

## Contact Tracing: Mark 5.21-43

Perhaps it's appropriate that we have two encounters with women — one old, one young — on this International Women's Day! This modern painting from the church at Magdala conveys the claustrophobic feeling of being down among the hurrying feet of the crowd, desperately reaching out to touch Jesus and find healing ...



When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she kept saying, “If I only touch his clothes, I will be healed”.

Just above the Silk Road in Macclesfield stands St Paul's church, a tall Victorian church, built (I presume) to serve the mill-workers who lived in the small terraced houses surrounding the churchyard. Most of the graves are small and modest — but there's one that stands out, huge and expensive-looking. Must be the mill-owner, I thought, as I went across to look at it once. But I was wrong. The monument was not to a wealthy industrialist, but to a little girl, dying in childhood like so many Victorian children. Yes, the family must have been wealthy to afford such a grand memorial. But the grief of loss cuts across class and social standing: rich or poor, the pain is just the same.

**Jesus is back in Capernaum, surrounded once again by excited crowds. And here, pushing his way to the front, comes Jairus, desperate to get help for his sick daughter. Jairus is an important man in the town, a “ruler of the synagogue” — which probably means he was one of the wealthy donors who paid for the upkeep and management of the synagogue building.**

**Last time Jesus was in the synagogue, he was picking a fight with the teachers, not afraid to stir up a bit of controversy with his vision of where God’s priorities lie (Mk 3.1-6). But Jairus has forgotten the controversies — he only knows that he needs Jesus, and needs him fast. His daughter, loved, protected and precious, is lying in her room, wasted with fever. Maybe — just maybe — the Teacher can save her.**



**But there’s someone else in the crowd who needs Jesus, and Jairus has to wait. A woman, out on the streets alone: maybe just one of those old women nobody notices, like this herb-seller on the streets of Jerusalem. Nobody special, nobody important. Probably she doesn’t want to be noticed: certainly she doesn’t want to talk about her embarrassing illness, because women don’t talk about these things — and anyway, if people knew, they might say she was “unclean” and send her back home.**

**So she takes advantage of the crowd, pushing and shoving, to reach out**

and make contact with the hem of Jesus' cloak. That's all it takes — reaching out and making contact, and feeling the healing starting inside. Now all she has to do is to work her way back out of the crowd, and take her secret home with her.

But Jesus senses that something has happened — something of enormous significance, something that needs to be affirmed and shouted out loud for everyone to hear. To the disciples, it's just a crowd of people pressing in, just random contacts that don't mean anything. But to Jesus — and this anonymous grandma — every contact matters.

In fact to Jesus (unlike everybody else) she's not even a grandma — she's a daughter (v.34). (The cheek of him!) She's a person of infinite value in the Kingdom of God, a person whose story is part of the good news, a story that needs to be told. So Jesus' gentle questioning brings her out of the shadows to be affirmed in a new life of wholeness and peace. The Greek word for healing and wholeness is also the word for salvation. So there's the good news in a nutshell: faith — reaching out to Jesus, making contact — salvation, wholeness — peace (shalom).



Meanwhile, inside the ruler's house, the minutes are ticking away. Away from the bustle of the crowded streets, it is shady and cool. With hushed voices, the servants go about their business. Stone passages open onto carefully-tended flowers in the Mediterranean sun.

But for all its wealth and comfort, this is a house in trouble. The daughter of the house, twelve years old — just on the threshold of womanhood — is slipping away beyond her parents' reach. The message goes out to tell her father: Don't bother the Teacher. It's too late: she's gone. And the quiet courtyards are filled with wailing and lamenting.

But Jesus comes anyway, holding out words of hope: Don't be afraid: she's not dead, only asleep (v.39). The professional mourners laugh at him (what does he know?) — but a flicker of hope stirs in the parents as Jesus takes his three closest disciples indoors to see her. And they watch, astonished, as he takes the lifeless hand and raises her to new life. The memory of that moment lingers in the words Talitha cum, not the Greek of the written gospels but the everyday Aramaic of the streets: C'mon girl, up you get!

So there's another bit of good news: when Jesus takes you by the hand, we're talking resurrection, new life. (Again, the Greek words for

**“resurrection” are the same as the words for “getting up”.) Sooner or later, death will come (it’s a natural part of life), and grief and lamentation will be a natural and proper response. But even amidst the grief, the believer can take comfort (as Christians have taken comfort down the centuries) from seeing death as ‘falling asleep’ — to awake to new life at the touch of Jesus’ hand. It’s the encounter with Jesus that makes all the difference.**

**For God has destined us for salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing. (1 Thessalonians 5.9-11).**

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