

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller
The Fifth Sunday After Pentecost
28 June 2015

Scripture readings:

2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27

Psalm 130

2 Corinthians 8:7-15

Mark 5:21-43

I must tell you I find miracle stories upsetting. I received as recently as last Sunday something from the internet that was given to me with the best intentions in hopes of easing my grief these many months later after James' death. To me it was what I think is commonly known as a "crock." *"He is not dead. He's only in the other room. Life has not changed. Everything is the same."* It's a lie! It's an absolute lie. And despite the popularity of this kind of thinking and that wishful thinking about death and loss, and despite the authorship of this piece which is attributed to some early 20th century English divine from the University of Oxford, Regius Professor of Divinity, I found the piece profoundly upsetting, disturbing and wrong. Loss and grief change things. I wrote a response to the piece which I didn't give to the person yet, but will, and I will do that personally. One of the things was, *"He's in the next room."* I said, *"It's not true. I have looked."*

The story this morning says in the mouth of Jesus, *"She is not dead but only sleeping."* We often refer to the dead as sleeping. Well, in forty plus years of ministry I've dealt with dead bodies. They are not asleep. They're dead. And that's my difficulty with miracle stories because what happens when people pray faithfully? What happens when parents mourn dearly? What happens when, as in my last parish, the fourteen-year-old who had received two, possibly three, kidney transplants died from the last one because it came to him with the Epstein Barr virus. Was Jesus not there? Was the gift of that kidney a gift of death? Where are miracles today if this is what you mean by miracle? What happens when we pray and the answer we pray for doesn't come?

Those are fair questions. As much as I find these stories challenging, I think they're worth thinking about. The real miracle, I've come to believe, is not the suspension of the natural order. *"Please take what is here and make it different."* *"Please excuse us from life and death."* The real miracle *is*, in fact, the natural order. And today with this baby, this tiny beautiful baby, we will celebrate that she will indeed die. It may not be tomorrow. It may not be in the first 10, 20, 50 years, but she will die. And, friends, so will you and so will everyone you know and love. Now that's the part of the natural order we really despise. That's the part of the natural order we would like to get around. That's the part of the natural order we would all like to be excused from. And you can like that excuse all you want, but you will not get it. And I don't care how well and hard and long you pray. If you want to ask about the little girl who was raised from the dead today or Lazarus, Jesus' best friend, who was raised from the dead, my question is, *"Where are they now?"* Their end did come in this world at some time.

Now if I were to end there I would have preached a sermon that was full of bad news because that's not very good news as far as I'm concerned. But we gather here to celebrate good news, and the good news that we celebrate is that in addition to the miracle of the natural order which brings us into life, through life and out of life, we believe, teach and confess that no matter what we encounter on our journey in this life - and some of it is very good and some of it flat-out stinks - we believe, teach and confess as Christians that for reasons we do not understand, God loves us and intends to be with us at all times and in all places under all circumstances and forever. That's the miracle! That we believe in a God who creates the whole shooting match and.... You know, if I were God and I'd bet a lot of money if you were God - if you were God and you were faced with the mess of this creation, wouldn't you just take an eraser and wipe it out, forget the whole thing? Wouldn't you really - and start over? But we have a God who, for reasons we do not understand, desires to invade creation and be present there with God's power for those who live in creation despite their lack of deserving that presence.

Jesus, I think, comes off looking a little bit cheap today. Don't you? *"Who took power from me?"* *"Well, there's a whole crowd around you, Master. What do you mean who touched you? Everybody's touching you."* And you know people in other cultures seem ruder than we are because they don't mind pushing each other. You've been hit by the older person with a shopping cart in a line checking out, haven't you? *"Who did that? Who violated my personal*

space? Did you?"

I'll tell you how exciting my life is these days. Were you watching the Weather Channel this week? I was. The odds of being struck by lightning are 3,000 to one. Those odds were too short for my comfort, but the odds get better if you're struck twice. Of course they had somebody who was struck twice. And they did all kinds of graphics and designs on how it happened. A tree was hit, the electricity went underground and tickled his feet and he felt that. The next time he got it directly and that hurt more.

Then as I read this Gospel of this woman who's hemorrhaging for all these years snakes her way through the crowd on the ground to touch the hem of Jesus' garment to be healed. He says, "*Who touched me? Who's stealing energy from me? Who's taking my power for her own purpose?*" He comes off like a real cheapskate, I think. He doesn't take it back, but he does want to know who did that. And then I think the most extraordinary thing is the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling and fell down before him and told him the whole truth. That's what people do who lie and cheat and steal. They finally tell the whole truth. Isn't that what we spend most of our time watching CSI and all the rest of it on TV for? When they finally tell the whole truth - and it has to happen within a half an hour. Maybe she made it before the commercials at the end of the program, but she is cast in this story as a criminal who has stolen from the Lord what she needs for her own health and benefit. She tells the whole truth and he said to her, "*Your faith has made you well. Not my energy. Your faith has made you well. Go in peace and be healed of your disease.*" She believed that God was with her. She believed Jesus had the power, and she appropriated that power for her own life and her own health. But she also knew she was in a bad situation before she got there, and she also knew that all the wisdom and all the effort in the world up until that time did her no good. But she and the early Church came to believe that in being in the presence of Jesus she was in the presence of God.

I don't think this story is so much about suspending the natural order but believing that a part of the natural order is acknowledging the presence of the Creator God in the natural order so that we acknowledge that no matter what comes our way God is with us. Now we sort of relegate that Emmanuel stuff to Advent and Christmas, don't we? And then we forget because our sense of the incarnation has to do with a Jewish boy two thousand years ago who dies, comes out of a hole in the ground and all of that stuff and is unrelated to us except as a history lesson. Well, I think there's a stronger lesson being shared with us in this Gospel today - that in the miracle of the natural order which has these astounding landmarks for us in our lives that we begin, live and die, each of us--that God is with us! And the confession we make as people of faith is that if God is with us, there is nothing really that can harm us or be against us. Neither height, nor depth, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor life, nor death can separate us from the love of God which we perceive to come to us most clearly in the person and life and work of Jesus Christ.

So we celebrate a sacrament today, a sacrament that celebrates the miracle of the natural order - that there is before us a tiny, sentient, beautiful being who does not know where she came from. Is there anybody here who knows what life was before you were born? Where were you? But we know now. And we know another scientific fact: that without love and care this child will not thrive. We believe and acknowledge that love comes from God - God *is* love - and that love gives life. So every time this child is rocked, cooed to, fed, cleaned, protected, taught, encouraged and brought into life, God is known to her through you who do those things for her. God is with us in the miracle of the natural order by virtue of other human beings and through the touch, the gaze, the affection, the provision that other human beings provide for her and for us. This is what Christmas is all about - that God will be incarnate in this world, that the only way you'll really know God is through and by virtue of other people. You can have all the highfaluting ideas you want about God and if you are unloved and if you are incapable of love, God will be absent in your life, not because she wants to be but because you prevent her from being there. Yes, you don't think God wears trousers, do you? If she does, we're in trouble.

We believe, teach and confess that God is larger than all of it, even gender, even power, even race. God is larger than sin. God is larger than human life. God is larger than all of creation. We believe, teach and confess that God who creates this entire shooting match, and for reasons we cannot understand but only can believe and trust, that God chooses

to remain in the world and is a miracle worker every second of creation and that we are a part of the miracle of creation at whatever stage in life we find ourselves. And so it is that the Church has the nerve to take a helpless human being.... Now you may say a lot of things about Roberta but I will say this: she can do nothing for herself except make her selfish needs known clearly by crying and making your life miserable until she gets what she wants. She cannot work and earn; she cannot return the favor. She can only accept from you what she needs to survive. And one of the most important elements in addition to food and warmth is love. And so the Church has the nerve today to take this tiny, fragile, obstreperous, beautiful, happy human being and say, *“You, by virtue of being a human being, are a part of the Body of Christ. You have the potential of communicating God’s love to other people even now as you accept God’s love from those same other people. You, Roberta, make God present to us as a member of this organization which is the Church.”*

And so it is the Church comes together regularly to do this at this table which is simply to take a little bit of bread and some wine and to ingest them, to eat them. And in doing so, we proclaim to ourselves primarily and somehow, I suppose, to the rest of the world that we believe that God can inhabit human flesh which is temporal, which is limited by space and time and human imperfection, but God can by God’s miracle live in each of us in order that others who are temporal might know God’s love through us and we might know God’s love from them. That’s what baptism is: God simply saying, *“This is my child. This is a part of my body. Love her and be loved by her and I will be known and I will be present.”* Science won’t teach you that, but that’s miracle. And wherever love is, friends, there is God because we believe, teach and confess, and always have, that God *is* love.

And so as all of you who bound up my wounds in the last couple months know, one of the finest places I saw that love sat there. See the love of God here. Return it, share it, allow it to fill your lives and be the blessing that God is by being with us. This is not a magic act of preventing babies from going to hell if they die unbaptized. Can you get that out of your head? This is the image of God pouring God’s love over Roberta and every last one of you here. That’s why I invite you before you leave to make sure you have your hand in this water and remember that you’re baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Because this is God’s activity just as that is God’s activity - God saying, *“You are mine”* and God saying, *“I am yours, and in the natural order I will be known as you share love.”* That is true miracle, friends. And then of course when the little girl either survives her illness or is carried off, we confess that God’s love is eternal and she was a recipient of a piece of eternity and a sharer of it as well.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.