

## **Learning to Fly**

*B Lent 2--Mark 8:31-38*

It is July 2, 1937, and fifteen-year-old Betty Brown is home alone in St. Petersburg, Florida, with her father's short-wave radio. She's scanning through stations from around the world, listening for popular music shows and writing down song lyrics so she can learn them without having to buy the sheet music. The air presses against everything, heavy and still. As one song comes to an end, she fans herself with her notebook and starts to dial for another station. Suddenly she hears a voice she recognizes from the newsreels they show before movies at the cinema in town. "This is Amelia Earhart Putnam," the voice says, "Please help me. Please hear me."<sup>i</sup> Betty grabs her notebook and starts to write what she hears. Over the next few hours, that voice, frantic and scared, fades in and out. Apparently there's been some kind of crash-landing or accident, on a reef or maybe a beach, and there is rising water. The woman mentions numbers, coordinates maybe, and keeps pleading for help. There is a man's voice too, ranting nonsensically, and at times Betty has the impression that the man and woman are struggling for control of the radio.

At one point, Betty's father comes home, hears some of the broadcast, and drives down to report the message to the coast guard. But even though the coast guard knows that Earhart is missing, they brush him off, telling him they have no need of his information and everything is under control. A short time later, Betty records the final words of this mayday call, "Let me out. Knee deep over. Stop...38-3. Huh. Are you here? 3. Darn. 30. NY NY." Neither Earhart, nor her plane, nor her navigator, Fred Noonan, are found. And although Betty makes several phone calls to the government

over the ensuing years, no one is interested in her story or her notebook. So she gives up on that. She goes on about her life. But as the decades pass, she remains haunted by those few hours at the radio that hot, July day, and convinced that if someone had listened to her and her father, the outcome for Earhart and Noonan might have been totally different.

But here's the thing. Betty has previously taken very little interest in Amelia Earhart, but this chance encounter changes her life. As she puts it in an interview many years later, "I wanted to do something for her. I decided I would learn to fly, and I did." In fact, she discovers that she loves to fly. She ends up logging so many hours on her private license that she's invited to join the ferry command, where she meets and falls in love with her future husband.

*I wanted to do something for her. I decided I would learn to fly.*

This transformation of an ordinary life is not so different from what's beginning to happen to Peter in our gospel reading today. At this point we are halfway through Mark, and Peter has just proclaimed, aloud, for the first time, that Jesus is the Messiah. Now in that era, Jews like Peter believed that the Messiah for whom they waited would be a political and military leader in the mould of King David. He would rise up, throw off Roman oppression, and return Israel to its glory days of autonomy and prosperity. That's why Peter rebukes Jesus when Jesus immediately begins to teach that as the Messiah he will be rejected by the Jewish leadership, tortured and executed like a shameful criminal, and then raised again. Peter doesn't understand that Jesus' way is a way of peaceful resistance and civil disobedience and not of brute force. Later, as we

know, in Jesus' hour of need, Peter runs away and denies he even knows Jesus three times.

So Peter is just clueless and timid, ordinary, a fisherman picked up in the backwaters of Galilee. It isn't until the tragic death and the mysterious empty tomb that he begins to change. You can almost imagine Peter, having witnessed these shocking events, saying to himself, "I want to do something for him. I think I'll learn to lead." And suddenly Peter is transformed. As the book of Acts chronicles, he takes over leadership of the disciples. He delivers bold speeches to hostile crowds. He raises the dead and heals the sick with the touch of his hands. Just as Betty Brown learns to fly because her life is touched by this amazing woman who dies in flight, so Peter learns to lead, and preach, and heal because his life is touched by the savior who dies and is resurrected leading, preaching, and healing.

Sometimes tragedy reaches it's long arm out of the random world and seizes us, us ordinary people. We don't know why. It grabs us by the shoulders and hands us a responsibility we neither sought nor wanted. It changes our life. The shooting of a young man over a ten-dollar pizza prompts his father to reach out to the murderer's family to start a movement for forgiveness and nonviolence. The epic heroine figure who dies on a trans-Pacific flight inspires a teenage girl to learn to fly. The rabbi who is murdered for liberating oppressed people galvanizes his most timid and clueless follower to carry on his work.

We have other options, of course, other ways to respond to tragedy. We could turn inward. We could get lost in our bitterness or our sense of defeat. We could turn off the panicked radio calls for help. We could rebuke the Messiah and never move past our

false understanding of the purpose he proclaims for his life and for ours. But to do this is to set our minds on human things and not on divine things. To set our minds on divine things, Jesus reminds us, we must take up the crosses that the world hands us and follow him. Or, to put it another way, we must take up the wings of those who have gone before and learn to fly.

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<sup>i</sup> This story is a mix of my imagination and radio reportage. Its shape and quotations are taken from "Listening for Amelia" an episode of the National Public Radio program, *The Story*, originally aired 8/6/08, accessed on 3/5/09 online at [http://thestory.org/archive/the\\_story\\_575\\_Listening\\_For\\_Amelia.mp3/view](http://thestory.org/archive/the_story_575_Listening_For_Amelia.mp3/view). I also used some supplemental material from Betty Brown's notebook, accessed on 3/5/09 at <http://www.tighar.org/Projects/Earhart/Documents/Notebook/notebook.html>.