

## "Making Room: What is in the Way?"

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<sup>1</sup>When [Jesus] returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. <sup>2</sup>So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them.

<sup>3</sup>Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. <sup>4</sup>And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay.

<sup>5</sup>When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

<sup>6</sup>Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, <sup>7</sup>"Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

<sup>8</sup>At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? <sup>9</sup>Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and take your mat and walk?' <sup>10</sup>But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" —he said to the paralytic— <sup>11</sup>"I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home." <sup>12</sup>And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!" (Mark 2:1-12)

The film "Men of Honor," which was released 22 years ago this month, was based on the inspirational story of Carl Brashear, the US Navy's first African-American master diver and the first amputee to qualify for active diving duty. During his grueling training, Brashear's character, played by Cuba Gooding, Jr., hears for the first time a mantra repeated by his crude and overbearing instructor Billy Sunday. "The Navy Diver is not a fighting man," Sunday yells. "He is a salvage expert. If it is lost underwater, he finds it. If it's sunk, he brings it up. If it's in the way, he moves it." <sup>1</sup>

From the very beginning, the divers are taught that their job has little to do with glory or recognition. Nine times out of ten, they will be discharging their duty alone in the cold and the dark. No crowds will be there waiving flags to urge them on. To do their job well, they will need uncommon grit, determination, and drive.

That scene came to mind as I studied this story of four men from Capernaum who went to such great lengths to help their friend. It would not be wrong to say they were "salvage experts." A chronic condition had pulled their friend under. He had sunk about as low as he could go, and his friends had watched him suffer for too long. The only ray of hope they saw was an amazing new teacher and healer who lived in their own town -- a Good Shepherd who promised that, if something was lost, he would find it. When they heard that the healer was back in town, they carried their paralytic friend to his home, only to find that the door was hopelessly blocked. The crowd around the house was so dense, and so large, there was just no way to get inside. But they did not let this stop them. Somehow, they found a way up onto the roof. Somehow, they managed to haul their friend's pallet up there with them. And then, with uncommon grit, determination, and drive, they moved the obstacle standing in their way.

The Greek text uses two verbs to describe what they do. The first, *apostegazó*,<sup>2</sup> means literally to "unroof." It is a compound verb that combines the preposition "*apo*" -- which means

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.quotes.net/mquote/61338>

<sup>2</sup> ἀποστεγάζω, <https://biblehub.com/greek/648.htm>.



“against” or “away from” – with the regular verb *stegazó* -- which means “to cover” a roof or building. So, they literally “opposite roofed” or “de-roofed” the building.

But the master storyteller of Mark does not stop there. The verb *exorussó*<sup>3</sup> suggests that the process of de-roofing was not a neat and tidy task. To open up the hole, they had to dig. The verb is only used twice in the New Testament -- once here, by Mark – and later by Paul in his letter to the Galatians, where he uses it in the context of “gouging.” Paul often spoke about a condition that he called his “thorn in the flesh.” Nobody really knows exactly what the condition was, but there is a passage in Galatians 4 that suggests it may have been a problem with his eyesight. “*You know that it was because of a physical infirmity that I first announced the gospel to you,*” Paul writes. “*Though my condition put you to the test, you did not scorn or despise me, but welcomed me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus. What has become of the good will you felt? For I testify that, had it been possible, you would have [gouged] out your eyes and given them to me.*”<sup>4</sup> Exactly what this meant to Paul and the Galatians we do not know, but it is safe to say that, whatever it meant, Paul knew that the Galatians had -- at least at one time – had a faith that was so complete and so trusting that they would gouge out their own eyes if that is what they thought they needed to do.

That is the kind of passion driving these four friends who would go to such great lengths to help their paralyzed friend. In that day, most of the roofs in Capernaum were likely made with slabs of the volcanic rock basalt, which were then covered with plaster and some kind of tile.<sup>5</sup> Some sources suggest that a composition of mortar, tar, ashes, and sand would also be used, and in some cases, grass would sprout in that mixture.<sup>6</sup> So, it is very likely that these four men had to do some serious gouging, digging, and excavation to make a hole big enough to all their friend’s mat to pass through.

Perhaps that is why Mark focuses so intently on their faith. It is interesting, I think, that when Jesus heals the paralytic, he makes no mention of the stricken man’s faith. He does not say, “Your faith has made you well.” What impresses Jesus -- in fact, what seems to motivate Jesus more than anything -- is the faith of the four men who broke through the roof and lowered him down. As a classic Scottish commentary on this passage once noted, what Jesus saw in the four friends was “a faith which was not to be defeated—a faith victorious over all difficulties... the [kind of] faith for which [Jesus] was ever on the watch.”<sup>7</sup>

In other words, it is the kind of faith that stands ready to seek God and find God no matter what it takes. If that hope is lost underwater, faith finds it. If it's sunk, she brings it up. If it's in the way, she moves it.

Truth be told, I don’t really know if that was a real thing that Navy divers said. It may just be something cool that the writer came up with and wrote into the screenplay. But anyone who knows anything about the true-life story of Carl Brashear would have to admit that the saying seems right. The son of a sharecropper, Brashear overcame overwhelming odds to carve out his place in Naval history. He enlisted in the United States Navy on February 25, 1948, a full five months before Harry Truman desegregated the Armed Forces with Executive Order 9981.<sup>8</sup> He started out as a steward, and almost everyone assumed that was all he would ever be. But when Brashear saw a salvage

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<sup>3</sup> ἐξορύσσω, <https://biblehub.com/greek/1846.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Galatians 4:13-15.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ritmeyer.com/product/image-library/buildings/houses/capernaum-house-roof-construction/>

<sup>6</sup> Vincent’s Word Studies, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/mark/2-4.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> “Mr 2:1-12. Healing of a Paralytic,” from *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, by Robert Jamieson, Andrew Robert Fausset and David Brown, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/jamieson/jfb.xi.ii.iii.html>.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/executive-order-9981>

diver recover an airplane that had accidentally slid off the deck of the USS *Tripoli*, Brashear said, "This is the best thing since sliced bread. I've got to be a deep-sea diver!"

For three years, he repeatedly applied to the Navy's Diving & Salvage program. Every time, he was denied admission, almost certainly on racist grounds. Finally, in 1954, he was accepted into the program, the first African-American to be given that honor. Throughout the program in Bayonne, New Jersey, he faced daily hostility and racism. Malicious notes would be left on his bunk peppered with slurs and threats. "We're going to drown you today, N-word!" "We don't want any N-word divers." But with uncommon grit, determination, and drive, Brashear stuck it out and became the first African-American to graduate from the program and begin active service as a salvage diver.<sup>9</sup>

That alone would be movie-worthy, but Brashear would go on to earn another first in the US Navy. On March 23, 1966, serving aboard the USS *Hoist* in an urgent operation to find and recover a missing thermonuclear weapon, Brashear was directing the movement of a transfer crate that would hold the bomb. Without warning, a line failed and the heavy crate started to fall. As a bending steel pipe broke under the weight, Brashear leapt to push a sailor out of harm's way. His quick action saved that man's life, but the lethal pipe that was shearing across the deck struck Brashear and gruesomely shattered his left leg.

After the medic on board placed two tourniquets on the injured leg, Brashear began an arduous journey to an Air Force hospital in Spain. Waiting beside a runway for his transport plane, the massive blood loss threw him into shock. His doctor later confessed that he thought Brashear would almost certainly die. By the time he arrived at the hospital, his heart had stopped. Miraculously, he was resuscitated. It took 18 pints of blood before he finally regained consciousness.

Brashear survived the accident, but he lost his leg, and no one thought he would ever dive again. Once more, Brashear would face overwhelming odds to prove to the Navy that he could do the job he was born to do. He adapted to life with a prosthetic limb and secretly started training to dive again. Later, he began sending photographs of his diving workouts to the Navy to convince them he was in good enough shape to return as a master diver. "Sometimes I would come back from a run," Brashear later said, "and my artificial leg would have a puddle of blood from my stump. I wouldn't go to sick bay. In that year, if I had gone to sick bay, they would have written me up. I'd go somewhere and hide and soak my leg in a bucket of hot water with salt in it — an old remedy. Then I'd get up the next morning and run."<sup>10</sup> It was a monumental mountain to climb, but Brashear was determined to climb it. His hope seemed lost underwater, but he found it. His career seemed sunk, but he brought it up. Everything in his way, he moved it, until he was restored to full duty as a Navy diver — the first amputee in Naval history to make it back.

Pondering these stories – one ancient, another more recent – my question today is "What is in our way?" What is holding us back? I'm asking that question in the specific context of faith, because that is what this story from Mark is really about. It's about a faith that was ready to move obstacles... a faith which would not be defeated... a faith determined to be victorious over all difficulties... the kind of faith that got Jesus' attention. I know we all have different reasons for being here this morning, but I think that there is at least a little place in all of you that is attracted to that kind of faith. Maybe you have had it before, and you've kind of lost it. Maybe you have never had it, but you are curious about it.

Stories like the one about Carl Brashear can seem daunting or unattainable to us, but the story of four friends in Capernaum – that is not at all out of reach. We can all take a step toward a

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<sup>9</sup> <https://navalunderseamuseum.org/brashear-diver/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://navalunderseamuseum.org/brashear-injury/>

deeper faith... a more vibrant faith... but maybe there is something in the way... something that is blocking our progress... something that needs to be dug through.

If taking that next step is something you want -- or even if you are just a bit curious about what it would be like to trust in God and hope in God like that -- I am here to tell you that faith in God is ***always rewarded***. Maybe not in the way you want it to be. Maybe not as quickly as you want it to be. Maybe not in ways that the world will celebrate. But faith is rewarded.

Take, for example, Barbara Maghami who joined our congregation this morning. Barbara was born in Iran. Raised as a Christian, her family watched in fear as religious fanatics took over the government and her country that had once been free became increasingly oppressive. "No one had the right to have another religion," she says. Those who exercised freedom of religion, speech, or expression -- anyone who stood out or differed -- was imprisoned, tortured, and often executed. After a while, her father warned her not to wear her cross necklace, because if anyone saw her she would be arrested. Her church was targeted with more and more governmental restrictions. But still, she resisted. "This is my belief," she said. Even so, it was impossible for her to be baptized in her home country. It was only later, when she escaped to Turkey, that she was finally able to receive the sacrament. And now, today, her son has received that sacrament in freedom and joy.

Stories of faith like Barbara's remind us that we are not alone in our striving. As hard as we might work for God, God is always working harder for us. In those times when faith seems like a treasure that is too difficult to find, we remember the promise of Jesus: *"Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened."*

So, whatever is in your way, do not be daunted. Take a step toward faith. If it is lost underwater, go find it. If it's sunk, bring it up. And if something is in the way, move it.

***Amen.***