Today's Gospel begins with Jesus and his disciples going to the home of Simon and Andrew. We're not told why they go, but it is possible that Simon has asked Jesus to come to his home because his wife's mother is sick. It is difficult to see the character of Simon's mother-in-law as an early model of women's liberation. First of all, Mark doesn't give her a name; the only way she is identified is by her relationship to her male son-in-law. Secondly, after Jesus heals her, the first thing the woman does is get up and start waiting on Jesus and the disciples. We don't read anything about her even speaking to Jesus. She's sick, Jesus heals her, she gets out of bed and resumes her household duties. It's a simple enough story, one of Jesus' many healing miracles. But we have learned that when Mark puts something in the first chapter of his gospel, he does it for a reason.

In Mark, this is Jesus' first physical healing. Jesus crosses major societal boundaries by entering the woman's home as a male outsider to the family, then touching and healing her. Then, Mark uses the same Greek word to refer to this nameless woman's service as he used to describe how the angels waited on Jesus when he was in the wilderness: “And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.” Here, Mark is placing the woman's ministry to Jesus in a very positive light, even going so far as to say that the woman models, by her service, the vocation to which Jesus calls his disciples. Jesus heals the woman for a reason – so she can continue serving God by attending to the needs of others. This passage begins a series of incidents in which women represent the right response to Jesus, while the disciples fail to understand. We read about the widow with her two small coins, the woman who anoints the feet of Jesus with precious nard and the women at the cross and tomb. In the gospel of Mark, it is typically the “nobodies” or the “unnamed” of the world who understand Jesus and his call better than the disciples, who frequently come across as clueless. This is intentional on the part of Mark, who sees Jesus as constantly breaking through traditional boundaries that separate insiders and outsiders, this time crossing gender barriers and teaching us something important about God's coming kingdom.

Jesus heals people and raises them up so they can serve him.

It still happens today. The Rev. Darren Ferguson was convicted of attempted murder and was sent to prison. He served nine years at Riker's Island and Sing Sing, both in New York state. Ferguson refers to himself as one of the “one in fifteen,” meaning the number of African-American men who are incarcerated in the U.S. at any given time. One of Ferguson's fellow inmates talked about the situation in this way: he said there are 4 o 5 neighborhoods in New York City from which most of his fellow prisoners start out. Then he said there's a figurative train that begins in each of those neighborhoods and young boys get on the train when they are 9 or 10 years old. The train's destination? Sing Sing. When he went to prison, Darren Ferguson says he was an atheist. While incarcerated, he listened to what the visiting church groups had to say and he began to read the Bible. He received the gift of faith in Jesus and got both a college and seminary degrees while in prison. When he was released from Sing Sing, Ferguson vowed to go back home to try to stop the train, to tell at least some of the thousands of nameless, faceless young men in his neighborhood that there is another way, that they don't have to end up where he did.

While he was in prison, at age 26, Ferguson dropped to his knees one day in prayer. He didn't know how to address the God to whom he was praying. But God heard him, reached down and pulled Darren Ferguson to his feet and healed him so that he could serve God with the rest of his life. That's what Jesus does. He hunts for people like the unnamed woman and Darren Ferguson, people who might seem like unlikely disciples but who are exactly who Jesus chooses to carry out his ministry. Jesus transforms lives so that people can become who they truly, most fully are. Jesus healed the mother-in-law so she could serve him most authentically as a mother and the manager of her household. Jesus raised Darren Ferguson up so he could find his true calling as a minister to those who feel they have no alternatives to lives of crime and violence. And now Jesus is here with us – holding out his hand and saying, “Let me help you stand up. How can I help you find your way out of whatever is keeping you from being who you most fully are?” A lot of us live on the periphery of our lives, filling our days with tasks that take our attention away from who we are as people of God. Jesus became truly human so he could understand what it means to be us, to grasp how easy it is to look everywhere but at God for a sense of purpose for our lives. God knows that by bringing us together to hear God's word, to be washed in the water of forgiveness and healing, to be fed at his holy table, we will find who we truly are, what we have been created to be. And then God takes us out into God's missionary field and tells us to share his love with those we meet. The beauty of this plan is that each of us has a distinct role as disciple. Each of us finds a place where we are most genuinely “us,” where our personality and gifts are most fully expressed, where we can share the love and compassion of God with joy, where we can even dare to make a difference in someone else's life.

In his song, *Speak Life*, singer Toby Mac puts it this way:

*Well, it's crazy to imagine  
Words from my lips as the arms of compassion  
Mountains crumble with every syllable  
Hope can live or die,*

*Look into the eyes of the broken-hearted  
Watch them come alive as soon as you speak hope  
You speak love, you speak life.*

Jesus stretched out his arms of compassion so that we might know love and life. Jesus steps right into the middle of the messiness of our lives to fill us with hope that spills over into what we say and do. Jesus reaches down to you and me, the nobodies and unnamed of the world, pulls us to our feet and breathes life into our tired bodies, loves us into becoming most fully us. So that we might look into the eyes of the broken-hearted, speak words that are the arms of compassion and watch them come alive with a word of hope, a promise of love and life. Amen.