

*“Grace that Breaks and Enters”*

*Mark 2:1-12*

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It’s a gift to be here, to preach with you and consider the question of whether I might be your pastor. It means a lot for me to be in this moment. It’s especially meaningful because much of my life has been shaped by things that happened in Ohio.

I went to college in Ohio. I fell in love and got married in Ohio. I began to sense a call to ministry in Ohio. It was in Ohio that I learned what it feels like when your nose hairs freeze! And it was in Ohio that, for the first time, I saw snow fall from the sky.

I’ve done my research and happen to know you get 100” of snow a year in these parts. So I imagine you might laugh at me when I tell you that in San Diego, where I grew up, people drive to visit the snow. A few times each winter my family would bundle up in our warmest clothes, pile into the car, and drive a couple hours to the mountains to pay a visit to snow. We’d slide down hillsides in inner tubes; we’d see people on the same Boogie Boards they use to ride waves in the summer trying to sled in the winter. It all seems rather pathetic now.

Even though I’d *seen* snow before coming to Ohio I’d never seen it fall until I was a high school senior and I flew to The College of Wooster to sit for a scholarship exam. It was February and the ground was thickly covered—more snow than I’d seen in my life! After the exam, my dad and I were walking to the car, flurries began to flit from the clouds. Then came flakes tickling my cheeks, clinging to my lashes, nestling in the fleece of my coat, thousands of zig-zagging sponges trying to soak up all the sounds of the world.

Somewhere in a box I have a picture my dad took of me with my head thrown back, my arms stretched out, my mouth wide open, as I ate up my very first snowfall. It felt as though I was looking up from the bottom of a snow globe. It felt as though I had entered another world, or that another world was falling upon me. I had never seen anything like it!

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It must have started with just a dusting, a sense of something on the air, maybe like the sensation of walking under a tree and feeling, what—a leaf? a drop of water?—landing on the head. Although, perhaps it took a while to notice, enthralled with Jesus as they were. Jesus was speaking the word and they had a front row seat right in Jesus’ house, so it may have taken a chunk of dirt hitting their ear to get them to tip up their heads up for an eye full of dust coming down from the roof.

I’d guess Jesus stopped preaching, as people looked up at bits of blue pocking the roof, and down at pools of sun growing on the floor. Four guys were tearing a hole in the roof of Jesus’ house!

I think it would have been fun to be in on the scheming of these guys on the roof. In their virtues and vices, William Placher says, they remind one of fraternity boys.<sup>1</sup> I don't know, maybe the conversation went something like:

"Hey, Jesus is back home. He's been all over Galilee, healing the sick and throwing out demons. We should take Billy to him."

"Yeah, we should, but not today—have you seen the crowd? It's out his door! We'd never get Billy through."

"Oh, we couldn't get *through* them, but I bet we could get *over* them!"

"*Over* them? What do you... No, you don't mean..."

"Oh, yeah! We can put Billy through the roof!"

I'm thinking Jesus just watched and waited as the hole in his roof grew and grew, and then was eclipsed by a stretcher-sized blotch as a man was lowered onto his floor. Now, what do you say when someone has busted your roof and put a guy down through the hole. Well, if you're Jesus you say, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Which is such a Jesus thing to say, is it not? "Your sins are forgiven!"

Except, if we stop and think about it, it seems awfully out of place. What does Jesus have to forgive the guy for, unless he's talking about the roof. But if he were, he wouldn't forgive the paralyzed man, but the guys up there with the shovels. And about those guys, Mark says when Jesus looked at them what he saw was faith. The hole torn in the roof was to Jesus an act of intercessory vandalism. Jesus saw guys pleading to God for their friend, and Jesus liked it!

Which, like I said, makes Jesus' forgiveness of the paralyzed man...*weird*. Because, to look at the atrophied calves and quads, this pile of bones of a man, what he obviously needed was *healing*. To get nerve synapses firing and muscle fibers leaping to life. But Jesus didn't say, "Son, you're healed." He said, "Your sins are forgiven."

There must have been something in Jesus' voice that said he wasn't just talking about the roof. Some of the people there, they heard Jesus declare forgiveness and their hearts, they did a double take. "What did he say?"

The air grew stuffy with unsaid grumbles as "the teachers of the law," took umbrage at Jesus forgiving the man. They didn't speak their guff but, Mark says, Jesus could see the legal experts' thoughts, as though in comic strip bubbles above their heads.

Now, in most Presbyterian churches there tend to be some legal experts around, sometimes even serving as liturgist, so one needs to be careful of what one says. These teachers of the law who thought to themselves, "Why does he speak this way? He's insulted God! Only God can forgive sins!"—these are important people to have around. Pastors can be of this ilk. These folks have radar that looks out for theological error because the tradition must be guarded, the faith preserved.

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<sup>1</sup> William C. Placher, *Mark*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 42.

Well, the legal experts with Jesus had picked up a theological bogey! In forgiving, Jesus had gotten into business that they thought didn't belong to him. Interesting, isn't it, that so far in Mark Jesus has healed and kicked out demons, and people have flocked to him from all over. But when he forgives—hold on, now. That's God's department.

Like what we heard in Isaiah 43, God saying, "I am he who blots out your transgressions...and remembers your sins no more." What the paralyzed man's sins actually were is quite beside the point. A guy who grew up in Nazareth just down the road had no business declaring the forgiveness of them, as though he had the authority of God in the matter.

Jesus understood their concern, Mark says. And what Jesus said next...well, that's what really tore the roof off the place!

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My first semester at Wooster I discovered there's a ceiling of clouds that moves in about the first week of November and it likes to hang around until about April 1. This was hard for me after my first Ohio October when I learned that wooded hillsides can shine like one of grandmas patchwork quilts—gold stitched to crimson sewn to Cleveland Browns orange!

The middle of December, after weeks of hovering gloom, I woke up to a splinter of light through blinds. I pulled them up to see first sunny morning in weeks. It looked as though God had gotten a new box of Crayolas and decided to use all the bright colors.

I did what any San Diego boy would do upon seeing a sunny day—I put on jeans and a short sleeve shirt...and walked into a frigid, 5-degree morning! I gasped, turned tail, ran inside and put on my big down coat! I had never seen anything like that!

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Mark's story of the Jesus forgiving and healing the paralyzed man is a signpost of what it looks like when the kingdom of God is at hand, a snapshot of grace breaking in, a depiction of another world falling upon us.

Mark chapter 2, where we are today, is just half a chapter back from another story about a ceiling of sorts getting busted. Jesus was at the Jordan receiving baptism from John, and as he came out of the water he looked up and saw God tear a hole in the heavens and the Spirit flit down to him. God vandalized the roof separating earth from heaven. Jesus went from there preaching, "The kingdom of God has come near! Repent and believe the good news!" Which might be a fancy way of saying, heaven has sprung a leak and love, justice, forgiveness and joy are rushing down to earth.

Though forgiven, the man still bound to his mat just wasn't entirely well. His most obvious ailment still had him. Yet in his healing, the way Mark describes it, the point wasn't that Jesus had the power to mend bodies, or that Jesus could perform miracles, which he could. It was that Jesus had a certain *authority*.

Jesus looked the theological radar squad and, as I take it, without any disdain in his voice, said, "So you know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins..."

And he turned to the man on the floor and said, "Get up, take your mat, and go home." The man got up and walked out, right in front of everyone. He came in by the roof, he went out by the door, carrying his mat in his arms.

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In Mark's gospel Jesus will go on to calm storms, throw out more demons, turn meager loaves and fish into a meal for thousands, and on trial in the shadow of the cross claim in so many words he has the authority belonging to God alone. People have all kinds of authority, but no one had never seen anything like this.

It can be shocking when grace happens and you have a front row seat to the kingdom of God. I am fascinated with what it looks like when God lowers God's kingdom and sets it down among us. If I have a chance to sit down and hear your stories, I bet you'll give me a witness to how the grace of Jesus has fallen upon you.

Maybe, some days, when God's grace breaks in it really is sun in winter. But it's also things like forgiveness given unbidden and God granting a fresh start in life. The overwhelming kindness of friends, a moment of clarity about God, and faith in the midst of struggle. Gasps and shock, arm hairs standing on end all appropriate response! The paralyzed man strode from the house, and astounded people praised God. They said, of all I've ever seen, nothing is quite like this! Could it be that a lot of church life, a lot in the life of faith, is simply about standing astonished at all that Jesus is doing in our midst?

It seems to me that as God summons a church and a pastor to think about walking a road together, the biggest thing hasn't first to do with what the pastor and church might give to each other but more what God is ready to do among us in the Lord in Jesus Christ.

Jesus doesn't just live in Capernaum, of course. From all I've heard from the DPNC, this congregation is Jesus' house. From the looks of things, there's a pretty good roof up there. But I'm pretty sure, God can still tear a hole in it. Amen.