



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, MAY 25, 2025
ACTS 16:9-15; PSALM 67; REVELATION 21:10, 22-22:5; JOHN 5:1-9

WITH HEARTS BROKEN OPEN



Figure 1: The ruins of a Byzantine Church over the Pool at Beth-Zatha in Jerusalem

John 5:1-9 [After Jesus healed the son of the official in Capernaum, there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids-- blind, lame, and paralyzed. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be made well?" The sick man answered him, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me." Jesus said to him, "Stand up, take your mat and walk." At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk. Now that day was a sabbath.]

Eden Murphy stepped into the pulpit with IV pump slung over her shoulder. She was only eighteen years old, but was invited to deliver the homily that day, as part of a service led by

the youth of her church. Her pastor, Peter Marty, sat in the pews, and wrote a moving essay recently about the experience.ⁱ

Eden shared that she had been born with hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, a condition in which the heart's walls thicken and become stiff, making the heart fail in its pumping duties.

"I received my first heart transplant at age two," Eden disclosed. She knew that this heart was a gift from a little boy who choked on food. What must it mean to know that someone else had to die in order for her to live?

"A year and a half ago," Eden continued, "I was placed back on the transplant list since this second-chance heart of mine has now failed... The wait is agonizing. Each day feels like a grain of sand slipping away. My future hangs in the balance, totally dependent on a new heart. This journey is the hardest I've ever faced. My heart is ready to give up, but I am not."

Eden the young preacher declared: "I believe in resurrection... Not just physically, but spiritually. I have to keep going... I press on in hope... I want to become a cardiologist who can say what none of my good doctors are able to say to me: I get it. I know exactly what you're feeling."

Parker Palmer speaks of the heart being broken in two ways—broken apart, when life shatters, and the heart can become brittle,

prone to anger, bitterness, or even violence. Or the heart can be broken open in a way that one learns to hold the suffering in ways that afford compassion and love.

It seems to me Eden lives with a heart broken open.

Palmer says we can learn to live with faith and hope in the tragic gap of loss. "Heartbreak," he says, "can become a source of compassion and grace because... people enlarge their capacity for empathy and their ability to attend to the suffering of others."ⁱⁱ

As we consider what it means to have our hearts broken open, not broken apart, let us turn to the gospel passage this morning, in which we hear about a man who for 38 years has suffered chronic illness. He comes daily to seek help in stepping down into the healing waters, but others would always rush past him.

I will tell you this man, this passage, holds special significance for me. It was there in 2015, beside the Beth-zatha pool in Jerusalem's Old City, just inside the Sheep's Gate, that I received a call that my mother back in Arkansas was suffering severe complications following heart valve replacement surgery.

I leaned against the fence over which you can peer down into the ruins of a Byzantine church built on the site, the healing spring only a trickle now.

I imagined that man lying at the top of the steps all those years. How did he perceive time? Day in, day out, he went to the pool. What is time wasted? Was his time landlocked on a mat a sort of torture? How it must have broken his heart each time others pushed past him to get to the pool. Yet he is there the next day, and the next. Then Jesus comes along and unlocks a timeless moment for him. Do you want to be made well, he asks. How was Jesus' heart broken open for him in that momentary interaction? How might our hearts be broken open by compassion and mercy?

I prayed for that man, sick for 38 years, that day. I prayed for my mother, and everyone with a heart broken physically, spiritually, emotionally. Which is to say, everyone really.

Beth-zatha, aka Bethesda, means "home of mercy."

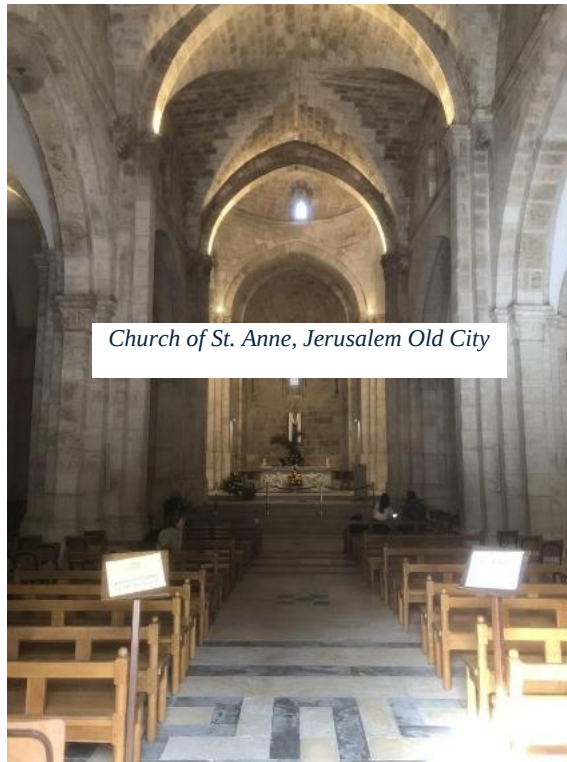
How is mercy meted out in a world of broken hearts? What is our work of mercy here and

now? How are faith and hope designed to span the tragic gap of loss in this life of broken heartedness?

After a time, my pilgrimage group moved into the adjacent 11th Century Church of St. Anne, known for its exquisite acoustic. For a thousand years now, pilgrims have chanted and sung their songs in this resonant place. We sang "There is a balm in Gilead"

that day. Words of faith and hope designed to span the tragic gap.

Kathy and I debated whether to leave the pilgrimage early, even checking flights. We decided to stay the last few days with the group and hold things as lightly as we could. We would wait and divert from the group when we landed in Newark on the stopover.



The next day in Jerusalem we walked the Via Dolorosa, the Good Friday Way of the Cross,

through the bustling market, the back alleys of the Old City, to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. The timeless journey of the broken-hearted Jesus. The timeless truth of the Paschal Mystery. Death and resurrection held in the same frame. You can imagine the poignant experience held against the backdrop of my mother's illness a half-world away.

We would visit my mother a few days later and again a few weeks later before she died. Between those times, we would worship in this community here, marking time by the

cadence of worship where we profess our resurrection hope day by day, week by week, year in and year out. It is good to be in community as we find our way.

What we say and do here matters, friends. These are not idle tales. This is a house of prayer for all with broken hearts. It is safe space to learn how to live with hearts broken open. This is a home of mercy where we are treated to a timeless moment with Jesus, the compassionate one, who sees us and loves us dearly. Take his hand and see what happens.

ⁱ Peter Marty. *The Christian Century*, June 2025, pg. 1.

ⁱⁱ <https://couragerenewal.org/library/the-broken-open-heart-living-with-faith-and-hope-in-the-tragic-gap/>

