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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA
Sunday, February 7, 2021
5 Epiphany, Year B, Revised Common Lectionary
[Isaiah 40:21-31](#)
[1 Corinthians 9:16-23](#)
[Mark 1:29-39](#)
[Psalm 147:1-12, 21c](#)

In the name of Jesus Christ, in whose service is perfect freedom: Amen.

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I want to start out today with an image: one of my favorite Eastern Orthodox icons, this icon of the Resurrection. You may have seen it at Easter Sunday services two years ago when we gave it out as a prayer card. Jesus is bursting out of Hades, and not by himself. He grasps Adam and Eve by the wrists and practically yanks them up out of the grave, raising them up from death to eternal life.

Today's gospel story is the first healing miracle in Mark's gospel, as Jesus heals Simon Peter's mother-in-law. And to be honest, for a long time I found this story a bit disappointing in what happens after. "He took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them." And something inside me says, Wait: didn't she even get to take a break? When Jesus heals a little girl he tells the people around to give her something to eat. But Simon's mother-in-law just has to get to work serving the men in her life.

Now first-century gender roles were what they were, and of course we have plenty of those gender roles still with us today. But I began to see something more in this story thanks to two words. The first one is the Greek word for "lifted up"; and the second is the word for "serve."

“Lifted up” is the exact same word that’s translated elsewhere as “raised up.” It’s the exact word that’s used of Jesus being “raised up” in the resurrection. So one way to see this story of Jesus grasping Simon’s mother-in-law by the hand and raising her up is as a kind of foretaste of the resurrection, a miniature icon of what’s to come, not just for Jesus but for all of humanity, with Simon’s mother-in-law as the stand-in for Adam and Eve.

Now the word for “served,” as in “and then she served them,” is the source of our word *deacon*, as in a servant leader in the church. And there are two other places in Mark’s gospel where this word is used. One is to describe the women who provide for Jesus and his disciples in their travels, almost as patrons. And the other is where Jesus tells his disciples about himself, “The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve.” Or if you like, The Son of Man came not to be deaconed, but to deacon. So to practice *diakonia* is to do what Jesus does: to join him in his ministry. In God’s eyes service is the greatest honor of all. So it may be less that Simon’s mother-in-law is healed from her fever so she can get back in her place, and more that she serves in this story as an icon of each of us: *raised up to serve*. That’s really what God is doing, always and everywhere: setting people free, raising them up, not so they can lord it over others, but so they can join in God’s own work of loving service for the life of the world.

This week I’ve been thinking a lot about one particular servant leader. I haven’t seen it yet, but a documentary came out this week about her life: Pauli Murray. And if you’re not familiar with Pauli Murray, let me invite you to get to know more about her: because she is one of the Episcopal Church’s great treasures, one of our saints. Literally: in 2018 she was added to the calendar of Lesser Feasts and Fasts, and she’s commemorated on July 2 each year.

This month is a good time to honor Pauli Murray: February of course is Black History Month, and Pauli Murray was the first African-American woman ordained as a priest in the Episcopal Church, in 1977. But before that happened, Pauli Murray had had a long career as a law professor, a legal scholar, and a central figure in both the civil rights movement and the women’s movement—as well as a

poet. In 1950 she wrote a book about segregation laws that Thurgood Marshall called “the Bible of the civil rights movement.” She was a friend of Eleanor Roosevelt and a mentor to Ruth Bader Ginsburg. She worked with Betty Friedan to co-found the National Organization for Women. Farther back, in 1940, at the age of thirty, she was arrested for refusing to move from the white section of a bus in Virginia, fifteen years before Rosa Parks did the same thing in Alabama.

Pauli Murray faced a lot of obstacles. She was orphaned as a child and raised by her grandparents and aunts. She worked her way through college waiting tables in restaurants that wouldn’t serve her because she was Black. She was used to being one of only two or three Black people in the room and two or three women in the room and the only one who was both. She also struggled with her experience of gender and sexuality: she wore men’s clothes and short hair, fell in love with women, and changed her name from Pauline to the more ambiguous Pauli. It’s not clear how Pauli would have identified herself in today’s terms: perhaps as a gender-nonconforming woman, a transgender man, or a nonbinary person. Today her biographers disagree about what pronouns to use for Pauli, especially earlier in her life; in the later part of her life she used she and her pronouns and identified at least publicly as a woman. But what’s clear is that she spent her life as someone who didn’t fit comfortably into society’s categories.

Now Pauli Murray’s great-grandmother Harriet was born into slavery, enslaved to a white woman in North Carolina named Mary Smith. Mary Smith’s brother was a lawyer named Sidney, who did something very common among white men in that place and time. He forced himself on his sister’s slave; many times. The child born from that rape, Cornelia, was born into slavery too. Her aunt Mary Smith, who was also her owner, had her baptized into the Episcopal Church, at the Chapel of the Cross, and she grew up in that faith—although she had to worship with the other slaves in the balcony.

After the Civil War, there were a couple of decades when Black Episcopalians worshiped in the same churches as whites. But as the reaction against Reconstruction set in, white Southern Christians were no longer willing to share

their churches. So a Black Episcopal church was formed, St. Titus's; and it would become the church of Pauli Murray's childhood, the church that shaped her faith. That faith sustained her through many years of struggle and advocacy. That faith led her, later in her life, to become one of the pioneers of women's ordination. And after she was ordained, she went back to North Carolina to celebrate her first Eucharist at the Chapel of the Cross, in the same place where her grandmother Cornelia had been baptized and had worshiped in the balcony.

She writes about that moment: "Whatever future ministry I might have as a priest, it was given to me that day to be a symbol of healing. All the strands of my life had come together. Descendant of slave and of slave owner, I had already been called poet, lawyer, teacher, and friend. Now I was empowered to minister the sacrament of One in whom there is no north or south, no black or white, no male or female—only the spirit of love and reconciliation drawing us all toward the goal of human wholeness."

Human wholeness. That is the life we are raised up to by Jesus: the life of healing, and the life of sharing that healing with others: the life of service. Pauli Murray was raised up to serve. May we receive that same healing, that same raising up, and that same commission to love and serve our neighbors in Jesus' name.