Three sons left home and prospered in life. When getting back together they discussed their success and the great gifts they were able to buy their elderly mother. The first son said, "I sent mom a Mercedes." The second son said, "I bought mom a mansion." The third son smirked and said, "I've got you both beat. Remember how mom liked reading the Bible when we were young? And you know she can't see very well anymore? Well, I sent her this amazing parrot that recites the entire Bible. It took elders in the church 12 years to teach this parrot. He's one of a kind. Mom now just has to name a verse and, the parrot recites it. There's no doubt she'll like my gift most."

Soon after receiving the sons' gifts, mom sent out her thank you letters. "Andy," she wrote, "the house you built is so big and even though I live in one room, I still have to clean the whole house." "John," she wrote, "I am too old to travel and spend most of my time at home, so I never use the Mercedes." "Mark," she wrote to her third son, "You are my favorite son. You have such good sense to know what your mother likes. The chicken you sent me was simply delicious." This Epiphany season we're talking about seeing. We live in a culture that elevates, “Seeing Is Believing.” If we can't see it, then we can't believe it. The Bible presents a view of faith that runs counter to this assumption. Faith is to believe what we do not see and the reward of faith is to see what we believe. With Jesus, so much of what is seen requires our believing before seeing.

In Matthew 9 Jesus is caught up in an argument with the Pharisees. Once again, they are trying to entrap Him by asking challenging questions. No one knew the promises of the coming Messiah better than them. Throughout the Gospels, the most qualified to see were often the most likely not to make the connection. Right in the middle of their challenge, Jesus is approached by a synagogue leader. Immediately upon arriving on the scene, the man kneels before Jesus. He pleads with Jesus and exclaims that His daughter is very sick. Take note of the description, “leader of the synagogue.” Here is a person that would have identified with the Pharisees who are challenging Jesus with questions. The synagogue officials were Jesus' harshest and fiercest critics. Now, for this man approaching Jesus, his life is desperate. We can be sure that approaching Jesus was not the first option, or the second, or third. The man is kneeling as the last option.

Our defensive side might look cynically upon such behavior. Now is the chance for Jesus to put the man in his place. Before we react too quickly, we might think of times in our life when desperation
was the deciding factor. Jesus didn't mean that much until I was in trouble. Jesus wasn't a consideration until I run through all my other options. Jesus isn't a priority until nothing else and no one else can answer the problem. This man doesn't know what else to do. Where was this reverence before you were in trouble? Where was this kneeling before you were desperate? Maybe Jesus is nothing more than a Carpenter from Nazareth but it's worth a try. Maybe Jesus is nothing more than a homeless wanderer with no place to lay his head but what more do I have to lose?

It is Mark's Gospel that shows Jesus and the synagogue leader on the way to the house when someone informs them it's no use to travel any further. The daughter is now dead. There's no use troubling Jesus any more. In this case, the daughter has passed the point of no return. What we have is a clear case of the irreversible. Those who are dead stay dead. The synagogue leader hasn't given up and requests for Jesus to continue. When they arrive, people are in mourning. The surrounding scene is chaotic. Musicians are playing mournful music and a crowd is wailing. Jesus announces to the crowd, “Don't mourn because this girl is only sleeping.” The crowd then laughs Him to scorn. Imagine this synagogue leader. He represented a group that resisted Jesus. This was a group that opposed Jesus and made life difficult from Him throughout the Gospels. Jesus travels to the man's house and when they arrive they are greeted by skepticism.

What do you do when members of your own family don't believe? What do you do when the friends and company you keep don't believe? What do you do when the place you work and the co-workers who surround you don't believe? Despite having skepticism and unbelief on all sides, the synagogue leader refuses to give up. He pressed forward even when they announced the girl was dead. He pressed forward even when his family and friends laughed Jesus to scorn. He pressed forward even though the group he worked with opposed and rejected Jesus. Despite how bleak the conditions appeared, he pressed forward. Though there was nothing in the situation that suggested any basis for common sense hope, the man pressed forward relying only on faith alone.

Now, before they arrived at Jairus's house, Jesus had a second encounter. As they were traveling along, a woman who had an illness for 12 years observed Jesus from a distance. Mark's Gospel notes how the woman had seen several different physicians before encountering Jesus. She had spent nearly everything she had seeking help. She had been searching for 12 years. Here is another case of desperation driving us straight to Jesus. One of our greatest temptations after enduring an affliction over an extended period is to reach a point of apathetic acceptance. Why even bother? It only hurts to get hopes raised again. Like Jairus, this woman had every reason to give up and give in. Nothing had
worked in the past, so why try and only fail again? If specialists tried and failed, then it would seem we have a futile situation that requires our acceptance.

Some commentators have noted that the woman's attempt to touch the hem of Jesus' robe was actually an expression of superstition. Clearly, there was much this woman didn't know about Jesus. She doesn't approach Him and even when Jesus first asks the question about who touched Him, she didn't step forward. There was much she didn't know but she knew enough to reach out to Jesus for help. Her actions demonstrate an earnestness to get close. She was reaching out with actions showing the determination of life and death. There were no other options available. Compare her actions with the Pharisees a few passages before who were challenging Jesus. They knew more Scripture. They were far more informed about Scriptural prophecy. Nevertheless, the behavior that got close to Jesus was the actions earnest enough to do whatever it takes.

The third encounter Jesus has is with two blind men. In Jesus' day, blindness was viewed as a fate worse than death. Those who were awaiting the Messiah were looking for one sign in particular that would signal arrival of the promised one. Throughout the Bible, there are many miracles but Jesus is the only figure to heal someone from blindness. It was expected whenever someone showed up capable of healing blindness that the identifying sign is revealed. The Messiah has arrived. These two men are calling out, “Son of David.” The title itself shows they really didn't know Jesus. In the Gospels, whenever someone uses this title, it's by someone who only knew Jesus second hand. The title reflects Jesus' lineage with King David. However, those who used it were looking for a King like David, a military conqueror who would restore the nation of Israel. Jesus resisted this conception and always showed His kingdom was different.

These men don't really know who Jesus is but they know from hearsay that Jesus helps people. What other options do they have? They are desperate. People who were blind stayed blind. No one else in the Bible performs the miracle. They don't know a lot about Jesus, but they know enough to reach out. What do they have to lose? Jesus asks a peculiar question, “Do you believe I am able to do this?” Can you imagine a doctor asking this of their patients? If the patient said “no” then we might wonder why the patient showed up in the first place. For Jesus, this is a clear way to separate the contenders from the pretenders. Do they really anticipate Jesus can provide good things or are they just literally taking a shot in the dark? For Jesus, it makes a big difference.

Jesus proclaims to them, “According to your faith, let it be done to you.” This is not what he said to Jairus or to the woman who was sick for 12 years, but He may as well have. In each case, these
three situations involve someone reaching out to Jesus who have no guarantee upfront of what Jesus has available. For Jairus, his daughter was dead, passed the point of no return. The woman who was sick for 12 years, had seen several specialist who couldn't help, passed the point of no return. The blind men who come to Jesus, no one else could help, passed the point of no return. There was nothing in the present circumstances that gave them any indication or proof things could be different. They approached Jesus without having anything tangible as the precondition. In the third case especially, this was a case of believing first before seeing is possible.

The Pharisees had more exposure and more information. They should have believed, but they were demanding seeing before believing. For Jairus, the sick woman, and the blind men, they were all in desperate circumstances with no clear answers available. Despite their limited knowledge about Jesus, they came with anticipation and expectation. They came with earnestness. The passion which moved them was the force between life and death. If Jesus doesn't make a difference then nothing else will. She may have acted with superstition. The blind men may have called out a name gathered second hand. For Jesus, what matters most is the earnestness by which we pursue Him. What matters most is the intensity by which we let nothing stand in our way. Though we are surrounded by obstacles, we overcome them to seek for His help.

By the time we get to the end of the story, the Pharisees are in the same place at the end as they are at the beginning. They are no closer to belief. Even after the miracle of delivering blindness, they account for it by suggesting Jesus might have dark powers. How often in life we see only what we want to see. We see only what we are willing to see. For Jairus, the sick woman, and the blind men, if they judged by appearances, there was nothing to go on. The surrounding conditions were hopeless by anyone's standards. We don't base our approach to Jesus on common sense. We don't base our approach to Jesus on what he needs to start with in order to bring about a miracle. In all three cases, none of them had anyone in their corner. They made the move. They took the initiative. They didn't wait for someone to make it for them. If they hadn't stepped out, then it never would have happened. They stepped out in spite of the bleak conditions.

We speak often of radical faith as if such an expression is reserved for the advanced believers. As we see from all three of these miracles, this wasn't the later point of their spirituality, this was the starting point of their spirituality. In our lives, if there are situations that look uncertain, we are not to wait for favorable conditions before approaching Jesus. In all three of these cases, the conditions were unfavorable. There wasn't the slightest natural advantage to build on. Jesus doesn't need a natural
advantage to build on. There's nothing He needs to start with in order to bring something about. The best miracles from Jesus happen when he brings something from nothing. When all the other specialists have declared the situation irreversible is where Jesus now begins.

So what happens if we do come to Jesus with doubts? Are we then excluded from His intervention? Remember the story of the father who came to Jesus who had the sick son. All the disciples had tried to help and failed. The father comes to Jesus and says, “If you can.” Jesus then responds, “If I can?” The father then exclaims, “Help my unbelief!” Jesus can work with doubt. Jesus can work with superstition. Jesus can work with those who merely repeat lines they hear. Jesus can work with lack of knowledge. Jesus can work with no knowledge. Jesus can work with someone who comes treating Him as a last option. Jesus can work with someone who was once intensely opposed. The one and overarching quality despite everything else is openness. I'm filled with doubt, but I'm open. I'm filled with confusion, but I'm open. I'm filled with superstition, but I'm open. I'm filled with disappointment, but I'm at least open.

The three word prayer is as good as any in Scripture. “Help my unbelief.” Such a prayer can overcome all the hurdles that life puts before us. It's not a matter of sorting out our confusion before approaching Jesus. It's not a matter of sorting out our mistaken information before approaching Jesus. It's not a matter of curing my own disappointments before approaching Jesus. I may have some baggage but I come anyway. I may have some skeletons in the closet but I come anyway. I may have some dirty laundry but I come anyway. In every case, all three of these miracle stories could have talked themselves out of it before taking the first step. For every reason they had to step forward, there were a hundred more to just remain and avoid all the disappointment.

“According to your faith let it be done to you.” Jairus was surrounded by friends, family, co-workers who tried to talk him out of it. Why bother Him? Your daughter is passed the point of no return. There's too much water under the bridge. Specialists have told you this condition is incurable. Why can't you accept authoritative opinion? This situation is unfixable. This situation is irredeemable. There situation is uncorrectable. All of this is necessary to accept if we base our decisions on the way things appear. Faith is to believe what we do not see and the reward of faith is to see what we believe. These three incidents are not exceptions but they reflect the standard. In our lives the moments that can offer the most possibility are too often the moments we base decisions on how things appear. We give up. We bail out. We walk away. Common sense offered not a flicker of confidence. How amazing that Jesus often waits until this precise moment before striding into our
midst. This is the moment of decision.

In all three cases, it was not a matter of what Jesus had available because He supplied more than enough. “According to your faith let it be done to you.” While Jesus brings the potential of our enrichment, our faith is what meets His gift halfway. Too often Jesus is eager to give when those on the receiving end stifle and restrict what would have otherwise flowed with abundance. Instead of faith, Jesus was met by common sense. Instead of faith Jesus was met by prudence. Instead of faith Jesus was met by specialist opinion. Instead of faith Jesus was met by what sight can prove first. If I can't see it, then I can't believe it. Count on Jesus to challenge us on this every time.

Look at all three of these stories and there's one glaring commonality. They all moved from where they were to get in better position to encounter Jesus. Jairus left his home and went on a desperate search. The sick woman left where she was a crawled on her hands and knees through a crowd. The blind men went staggering into the street shouting out. So much of our lives is about what doesn't happen or what can't happen because of obstacles. What would have happened to Jairus if he had listened to the crowd? What would have happened to that sick woman if she had taken the specialist diagnosis as the final word? What would have happened to those blind men if they had refused to push through the obstacles? The only exclusions are self exclusions. I talk myself out of opportunities before even taking the first step. With these three stories, even if there journey had failed, they were at least going to go down swinging full force.

Situations that appear incurable come in all varieties. It's when we're surrounded by numerous reasons not to believe Jesus has an interest of showing up at just the precise moment. “Do you believe that I am able to do this?” Better yet, “Are you open to believing that I am able to do this?” About the only qualification we need to bring is the desperation of having no other place to turn and the openness that maybe Jesus can do something. Sometimes grace has an incredible way to get us moving so as to better position ourselves for what Jesus has to offer. If we wait for all the obstacles to go away, we'll never make the first move. For those who receive, they launch out and ask questions later. We just throw caution to the wind and let the chips fall where they may.