

“A Miraculous and Mundane Faith”

Luke 24:36-48 (NRSV)

Maybe I’m a bit nerdy about the Bible, but I think it’s fun that we have four different gospels because Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all have variations in their accounts of Jesus’ resurrection. But, they are absolutely consistent on *one thing*: no one believes the good news of Jesus’ resurrection when they first hear it. No one. And that includes Jesus’ own disciples, the ones who were closest to him and spent the most time with him.¹

In Luke’s resurrection account, women go to the tomb first. To their surprise, they discover that the stone is rolled back, and two men in dazzling clothes announce that Jesus was raised. The women return home and report the news to the disciples, but their report seems like an “idle tale” and was dismissed. Peter, however, ran to the tomb himself and he confirmed that it was empty.² Because, of course, everyone knows that a man must confirm what a woman says

in order for it to be true. (ahem! I’m being facetious here...)

By the way, the phrase “idle tale” is the translation we’re used to reading, but the actual Greek word – *leros* – is the root of our word *delirious*.³ So the disciples literally say these women are disturbed out of their minds, incoherent, speaking nonsense. That’s a bit more dramatic than just saying that they told a “tall tale!” Perhaps it wasn’t anything against the women thought. Perhaps it was just that the miracle of the resurrection was too good to be true. Rationally, it couldn’t be real.

At this point, it seems, just NOT seeing Jesus in the tomb is NOT enough to believe he is raised from the dead. And so as Luke continues the story of that first Easter Sunday, the plot takes an interesting twist: Jesus starts showing up – in the flesh.

¹ David Lose, “Easter 3B: Resurrection Doubts,” *In the Meantime* (13 April 2015), accessed on April 15, 2018 at <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/04/easter-3-b-resurrection-doubts/>.

² Mark G. Vitalis Hoffman, “Commentary on Luke 24:36b-48,” *WorkingPreacher.org* (15 April 2018), accessed on

April 15, 2018 at http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3627.

³ Lose, *ibid*.

It's that same first Easter Sunday when two followers of Jesus, who were going to Emmaus, encounter, but do not recognize, Jesus. They express their disappointed hope that they thought Jesus would be the one to redeem Israel, but Jesus (still disguised as a stranger to them) explains how everything that happened was necessary according to Scripture. In their grief and dismay, I doubt that this was very comforting to them, but the two followers invite Jesus to come to their home anyway. It's the hospitable thing to do.

During this mundane, run-of-the-mill meal at their home, when Jesus blessed and broke the bread, their eyes were opened, and they recognized Jesus. But as quickly as that moment came, it was gone. Jesus vanished from their sight.

So you know how it goes by now. These two followers rush back to report to their friends (the disciples) what had happened only to discover that Simon stole their thunder because somehow, someway, Jesus had already appeared to him too!

Then we get to our text today which begins, "*While they were talking about this,*" (Now you know what the "this" was. THIS

being the fact that three people had now seen Jesus in two separate encounters) and Jesus is about to make it a third: "*Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you'*" (Luke 24:36).

As far as miraculous moments go, this one is way up there. You can't get much more grand than a dead man walking. But this miracle is overshadowed by the disciples' doubts and terror since they think they are seeing a ghost. To convince them that he is indeed really "flesh and bones real," Jesus shows them his hands and feet, we assume, so that they could see the wounds from the cross and know it was him. Interestingly, according to texts in antiquity that testify to ghosts, the way you identified a real person from a ghost is that you would check the extremities where bones are clearly visible and evident, namely the hands and feet, to make sure that a person's feet were touching the ground.⁴

The miracle is right before their eyes. But Jesus can tell it is still not sinking in, and so he switches from the **miraculous** to the **mundane**. He says, more or less, "*Forget my hands and feet, I'm hungry. Got anything to eat?*" (Luke 24:41)

⁴Hoffman, *ibid.* (See also *Epistula Apostolorum* 11-2 and Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 4.43.)

They give him broiled fish and he chows down. And this isn't a communal meal. Unlike the Last Supper and unlike the encounter earlier in the day when Jesus and his two followers broke bread together, at *this* moment, Jesus is just eating fish by himself in front of them, almost like a circus act, and I imagine their mouths are gaping open in disbelief as he chews and swallows. "*Do you believe me now?*" perhaps he says as he smacks his lips and licks his fingers.

When Jesus finishes eating, that is to say, when he finishes a mundane, earthly act, he immediately gets back to meaning-making and reminds them again of the miraculous: that everything that happened to him happened in order to fulfill Scripture, including suffering, dying, and rising on the third day. The result or response to this miracle, Jesus says, is that "*repentance for the forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things,*" (24:47-48). (We'll get back to that sentence in a minute.)

Luke, with the emphasis on the physicality of the resurrected

Jesus, clearly wishes to demonstrate a flesh-and-bones Jesus, not a mere spiritual presence or apparition.⁵ There's nothing metaphorical about *his* Risen Christ.

Perhaps he emphasizes this point because Luke, like us, has never seen the physical Jesus either. He is grappling with this miracle, just as we are, and he's doing so by showing us that *no one* believes in the Easter story easily or readily at first. So if you have trouble believing the resurrection, you're in good company!

The more I reflected upon this struggle to believe in the resurrection, the more I wondered if part of the difficulty in believing the resurrection is that we struggle to believe that God is both *completely beyond us* and *immediately in front of us*. Because remember, before the miracle of the resurrection came the miracle of the incarnation... God coming to earth in flesh-and-bone fashion to experience everything that we experience...and more.

The Creator became the Created. *Our* Creator became *our* teacher, our peer, our friend, our leader, our shepherd, and our neighbor. Do we truly grasp this truth? I'm not so

⁵ Hoffman, *ibid.*

sure we do, at least, I'm not sure it's reflected in our everyday lives. Because we tend to separate out "church" as something we attend (or a place where we work!), rather than "church" being the reality of Christ living in and through us, each and every day.

Author Madeleine L'Engle said, "*There is nothing so secular that it cannot be sacred, and that is one of the deepest messages of the incarnation.*"⁶

L'Engle was a devout Anglican throughout her adult life. Her faith filled her fiction. She avoided dichotomies and saw the world in a much more mysterious way. Asked once to define "*science fiction*," L'Engle replied, "*Isn't everything?*"⁷

The reporter who asked her that in 2004 also wrote, "On another occasion, in the vast, sunny apartment where she has lived since 1960, and where she and her late husband brought up their three children, she offered an example. 'I was standing right there, carrying a plate of cold cuts,' she said, pointing at a swinging door between the dining room and the

pantry. 'And I swooped into the pantry, bang, and got a black eye. It was exactly as if someone pushed me. Most likely,' she continued firmly, 'it was a poltergeist. There must have been a teenage girl in the house. All that energy! They create the best atmosphere for them, you know. We don't know how to catch and harness it.' She nodded. 'Too true of most things.'⁸ We limit our energy because we can't recognize or harness God's energy. For L'Engle, the supernatural was quite natural, and the veil between this world and the next is very thin.

If you read enough L'Engle, understanding the Resurrection will seem like a piece of cake! But it's precisely because of her ability to get us to think outside the box, that L'Engle is so beloved.

L'Engle's granddaughter Charlotte said, "*One thing I respect about Gran is that she's seamless. She is able to put many complicated things together and make them whole.*"⁹

Authors like Madeleine L'Engle remind us that the world doesn't

⁶ Timothy Dalrymple, "When Christ is Lord, Nothing is Secular" *Patheos.com* (Aug. 3, 2011), accessed at April 15, 2018 at <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/philosophicalfragments/2011/08/03/when-christ-is-lord-nothing-is-secular/#mJvsLRK3C1Wu8BEv.99>.

⁷ Cynthia Zarin, "The Storyteller: Fact, fiction, and the books of Madeleine L'Engle," *The New Yorker* (April 12, 2004), accessed on April 15, 2018 at <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/04/12/the-storyteller-cynthia-zarin>.

⁸ Zarin, *ibid*.
⁹ Zarin, *ibid*.

have to be as bifurcated as we make it. And neither does our faith. Because God is not as bifurcated as we think either.

Our God is *both* mysterious and beyond all comprehension *and* in front of our faces as plain as day. And this truth is exemplified in Jesus' post-Resurrection appearances. As he appears to his disciples he is at one and the same time a walking miracle (who was locked in a tomb dead and now is alive) and a mundane guy (who gets hungry and likes to chow down on broiled fish).

In our passage today, after he shows them his hands and feet, Jesus says, "I am myself" – which harkens back to that passage in Exodus when God says to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM" or "I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE."

Sometimes we separate Jesus' humanity and his life and ministry as something different than his resurrection and his divine origins. But that is our own human brains trying to make sense of something that I'm not sure we're meant to make sense of. But maybe it

doesn't need to make sense in our heads. Maybe it just needs to get us to come to our senses in how we live out our faith in our lives.

Notice Jesus last line to his disciples in today's text is NOT "you *will be* witnesses." It is NOT "*please be* witnesses." It is NOT "*consider being* witnesses if you have time." Jesus simply states a truth in the present, "you *are* witnesses of these things."¹⁰

We are witnesses. Whether we like it or not.

Later in Acts Peter says, "to this we are witnesses" (Acts 3:15). "*The empty tomb of Easter eventually propels the people of Acts to tell, through words and deeds, what they have seen and what they know.*"¹¹

If an empty tomb doesn't get you out there to be a witness for Jesus, it's hard to imagine what it will take. But maybe that's part of the problem. We seem to want to wait around for a more grandiose revelation of God's activity before we are willing to witness to our God.¹²

¹⁰ Karoline Lewis, "We Are Witnesses," *WorkingPreacher.org* (9 April 2018), accessed on April 15, 2018 at <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5126>. Matt Skinner, "Preaching Acts in Easter (Year B)" <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=5122>.

¹¹ Lewis, *ibid*: Matt Skinner, "Preaching Acts in Easter (Year B)" <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=5122>.
¹² Lewis, *ibid*.

Jesus and Peter remind us that while we are busy expecting another miracle to come our way...our silence, our looking the other way, our inaction are also a witness - that speaks volumes. We might want to stop and consider just what those words and deeds are saying about God.¹³

I suspect that for some of us, hearing that we are witnesses is not necessarily good news. We remember how often have we declined our identity or just expected other people to share their testimony...that ours is not needed. We remember how often we have determined that our witness wouldn't make a difference anyway, so why bother? But, in doing so, we deny the truth of who we are and who Jesus needs us to be for the world.¹⁴

And that's the rub, says Professor Karoline Lewis: "We are witnesses" is not only who we are but also then how others see God to be. "We are witnesses" both points to our calling as well as our commitment to it. "We are witnesses" gives witness to our own selves, our own faith, our own belief. And that is the hardest truth to hear -- that perhaps we don't believe in the identity God has

¹³ Lewis, *ibid.*
¹⁴ Lewis, *ibid.*

given us, don't believe God needs it, don't believe others will see it, don't believe that it actually matters." Yet "We are witnesses" does not depend on our acceptance or agreement or approval or on our readiness or recognition or responsiveness. "We are witnesses" just is.¹⁵

Witnessing is not optional. It's not an intermittent activity of faith. It's not something you can decide to do one day and then resolve to take the next day off. It's constant. It's a way of life. It's who you are¹⁶ as followers of Christ.

And so because we are witnesses to God's work in the world, whether we like it or not, then I just merely want to remind you today that we are witnesses to *both* the miraculous and the mundane acts of God in the world. Many of us might have moments where we have felt something in us that is beyond us, or where we heard a voice inside us that was as clear as day to us, or where we saw someone or something and knew it was a sign from God, or where we experienced a healing or a transformation that we have no other explanation for other than the power of God. I believe those moments do happen. Who am I to say they don't?

¹⁵ Lewis, *ibid.*
¹⁶ Lewis, *ibid.*

But many other moments happen too. Moments that may seem to be not that big of a deal, because they are not miraculous. But what if they are more miraculous than we think? Because *these* moments are not just private revelations for ourselves but these moments give witness to the love of God that Jesus came to show us on earth?

Hosting Family Promise families who are in transition this week in our building at Calvary is a seemingly mundane thing to many of us by now...but it gives real flesh and blood meaning to the message of Christ – that when someone was hungry, thirsty, and needed shelter, we provided it as if we were providing it to Jesus himself.

Looking someone in the eyes and saying hello and actually listening to how they are when you ask them how they're doing - *that* is a mundane act that is a witness to the incarnational presence of God in the world. To remind people that you can get something from this connection (*motion eye to eye/face to face*) that you can't get from Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, or Snapchat.

Think of all the ways that you experience God in the world. Yes, we experience the power and

majesty of God through nature, and we often bear witness to the awe and power of God when looking at a sunset or the majestic Rocky Mountains.

But we also bear witness to the love and power of God when we act like Jesus, walking into a room of our friends, and bringing a word of “peace” instead of fear. Or when we say “thank you” instead of complain. Or when we step aside to be second in line instead of first, when we build up a colleague instead of promoting ourselves. When we hold our tongue as we drive and let the other car go in front of us. When we take the time to call our congressional representatives to tell them what matters to us and how their votes affect those who have the least amount of power in our society. When we write cards of encouragement or make signs of protest or sign letters of petition. When we cook a homemade meal for someone, when we mentor a student, when we care for an elder or a family member. When we listen before we speak, when we seek to find common ground instead of finding fault. When we apologize instead of blame. When we give money to the work of God in the world instead of spending more money on ourselves. When we read Scripture, and share it

with others. When we pray, with our voices...and our feet.

When we do any of these things – we are witnessing to the love of God that seeks to transform the world, and not just our own lives.

If we wait until we have some big “miracle” moment to have faith, then we’ll probably be waiting a long time. The good news of the Resurrection is that it turns everyday mundane things into miracles – if we have eyes to see and ears to hear.

Zen master, Thich Nhat Hanh, echoes this idea: *“But I think the real miracle is not to walk either on water or in thin air, but to walk on earth. Every day we are engaged in a miracle which we don’t even recognize. A blue sky, white clouds, green leaves, the curious eyes of a child, our own two eyes. All is a miracle.”*

How do you experience God? Do you tend to focus on the miraculous or the mundane? Could there be ways to see God at work in the world and in your life that you are missing?

One of my spiritual leaders during my time in divinity school, Brother Curtis Almquist of the Society of

Saint John the Evangelist in Cambridge, Massachusetts, says, *“Our memory of Jesus’ resurrection fails us if we only understand his resurrection as a miracle. Jesus’ resurrection was indeed a miracle; however Jesus’ resurrection needs to be more than a miracle. It’s needs to be normal... every day... how we live and breathe: with resurrection power.”*¹⁷

So – all those mundane moments in your days? There might just be miracles mixed in with them. Make a point to pay attention to the ordinary as well as the extraordinary this week. Perhaps it’ll help your faith feel less foreign, and more familiar.

Christ’s Resurrection (thanks be to God) does not need your belief to be true, but it does need your witness to live on.

Amen.

¹⁷ Quote accessed on April 15, 2018 at <https://www.ssje.org/2018/04/10/power/>.