

Peter's Mother in Law

Mark 1: 29-39

There are many kinds of fever. And there are many kinds of healings. Let me tell you about both of mine—Lift them up, as it were, so you can see them, and perhaps you'll have a lifting up yourself.

Before I begin, I need to tell you that my name is Ruth. In the scriptures I'm only called Peter's Mother in Law— but I do have a name. It's Ruth. Are any of you Mothers in Law? Then you might know a bit of what I'm going to say.

My fever began when my husband died. Well, actually, now that I have gained some understanding of myself, I'd have to say it was before that – when I was a child – with being put down. You know what I mean by being put down? It can be anything— from the time someone laughs at the way you sing and so you never sing again— to the time when at age five someone tells you you can't be a rabbi the way you said you wanted to be— don't you know girls can't be rabbi? – To feeling what it is to be a citizen of a country ruled by another— the way we were by Rome in my day.

It doesn't really matter— personal, political,— a putdown is a putdown, and it does things to people. Looking back on it now, I think that's when the fever started. With put downs.

Later, I did my own putting down. If you've grown up with the message that you're not worth much, soon you begin to put yourself down. With me, it was my feelings. I hid them— even from myself. Especially the unacceptable ones— anger, for example. I'd hardly ever admit I was angry. Guilt and depression— those I was good at. But anger...I just put it down and pretended it wasn't there.

I remember most clearly the feelings I had after my husband's funeral. He was young— our daughter was still a teenager— and most of all I felt angry. Angry at whom? I don't even know. Sometimes angry at him for leaving me, as irrational as that is— sometimes angry at the doctors for not saving his life (even though I know there was nothing they could have done) at myself for allowing him to work so hard— and even at God. That was before I knew for certain that God does not cause death like that.

All the anger— and I just put it down. Down inside me and pretended it wasn't there. And soon I forgot it was there— and except for the occasional slip, and getting sick

from time to time– it didn't show up at all. But it was still there. It was just put down. Like me, really– put down, but still there. Looking at it that way, maybe it's a sign of hope.

My husband fished for a living. We owned a little fishing business. Not an easy way to earn bread, and times can get rough. After he died, I ran the business. I had to hire others to help me. One of the young men I hired was called Simon. He came, with his brother Andrew, looking for work. I hired them. They were nice boys– polite and good on the water. Simon could be quick tempered though, and was quite impulsive, and so when I noticed the growing attraction between him and my daughter, I was a bit concerned. Is this really the right man for her?

I'm sure that all of you who are parents know the fears and doubts that arise as your children choose their mates. When they came to me for permission to marry, I gave it, but I confess that I felt– well– disappointment. I think. I'm ashamed to say it, but I felt she could have done better. Not that I didn't like Simon, you understand,– but I wondered if he'd be good to her– whether he had what it took to stay in business after I was gone– whether his impulsiveness would get him– and my daughter– into trouble some day– if he'd make her happy.

You who are parents– do you know what I mean? And I suppose, no matter who she had married, I still would have felt what was true...that my baby, the one I had carried in my body and taught and who looked to me for love and support all those years– my baby's first love, first loyalty, was no longer to me but to him. And I hoped he deserved it. All of those feelings– and what did I do with them? Put them down. Pushed them aside and pretended they weren't there. Put them down. Life went on– they moved in with me after the wedding– Simon's brother Andrew as well.

Things went along quite well for awhile. Then a most interesting thing happened. While I was on my way to the market one day, I heard a man speaking– he was from Nazareth, and he was talking about the kingdom of God. He fascinated me– and what he said touched me in a way I can't explain. I listened to him for quite a while– then I went home to get the others to come and see.

Well, I never dreamed what was going to happen next. We all went and listened, and talked to him– Jesus, from Nazareth– and then he came to our home for supper, and I helped him out a bit with money, because he didn't have much. He came back a few times, and each time I liked what I heard, and invited people to the house to hear him.

Of all of them, though, he began to pay most attention to Simon (my son-in-law) and his brother Andrew. And one day, he asked them to go with him– and they did.

Left everything and everyone– and followed him. Now that might sound good to you, but I was left with a business to run and no experienced fishers for the boats. How were we supposed to make a living? Did he think of that? No– just picked up and left. And how do you think my daughter felt? She was crushed. Their second baby was on the way and let me tell you it was hard going at our house after that. My daughter put on a brave front and said she was proud that Simon followed his heart– but you could tell it hurt her deeply that his heart had led him away from her.

As for me– I burned. I was furious. How DARE he hurt my child? He came home from time to time, that's true– but that just fed my anger. What kind of man would abandon his wife and family and then drop in again for a meal? If you're going to leave, then LEAVE. Don't keep her hoping– don't come back just long enough to disrupt our lives and then go off again.

My anger was like a fever deep inside me. I tried to push it down, out of the way, and there were days when I succeeded– but there were days when I did not.

That particular Sabbath I heard they were in town again, and I began to feel sick. The anger burned inside me and I actually felt physically sick. I told the family to go on to worship without me, and I went to bed.

I lay there, unable to sleep, and rehearsing a speech I was going to make to Simon if he dared come here expecting my hospitality. It was quite a speech.

He came all right– and not alone. He brought his brother (who also lived with us before they left) and two other brothers– and they brought Jesus.

I was upstairs deciding what to do, trying to take the redness and puffiness out of my eyes, when Jesus asked if he could come up. I didn't know what to do...I was so angry but I liked Jesus and had once been quite moved by his teaching. He came into my room and we talked. I didn't hide my feelings from him– I couldn't have. He looked at me as we spoke– well, mostly I spoke, and he listened– and I shocked myself by speaking so frankly. All the old feelings from years ago came tumbling out, along with my fierce love of my daughter and anger at Simon for having deserted her.

He understood– I know he did– and he understood what I didn't or couldn't say. I can't begin to tell you everything we talked about, and I'm not sure how long it was, but at the end of a long and emotional encounter with that man, he took my hand and said “ shall we get up and go downstairs?”

I wish with all my heart for you that you may know what it is to have him take your hand and lift you up. For me it was release– relief– wholeness– salvation. I can't say how, only that it was so. My anger left me. My fever was gone. Everything that had been put down was lifted up. Especially me. And I have spent my life since trying to do the same for others. You can do it too.

Take someone's hand and lift them up. Lift them. There's enough in this world to put people down. The work of Jesus is to lift up. You can do it. It takes only a willingness to take someone's hand in the name of the One who took yours.

I wish I could tell you that life at our home was perfect after that. It was not. Simon was still on the road most of the time– finances were still tight and most of society held my daughter in contempt as a woman whose husband had abandoned her to follow a visionary vagabond.

But once you've been lifted up– I mean really lifted up, as I was, my life was truly freed from and there was a sense of peace that made those things secondary by far.

What fever is there in you? What is put down, deep inside that needs lifting up? And I ask you – beg you– to look around this room and your community and your world and see those whose greatest need is to be lifted up.

Will you take their hands? One hand– it's a beginning. One hand in the name of the One who took my hand and lifted me– and who was himself lifted up, as John said later, “as Moses lifted up the servant in the wilderness who will Jesus be lifted up” – and he meant, as you know, the cross.

May the Holy One of Israel, who lifted this mother in law to wholeness so that I could minister in that Holy Name, lift you too so that you may do the same for others.

Amen