

April 24, 2022

When Miracles Matter

John 20:19-31

Our scripture reading today comes from the Gospel of John, chapter 20, verses 19-31:

¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'

²⁶A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' ²⁸Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' ²⁹Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

As I mentioned in my Easter message last week, the heart of Christianity is not a set of doctrines. The basis of our faith has never been a list of propositions, but rather a story. The early church's preaching was really one simple narrative: Jesus, the Son of God, came to earth, died, was buried, and rose again. That's all: a simple history, with a miracle at the end. And that miracle is not only what defines us, it's what bothers us, because we modern, scientific sorts are suspicious of miracles.

Not just this miracle; all of them. For every miracle recounted in the Bible, you can bet that there's been a fight over it, and there will be the same three groups fighting. First, there will be the skeptics, who say "That's physically impossible. The Bible must be just a silly fairy tale." Then there will be the dig-in-their-heels, give-no-quarter defenders of the Bible who say, "It did too happen! Just the way it says!" And finally, there will be the people who try to please both sides with something like, "Well, *something* happened, but maybe not just that way, and maybe God used a natural process." On example: the Book of Jonah. In one part of the story told in that book, the prophet Jonah is swallowed by a great fish and lives in that fish's belly for three days. The skeptics say this is absurd: even if someone could survive three days inside a fish, no fish is big enough to swallow a human, unless you count whales, but their throats are too small. Then the Bible's defenders say, "God said it, I believe it, and that settles it!" and the middle-ground folks say, "What about the sperm whale? Don't they have larger throats?" And so it goes.

The same arguments rage around our defining miracle – Christ’s resurrection from the dead. Again, the skeptics scoff at the whole idea. This case is unique, though, because the biblical account of the miracle includes an account of a skeptic: the disciple Thomas. Now, Thomas is an interesting character in John. In the other gospels, he’s mentioned in passing, but isn’t described. In John, though, he has personality. In earlier chapters, he proves to be a brave, dedicated disciple, but in John 20, the passage we just read, we see a different side of his character: he is the scientist, the one who needs to see proof. “Unless I put my finger in the mark of the nails in his hands and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” Here’s our skeptic.

Many of us find ourselves identifying with Thomas. He wants proof, and so do we today. The miracles of scripture, and the Resurrection in particular, are stumbling blocks for us. That’s why we have those incessant battles between the skeptics and the anti-skeptics and the middle-grounders. But I want to move away from that tired old ground and point out that in those battles over biblical miracles, everyone loses. If you are a skeptic who refuses to believe something unless it can be independently verified in a controlled laboratory setting, then you’re shutting yourself off from some of the deepest and most meaningful truths of life. On the other hand, if you’re one of those people whose faith is based on defending miracles, then you end up doing little else, and before long your entire faith has become angry, suspicious, and defensive. Either way, you lose. Either way, you’re missing the point. To go back to the Book of Jonah – this book isn’t really about a miracle at all. It’s a startling, revolutionary statement about how God loves the people we hate the most. Really! But you’d never know that from *everything you’ve ever heard about Jonah*. As long as we’re arguing about the size of a whale’s esophagus, we’ll never see the true meaning of the book. These “defenders of the Bible” who fight to uphold every miracle may think that they are supporting scripture, but the truth is that they support the Bible the way that a rope supports a hanged man. They hold it up great, but they kill it in the process.

I believe in miracles. Once you believe in a Creator God, believing that that God can act outside of natural causation doesn’t seem like a huge stretch to me. But that doesn’t change the fact that we have to move beyond the miracle to the meaning. That’s what Jesus tried to teach our skeptical disciple. Now Thomas is luckier than most skeptics, because he actually gets the proof that wants. Jesus appears to him and says, “There. Put your fingers in my scars if you want. I’m here, and I’m alive.” And Thomas believes. But Jesus didn’t stop there. Verse 29 again: *Jesus said to him, ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.’* This miracle is not just for those who could see the proof; it’s for those to come later. It’s for us. Verses 30-31: *Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.* Did you catch that last bit? Jesus rose, and John told the story, not so that Thomas could believe, but so that *we* could. Jesus overcame death itself, but not so that Jesus could live, but so that *we* can. This is what the miracle is about, not just something that happened then, but something that can happen to us, and if all our focus is on what happened then, we miss it.

The religion scholar Karen Armstrong tells a story about when she was a nun – before she went over the wall – studying theology in order to become a teacher. She was assigned to write a paper proving the Resurrection. She read all the right books and compiled all their arguments into an essay. As she worked, though, she began to question her own assignment. If

the Resurrection really could be proven logically and scientifically, then it wouldn't require any faith, would it? And if it doesn't require any faith, then it doesn't call for any commitment or change. She began to see her own arguments as pointless word games. Well, she did the assignment and received top marks on it, but when the older nun who was her teacher praised her work, Karen Armstrong hesitated then said, "Yes, but sister, it's all nonsense, isn't it?" And the teacher leaned forward and said, "Yes, but don't tell the others."

The truth that Armstrong had sensed is that if our faith is all about *whether or not* Jesus rose from the dead 2000 years ago, then it's not much of a faith. Jesus did rise, but there's more to our walk with God than agreeing with that statement. Because even if we *could* prove conclusively that the miracle took place, we would still be faced with the question: And what now? Jesus' resurrection has to become *our* transformation. We, too, can rise from our past, from our sin, from our despair, from our brokenness, and we too in God's power can find new life. Our faith is based on the Resurrection, but that story is not just Jesus' story, it's ours. Miracles are real, and miracles matter. The Resurrection matters. But what matters is not just that it happened then, to him, but that it can happen now to us, and change our lives. So when does the miracle matter? It matters the week after Easter. It matters now.

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Final word: Here's the weird reality of the whole idea of proving the Resurrection: if there *were* a logical, scientific way to prove conclusively that Jesus rose from the dead, we would immediately discover that nobody cared. There are whole series of books dedicated to supplying convincing proof of God to skeptics, and the only people who read them are people who already believe, and as far as I can tell, the only lasting effect of those books on those who read them is a certain degree of smugness. No, people turn to faith in a search for meaning, not proof. Our greatest proof of the reality of our faith is to live lives of meaning and purpose, of love and compassion. Before it can be significant to anyone else, Jesus' resurrection has to become our transformation. It is by our lives that we can truly say, "Christ is risen; he is risen indeed."