

## Where Does Your Strength Come When Times are Tough? Pastor Jason Bryan-Wegner

### Mark 5:21-23, 35-43 NRSV

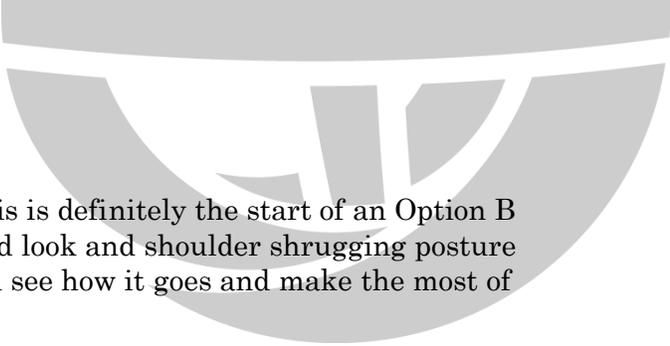
<sup>21</sup> When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. <sup>22</sup> Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet <sup>23</sup> and begged him repeatedly, “My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live.”

<sup>35</sup> While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader’s house to say, “Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?” <sup>36</sup> But overhearing<sup>[a]</sup> what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, “Do not fear, only believe.” <sup>37</sup> He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. <sup>38</sup> When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. <sup>39</sup> When he had entered, he said to them, “Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.” <sup>40</sup> And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child’s father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. <sup>41</sup> He took her by the hand and said to her, “Talitha cum,” which means, “Little girl, get up!” <sup>42</sup> And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. <sup>43</sup> He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

Facebook Chief Operating Officer, Sheryl Sandberg, had it all – two degrees from Harvard, a contact list filled with the richest and most powerful people in the world, a soaring career, beautiful children, a loving and supportive husband, and more money than anyone knows what to do with. It was her “Option A” life. Sheryl’s Option A ended a few years ago when her husband, Dave, suddenly died while they were on vacation in Mexico. He was 47. No amount of wealth or success could have prepared her for this event. No one thing could ease the pain of grief and loss she experienced. In a matter of days, she had to fly home, share the crushing news with her two small children that their father was dead, gather her extensive list of friends, family, and colleagues together for a funeral, and somehow muster the energy and courage to come up with an “Option B” for the rest of her life.

In her book called, *Option B*, Sandberg shares these experiences of grief and her search for strength and resilience after this traumatic experience. She says, “We all encounter hardships. Some we see coming; others take us by surprise. It can be as tragic as the sudden death of a child, as heartbreaking as a relationship that unravels, or as disappointing as a dream that goes unfulfilled. The next question is: When these things happen, what do we do next?”

I spent some time this week checking in with teachers, parents, and kids heading back to school



this past week. For all of these folks, myself included, this is definitely the start of an Option B year of learning. Just about everyone had the same dazed look and shoulder shrugging posture – as if to say, “I don’t know what’s going to happen. We’ll see how it goes and make the most of it as we do, I guess.” It’s the best we all can do, right?

The truth is that under the layers of trying to make things okay, and trying to feel some kind of normalcy in an ongoing time of disorientation, our emotional engines inside of us are working overtime. This year has dealt us all one collective dose of loss and grief, and forced us to come up with Option B plans for all kinds of things.

For some, this extended season of living under COVID-19 has impacted you in deeply personal ways. Perhaps it has kept you isolated at home for months, or kept you from seeing a loved one who lives in a senior care facility. Some have had to delay or completely alter important milestones like weddings or even funerals. Some of you have had to arm yourselves with PPE and N95s at the start of each workday. Add on top of this, sustained calls for justice for black and brown people, the massive volume of disturbing news every day, and the bitter divisiveness that is tearing at the fabric of our communities, and it’s no wonder so many people are weary and afraid. The grief we’re collectively experiencing is crippling, and the way I see, it’s leading to further destructive behaviors by leaders and citizens alike. C.S. Lewis once wrote, “No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear.”

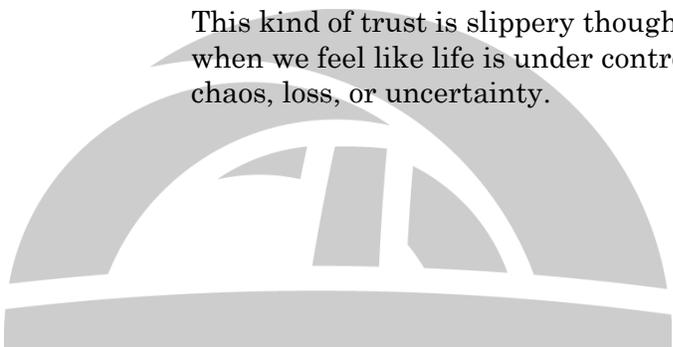
At its best, fear can keep us from doing stupid and dangerous things, like walking too close to the edge of a cliff. But more often fear keeps us from seeing possibilities when challenges arise. It stifles our ability to put our problems in proper perspective. At its worst, fear steals our hope and makes things that lead to death look certain, which tends to breed more fear.

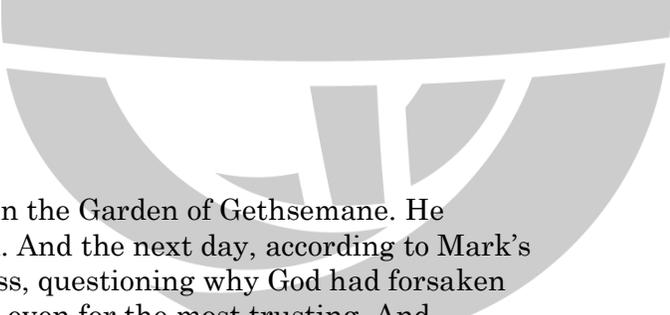
I can only imagine the fear that Jairus felt for his daughter that day. Pushing his way through the crowds to throw himself at the feet of Jesus, he pleaded for her life. From his account, his twelve-year-old daughter was hanging in the balance between life and death. An Option B without her was unimaginable. But he did not let fear get the best of him. He had heard, if not seen, Jesus restore others to life. Would Jesus be willing to act on his daughter’s behalf? Was life possible against the mounting evidence of death?

The people around him didn’t offer him much hope. Perhaps they had been there at one point, too. Perhaps they had felt the ache of the death of their own child. Perhaps the demands of life and living under authoritarian rule had dampened their spirits and left their strength atrophied by constant fear. Perhaps they were so worn down that all they could see were dead ends. And so, they shouted with malice, “Your daughter is dead, why trouble the teacher any further?”

But Jesus paid them little attention. He trained his eyes on Jairus, the one desperate for hope and strength, and gently rebuked the crowd’s doubt. “Do not fear, only believe.” Jesus knows that belief is hard fought. When Jesus talks about belief, it isn’t magical thinking, or subscribing to some rigid set of religious principles – it’s trust – trust that regardless of how devastating the problems we face are, that God’s grace is bigger than our fears, and God’s strength is greater than our troubles, and trust that God’s strength can be our strength.

This kind of trust is slippery though. We have it one moment, then it is gone. It washes over us when we feel like life is under control, yet it seems elusive when we are overwhelmed with chaos, loss, or uncertainty.





We only need to look at Jesus' own wrestling with trust in the Garden of Gethsemane. He prayed to God that he may escape his unescapable death. And the next day, according to Mark's gospel account, we hear the strain of his voice on the cross, questioning why God had forsaken him there. Yes, a deep and abiding trust can be slippery, even for the most trusting. And yet...Jesus does not hesitate to enter into Jairus' suffering and make the journey with him through a gauntlet of doubters. He does not hesitate to restore life and health to Jairus' daughter.

As they approached the house, mourners had already gathered outside. They too had a firm grasp on fear and could see only the possibility of death. Unlike the crowds by the lake though, these people were probably loved ones and friends. They attended synagogue together and broke bread at the same table. They had no malice for Jairus. But they too were gripped with fear and doubt. And again, Jesus challenged their doubts by asking them why they were weeping and making such a commotion. Death was not as near as they thought. If they had just listened, they would hear words of life – Talitha cum! – “Rise up, little lamb!” Do not fear little lambs. Get up, because life, and hope, and strength are yours!

Getting up is the first step toward moving through our troubles. It acknowledges that hope and possibility have a larger share of our lives than fear. And Jesus extends the invitation to get up and promises to stand with us as we do.

You see, friends, Jesus was and is the adversary of fear. You may or may not be facing the fear of literal death these days, but there is plenty happening in our world that offers us plenty to grieve over, plenty to be overwhelmed by, plenty that is stoking fear rather than faith, doubt in others, rather than strength in God and in one another. So, what do you hear Jesus calling you to get up from?

Jesus urges us to train our eyes on him, to focus on his voice amongst the voices of fear and doubt, and to be patient as we gain our strength through his life-giving presence.

Jesus is faith, and hope, and love embodied. Those who use Jesus' name for any other purpose, especially to stoke fear, abuse the good news of the gospel and betray God's purposes for it. In the words of John, “Jesus is the light of the world.” Jesus came “that you may have life, and have it abundantly.” The apostle Paul taught the early church that “For freedom (not fear), Christ has set you free.” These are words to hold on to when life is overwhelming, and when we need strength beyond ourselves to make it through troubling times. Trust in Christ is hard fought. Yet when we release fear from our grip, trusting Jesus makes room for possibility, and our hope in Christ gives strength to face even the greatest of fears. May Christ Jesus, the voice of hope among doubt, give you strength to “get up” this week. Amen.

