

**Are you a “don’t rock the boat, do what you’re told, follow the rules,” sort of person?** Before we talk about Jesus forgiving and healing a paralyzed man, I have a quick story for you. A snowstorm is raging outside, and Fred and Sharon are glued to the local weather report. “Tonight” says the weatherman “you’ll need to park your car on the *even* side of the street.” Fred puts on his boots, coat, and scarf and moves their car across the street. The second day of the storm the weatherman tells everyone to park their cars on the *odd* side of the street. Fred bundles up again and moves the car. The third night, the power goes out. “What do we do?” Fred asks. Sharon shrugs, “Let’s just leave the car in the garage tonight.”

The four fellows in Capernaum who brought their paralyzed friend to Jesus were NOT what you would call “follow the rules, do what you’re told, don’t rock the boat” sort of people. They knocked a gaping hole in the roof because the house Jesus was preaching in was so crowded they couldn’t get near him! When Jesus saw the tremendous faith of the man’s four friends, he immediately healed the paralyzed man *on the inside* first, saying, “*Son, your sins are forgiven*” (v. 5). And soon thereafter he heals the man in body as well as in spirit, saying, “*I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home*” (v. 11).

In the previous chapter of Mark, chapter one, Jesus makes a remarkable announcement, saying, “*The time has come, the Kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news*” (v.15). **N.T. Wright says that with these words, Jesus was starting a campaign** and in the next chapter, chapter two, he backs up his words with his actions. Just imagine if, without an election or any other official mechanism for changing the government, someone went on national media and announced that “We have a new leader, and we’re under a new government. It’s all going to be different.” **By what right is this person saying this? And what exactly does that mean anyway?** Well, when he forgave people and when he healed people those very things were part of what it meant that God’s Kingdom was coming and God’s becoming the King.

This is what it will look like. When Jesus went around saying that **God was now in charge**, he wasn't walking into uncharted territory. He wasn't making his announcement in a vacuum. **In fact, Jesus wasn't merely making an announcement. He was starting a campaign!** And he was campaigning for the Kingdom of God that came near because of his coming. At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus wanted to show what this Kingdom meant to people, up close and personal.

Over the years I've walked into some hospital rooms and heard the question: "What did I do to deserve this?" Our ancestors in Jesus' day believed illness and injury was the direct result of sin. Today, we say we have moved beyond that. Not only because of developments in science that tell us how illnesses are transmitted and injuries sustained, but also because our theology has developed. We firmly do not believe that God is seeking out sinners and striking them down with tuberculosis or paralysis or whatever. **We now believe that God came among us not to condemn us, but to save us in Jesus Christ.**

So, beginning with that, what do we do with this healing story that seems to suggest a connection between this man's sin and his paralysis? I think we begin by resisting the urge to jump to conclusions. I think we begin by remembering that two significant things happen in this story. The first is the man's sins are *forgiven*. This paralyzed man is brought by four very good and faithful friends and lowered through the roof of an overcrowded house in the hope that Jesus would heal him. We may not be the only ones surprised when Jesus announces the man's sins are forgiven because the man still can't move a muscle. I'm trying to imagine the looks on the faces of the four friends, let alone the paralyzed man. Did his friends speak up and say, "Yeah! Thank you, rabbi, for the forgiveness, but ah, that's not really why we're here?" There's no doubt this man was a sinner. We all are! But it seems obvious that he's there to be *healed*.

That's when the second significant part of the story begins to unfold. Jesus senses that the teachers of the law are murmuring against him for having forgiven this man's sins. The teachers of the law don't think Jesus has the

authority to forgive sins, only God can do that. To which Jesus seems to say, “Yes. You’re right! Only God can forgive sins. And I just forgave that man his sins. You put it together.” At least, that’s my paraphrase of what Jesus says! Actually, he puts it before the teachers of the law in the form of a challenge. He says, “*Which is easier: to say to this paralyzed man, ‘Your sins are forgiven’ or to say, ‘Get up, take your mat and walk’*”? Not surprisingly, Jesus didn’t get an answer to his question. Jesus then says to the experts in the law and to everyone gathered in that house, and maybe especially to the man on the stretcher, “*But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins*” (v. 10). And he does.

**These two highly significant acts, forgiveness of sins and healing, point to who Jesus the “Son of Man” truly is.** He is “Emmanuel,” God-with-us. These two highly significant acts point to **the overall purpose of Jesus’ coming**, and they point to **his mission and ministry**, and they point to **his identity**. In Jesus Christ we meet the One who has the authority to forgive our sins and to move us beyond all that would paralyze our spirits and our minds and our lives. **In Jesus Christ, we meet the One who re-orders reality as we know it.**

If you’ve ever talked to a person totally paralyzed from the waist down, they will probably tell you about all the things they plan to do to walk again, and how hard they will work to regain the use of their legs. However, in some cases, it may be better to face the music and adjust to the reality of the injury and admit they may never walk again. But if you were to say that to them, they probably would be the last words you are ever allowed to speak to them. And they would be right in not wanting to hear it! I’m convinced by the grace of God that my personal reality is sometimes way too small, too minimal, too black and white. Reality itself can be paralyzing. But no one needs to feel the paralyzing effects of reality on top of their injury. **What we all need is hope.**

**Hope doesn’t mean we live in a world of make believe.** But hope does call us to look beyond the confines of reality as we know it to what could be. I mean, have you ever really thought about what it means to be *forgiven*, to be *truly*

*forgiven, to have your sins wiped off the map, to have God remember your sins no more?* Forgiveness asks us to relinquish any reality that says such a thing is impossible. The good news of the gospel proclaims a new reality, one that takes us beyond the paralysis of sin, beyond the paralysis of reality, and into the kingdom of God where forgiveness abounds and, yes, miracles happen.

**So what are we saying?** We're saying that hope isn't just something we cling to from time-to-time when we're feeling our most desperate, but rather hope is a divine gift that forms, shapes, and molds us. Hope is our new reality. And hope begins with an acceptance of forgiveness. **Jesus leaves little doubt that regenerating nerve cells in paralyzed bodies is nothing compared to what he's up against when it comes to sin.** So, if it is true, truly true, that forgiveness is realized in Jesus Christ, then hope isn't wishful thinking, it is reality. It is a present reality, the reality that all things are possible with God.

And yet it is also reality to say that sin keeps us from living into hope. I mean, what better symbol for sin is there than paralysis? Isn't sin a freezing of our will that keeps us from doing the good that we know God wants? Isn't sin the freezing of time, the freezing of reality, that prevents us from moving beyond a certain point?

**So, who is it in our story that has the authority to both forgive sins and take away paralysis? Who has the authority to re-shape, re-form, and re-configure reality?** The good news is that God has acted in Jesus Christ to not only forgive our sins but also to relieve us of the paralysis that keeps us frozen in our sin. Only as we come to embody forgiveness in our paralyzed bodies will we know God's gift of this new reality; only as we come to sincerely receive God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ will we be able to genuinely forgive ourselves and others.

**So, when we sit at the bedside of a loved one and the doctor tells us that it's hopeless, we know better.** It's not delusional to believe that miracles can and do happen. But the even greater good news is that the hope we have in Jesus Christ is not limited to physical healing. There are plenty of people out there

whose lives have been transformed, whose world has been re-ordered, not because their cancer disappeared overnight, but because they came to know the forgiveness of God in Jesus Christ. The truth be told, sin is a far greater epidemic than any disease we've ever known. Jesus knew that. Which is why we live into the sure and certain hope that focuses on the reality of our forgiveness in Christ, and our deliverance from that which kills not only the body but also the soul.

In his book *Simply Jesus* N.T. Wright observes, "Forgiveness and healing. The two go so closely together personally and socially. Whole societies can be crippled by ancient grudges that turn into feuds and then into civil wars. Families can be torn apart by a single incident or one person's behavior that is never faced and so never forgiven. Equally, societies and families as well as individuals can be reconciled, can find new hope and new love, through forgiveness" (p. 72).

**And so, forgiveness can rightly claim to be the most powerful thing in the world.** It transforms like nothing else. It ranges from the very top of the scale all the way to the bottom to release us from the quiet secret horror of personal guilt and shame, that can quite literally paralyze us. With forgiveness and healing Jesus was tapping into something extremely deep in all of humanity. That's why he began his campaign—his ministry—with forgiveness and healing.

So, here and now on this day, we give thanks for the act of vandalism that went against the rules and rocked the boat, **when God ripped open not our little roofs of reality, but heaven itself, so that forgiveness from Jesus Christ might rain down on us all!**

Stand up, children of God!!

**Stand up and pick up your new lives and walk into a new day of forgiveness and healing and hope! Amen.**