire Bible. It is the promise of abundance.

When we are patient enough to prioritize the poor before ourselves, when we elevate people who are suffering the most, when we put the last first and first last, there will always enough for the rest of us—even those of us who identify as men. In fact, we may even get leftovers. Because when women have the audacity to interrupt the system and men have the humility to get out of the way, there is potential for everyone to find healing, and the possibility of a resurrection.