

**THE ART OF IGNORING: EXODUS 14:1-14;
MARK 5:35-43**

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Benjamin West was one of the great British painters. When he was only a lad, his mother went out and left him in charge of his little sister, Sally. While his mother was away, Benjamin came across some bottles of colored ink and some brushes and he was determined to paint a picture of his little sister. You can well imagine the results. His mother returned home later in the day and looked at the mess. She looked at the boy's attempted picture and said, "Why, it's Sally." At that she took Benjamin in her arms and kissed him. For the rest of his life Benjamin West said, "My mother's kiss made me a painter." If his mother had done what so many of us would have done, perhaps there would have been no Benjamin West, the painter. This is a wonderful reminder to all of us that our first words, especially to our young people, should be words of encouragement.

Apparently his mother had discovered a wonderful ability — it is what I call *The Art of Ignoring*. She had learned how to ignore the terrible conditions that existed and discern the possibilities rather than the problems. Now you must not misunderstand what I am saying. I am not saying that we should bury our heads in the sand in the midst of terrible circumstances. That unfortunate approach has too often been utilized and, as you might expect, circumstances grow worse. What I am saying is that our Lord looked at one of the worst case situations, acknowledged it for what it was, but determined that something better could come from it.

Let us take some time to look at our text. We are told in Mark 5:21 that Jairus, a ruler of the synagogue came to Jesus by the sea side. He was the elder in a local synagogue who was responsible for the overall

administration of the synagogue and who was in charge of the worship services. The fact that he came to Jesus at all indicated that he must have in some way understood The Art of Ignoring, for he must have found some resistance from his family and friends who would have discouraged him from seeking help from this Carpenter Healer. Apparently he set aside their objections and asked Jesus to come to his house.

But the journey to the home of Jairus had its own perplexities. As Jesus traveled along, he encountered a woman who had an issue of blood for twelve years. He simply could not ignore her request, but his delay must have heightened the anxiety of Jairus. As Jesus prepared to resume his journey to the home of Jairus, messengers arrived with the dreadful news that the little girl had died.

"Why trouble the teacher anymore," was their assertion. Nothing more could be done. If Jesus had arrived in time she would have been healed, but there was no need for further concern, only sorrow. Contrary to what they were saying, Jesus ignores their opinions and says, "Do not be afraid any longer; only believe," and he continues his journey toward Jairus' home. Yes, from a human standpoint there was no need to disturb The Teacher. For Jairus' family, life for the child had ended.

From the family's perspective Jesus had come to a blank wall — and upon the wall was inscribed the words "She is dead". But our Lord would have none of it. He rewrote it with his own inscription which said, "She is *not* dead, she is only sleeping". Hope was dead from their viewpoint, but Jesus was about to show them when Jesus arrives on the scene new things can happen.

There lies buried within each of us some dominate potential and Jesus comes to arouse us. I have an idea that there are a number of you here this morning who could testify to the fact that your life for all practical purposes has ended. In your mind the clammy hand of destiny has written the epitaph "She is or he is dead". The Gospels proclaim the good news that Jesus desires to write the words "Not dead but sleeping".

For that reason Jesus' additional words — "Do not fear, only believe" have an eternal optimism about them. Jesus possesses the capacity to carry us through the darkest circumstances and bring us through to firm footing.

When He arrived at the house of Jairus there was a tumult of confusion. There was weeping and wailing beyond our capacity to imagine. William Barclay describes the scene for us in vivid detail.

First there was the curious sight of the people who tore their garments. They tore their garments until you could see their flesh. The parents tore their garments on the left side; everyone else tore their garments on the right side. After thirty days the garment might be sewn up, but it had to be done crudely so that it was clearly visible.

Then there were the flute players. Throughout the ancient world, whether it was in Rome, Greece, Assyria or Palestine, the playing of the flute was connected with death and tragedy. There were flute players at the death of the Roman Emperor Claudius. Josephus tells us that in A.D. 67 with the news of the fall of Jotapata most of the people in Jerusalem engaged flute players to lead their lamentations.

Coupled with these events were other customs. A mourner was forbidden to work or to wear shoes. The men were not allowed to shave or do anything for comfort. They could not read the law of the prophets — only the books of Job, Lamentations, and Jeremiah. It was also customary to eat sitting on the floor rather than to sit on the floor. In addition to that there was a custom that survives even until this day — eggs were eaten which had been dipped in ashes and salt.

When you survey these customs you can understand the confusion that was present in the home — and Jesus ignored them. While the flute players, the torn garments and some of the customs may have disappeared, ours is an age of confusion that could equal it. We are stricken with disease that threatens to grow worse. We cannot build prisons fast enough to house the criminals. People who

have millions are not satisfied to be millionaires; they want more. A few years ago they told the cryptic story of a man who had robbed a bank and who was mugged on his way to the getaway car. Several years ago during the garbage strike in New York City a man couldn't figure out what to do with his garbage so he put it in green plastic bags and placed these in his car which was parked on the street. Within an hour all of the bags had been stolen from the car. In light of these events, the funeral customs of the Jews don't seem so strange.

But Jesus will not allow confusion and chaos to have the last word, either. Jesus did not deny the reports. He did not argue about them; He ignored them. The Christian faith does not deny the terrible circumstances and confusion of our times; it simply ignores those who would say that ours is a world without hope. The Gospel of Jesus cuts across all our finalities and says to us, even as He says to us and as He said to her, "Little girl — arise." And so it is when all our human resources for coping have been exhausted, when we too stagger about in confusion, He says, "Arise."

Having ignored the confusion, the pessimism, and the bewilderment of the three disciples and the parents there is one thing that Jesus does not ignore, and that is the fact that this is a young girl who has physical needs. What an amazing sensitivity He displayed. "Give her something to eat." After her resuscitation there must have been a great deal of joyous celebration, but Jesus remembered that she was still a little girl and needed something to eat. He could ignore the fact that she had been dead, but He could not ignore the fact that she was hungry. Thus, the Art of Ignoring has a sense or proportion and priority.

It is all right for us to ignore the slights and negative comments which some people may say to us or about us. It is not all right for us to ignore desperate human deed. I doubt that there is a person here today who would entertain anything like the idea of raising someone from the dead or performing some sort of healing. But we should not assume that just because we cannot perform the grand

miracles, there are no lesser ones which do not need our attention. May I suggest a few to you?

Ours is a desperately lonely world. It comes in all sorts of shapes and sizes. It is written in the lines on the faces of the elderly. They not only feel lonely, but they are made to feel insignificant. It can be seen in the eyes of the freshman student who looks out the window of his or her apartment or dormitory. Their parents have just driven away and they wonder how they will be able to cope with the demands that will be made of them. It is evident in the quiet desperation which we hear in the voice of that person who has recently lost a loved one and needs a word of encouragement.

I have an idea that many of us have experienced that sense of elation which accompanies the arrival of a letter from someone who has taken the time to let us know that we are important and that we have not been forgotten. You may not be able to bring about resurrection, but with so small a thing as a pen and a piece of paper you may lift the spirit of some lonely person.

But loneliness is not the only ogre which looms over us. There is so much fear. The young people with whom I minister have their own private brands of fear. Some live in a sort of abject fear that they might fail in school and be sent home. For them the humiliation would be enormous. Others cower behind their books because they are afraid to risk their fragile egos in the hurly-burly whirl of campus activity. Fear, however, is not the resident guest of any one group. It stalks us all.

Children are prone to think that they are the only ones who are truly afraid. They think that once you grow up and become an adult, you are no longer subject to fear. Unfortunately, we all know that this is not so and that in some measure fear touches each of us with its clammy fingers. That means, of course, that we all find ourselves in a gargantuan struggle against fear. Most of us know that one of the greatest allies in the struggle against fear is the presence of another person. This means that more is demanded of us on certain occasions. We must go and

stand with and along side people. Often, it means that we must stand beside them in uncomfortable or embarrassing situations.

I have a friend who told me that when his son was arrested, one of the greatest moments of consolation came when some friends came to his house to not only sit and talk with them, but to take them out to dinner as well. It was a way of saying to the people of the community, "We are not afraid to be seen with our friends."

What we must understand is that there was not just one Benjamin West. Yes, there may have been only one Benjamin West, the painter and artist. But there are hundreds and thousands of other people who share a similar need. He was trying to do the best that he could, but he made a mess of things. How often have you and I done something akin to that? We were trying to do the best that we could, but we made a mess of things. And just like Benjamin West we need someone who will ignore the mess we have made of things and will say to us, "I recognize what you were trying to do and I understand." They are able to ignore the mess that we have made, and with the expression of their love and confidence, are able to make us something far grander than we ever dreamed possible.

And who is better able to do that than Jesus Christ? He did not tell the woman who had been taken in adultery what a wretch she had been. Instead He told her that her sins were forgiven and to go and sin no more. Even after Peter had betrayed Him and fled, Jesus seems to have ignored the betrayal and left Peter for a faithful witness. It is Jesus Christ who ultimately ignores all our human finalities and speaks the most important word of all — "ARISE."