

EASTER -- THE GREATEST MIRACLE!

(04/01/18)

Scripture Lessons: 1 Corinthians 15:1-8
Luke 24:1-12

“*Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.*” (Luke 24:5)

Happy Easter! We are so glad that we are able to celebrate this very special day by sharing together in the Sacrament of Holy Communion, just as the disciples did with Jesus in the Upper Room the evening before he was crucified. As we do so, we pray that we, like the disciples, will experience the presence of our Lord both with and within us.

In the seventeenth century, a man who came to be known as Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection had a powerful religious experience. Lawrence was walking in the woods of France on a cold winter day when his eye fell upon a tree. The tree was bare, stripped of leaves.

All of a sudden, Lawrence *saw!* He realized that in a few short months life would burst forth within this tree! He must have realized this on an exceptionally deep level, because it transformed his life. He became a Carmelite monk. He developed a spiritual discipline that is known as The Practice of the Presence of God. He became known as Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection because it was an experience of the Resurrection in the broadest sense of the term that miraculously transformed his life.

Life is full of miracles! I am not speaking of a miracle as something that violates the laws of nature. I actually can't think of anything that falls into this category. I believe that seeing something as violating the laws of nature is an indication that we do not fully understand the laws of nature, that we have not plumbed the mystery of God's creation.

A miracle is something that strikes us as not only out of the ordinary but as quite a bit out of the ordinary in what we experience as a meaningful way. It is not what we would expect or have any reason to expect. In his *Introduction to the Ethics of Spinoza*, the philosopher George Santayana said,

Miracles are propitious accidents, the natural causes of which are too complicated to be readily understood.

Miracles are propitious, helpful, fortuitous accidents. Miracles can never be fully understood. They can only be experienced. And, with humility, we wonder how and why they happened.

Life is full of miracles -- if we have eyes to see! Brother Lawrence *saw* that barren tree in a way that most of us do not. He saw deeper. He saw into the miracle of spring, the miracle of life. Once you begin looking at the world this way, you will discover many miracles. You will find yourself constantly surprised by life, surprised by God. As Walt Whitman has noted,

*To me every hour of the light and dark is a miracle,
Every cubic inch of space is a miracle.*

Spring is certainly a miracle! No one appreciates it more than those of us who, for one reason or another, choose to live in New England. The great circle, the great flow of life is a miracle. Anyone who studies science cannot fail to be awed by the intricate workings of both the microcosm and the macrocosm. There is a pattern that lies behind the manifest level of reality, a pattern that appears in and through what we experience as change or even chaos. As far as I am concerned, this entire universe is a miracle! There is absolutely no reason why it should exist at all, let alone in the amazing form it has taken, but it does!

The Bible is a testimony to the possibility of miracles. It was a miracle that the ancient Israelites escaped from Egypt. It was a miracle that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were not burned to a crisp in Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace, and that Daniel was not devoured by the lions. The Incarnation, the birth of the Christ was miraculous, as was his escape from the wrath of King Herod. The Bible offers us example after example of what the biblical writers experienced as miracles.

If we believe in the possibility of miracles, we open ourselves not only to the wonders of nature, but also to the unexpected events of our lives. A belief in miracles will enable us to discern the hand of God not only in the life of Jesus, but also in our lives. We will discover things we would not expect and have no reason to expect.

Jesus turned water into wine at the wedding he attended in Cana. This is a miracle, but there are even greater miracles. He fed five thousand people with five loaves and two fish. He exorcised demons that were destroying people's lives. He healed the sick and restored sight to the blind. These are indeed miracles, but there are even greater miracles.

Jairus, a leader of the synagogue, begged Jesus to come to his house that he might heal his daughter who was dying. When Jesus arrived at the house, he was told that the little girl was already dead. Jesus replied, "Do not fear. Only believe, and she will be saved." The crowd laughed at him. They laughed at him! Jesus took the little girl by the hand and said, "Child, get

up!” Scripture says, “Her spirit returned and she got up at once.” Her parents and Jesus’ disciples were astounded!

I would call this a miracle, not because it violates the laws of nature but because it puts us in touch with the mysterious power of healing that Jesus set loose in the world. In addition to this little girl, Jesus also brought his friend Lazarus back from the dead. When Mary, the daughter of Lazarus, comes to tell Jesus of her father’s illness, Jesus says to her,

I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.

When Jesus arrives at Bethany, he learns that Lazarus has been dead for four days. He tells them to roll away the stone from the front of Lazarus’ tomb. Then Jesus says, “Lazarus, come out!” Scripture tells us, “The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, ‘Unbind him, and let him go.’”

What is the greatest miracle? Is it that Jesus walked on water? Is it that he opened the eyes of the blind? Is it that he brought people back to life? We heard about another miracle this morning, the miracle of the empty tomb. Jesus rose from the dead. This is the miracle of the Resurrection.

Just when we think we have encountered the greatest miracle in history, we discover something even greater, even more unexpected, even more puzzling and inspiring. Following his resurrection, Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene. He appears to two disciples who are walking in the country. He appears to the eleven as they are sitting at table in the Upper Room.

Jesus appears to his followers in a new way, in a new form. This is truly miraculous! The disciples were able to witness this miracle only because they saw through the eyes of faith. They knew Jesus and they loved him. The grace of God is stronger than unbelief. It can break through the doubts and darkness that separate us from Christ. In his confrontation with Saul on the road to Damascus, it is clear that Jesus even reaches out to those who persecute him. He appears to Saul in a way that totally transforms his life.

What I would suggest this morning is that *even this* is not the greatest miracle. The greatest miracle of all is not that Jesus *lived* but that *he lives*! It is not that he rose from the dead two thousand years ago but that he is alive *today*! In the words of our Easter hymn, “Jesus Christ is Risen *Today*!” Like the tree that Brother Lawrence saw, like the new life that bursts

forth in the spring, the risen Christ who restored life, who brought new life to the little girl and to Lazarus, bursts forth within us and in our world.

The risen Christ, the one who overcame death, has the power to raise us from the cold and barren winter of our souls and lead us into a new and fuller life. When we experience his presence both within and among us, he opens us to the miracle of life.

Two weeks ago we celebrated a baptism here in this sanctuary. When I held Cosette in my arms, I found myself touched by the miracle of life. How could you look at the mysterious and majestic wonder of this beautiful little human being and not believe there is a God? How could you not believe in the power of love when you can feel the love she evokes, a love that calls her mother and father forth into the hard and exhausting work of parenting? Perhaps the greatest miracle is not the emergence of new life in a little baby, but what this little baby brings alive in us.

At the close of our worship this morning, we will join in the singing of the old-time gospel hymn, "He Lives!" Although we sing it at various times throughout the year, it is a resurrection hymn. Perhaps this is why we need to sing it throughout the year. It not only celebrates the miracle and mystery of the historical resurrection, it celebrates the miracle and mystery of the resurrection as it happens to us today.

Jesus not only lived; he actually *lives!* He lives in us and in the world! We know this from the testimony of scripture and also from our own personal experience. If we are people of faith, we will feel his presence. We will experience his guidance and his love. The hymn tells us that our risen Lord will walk with us and talk with us, but only if we walk and talk with him.

The apostle Paul tells us,

"So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Corinthians 5:17)

The miracle of the resurrection happens every spring to our world! It happened to the daughter of Jairus and to Lazarus. It happened to Jesus. It happened to the apostle Paul and Brother Lawrence. And perhaps the greatest miracle of all is that it can happen today to us! This is the glorious message and the true miracle of Easter!

*A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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April 1, 2018*