

Miraculous New Life

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship

April 11, 2021 – 2nd Sunday of Eastertide

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

Text: Luke 24:13-32

Last Sunday we celebrated Easter and the twin miracles of the Resurrection and the Empty Tomb. What a special and joyful celebration it was as we also were celebrating our return to in-person worship and dedicating our long awaited new memorial hymnals. This Sunday we continue in this season of Eastertide to explore how life changes in response to the Easter miracles. Everything did indeed change in that moment when new life replaced the cold darkness of death. We are all still trying to understand what that miracle, the empty tomb and the Resurrected Jesus, mean to us as we make our way forward into the new Easter reality that surrounds us.

The Easter miracle was nothing new for Jesus who was known for his many miracles. It was these miracles that drew people to him by the hundreds, and eventually by the thousands. Jesus performed many different kinds of miracles. First, there were the miracles where he fed people who otherwise would have gone hungry or thirsty. These would be miracles like the feeding of the 5000, turning water into wine and the large catch of fish. Then there were the healing miracles, which also included both physical healing as making the blind see and the lame walk but also the casting out of evil spirits. He also showed that he could control elements of nature when he walked on water and calmed the storm at sea. And then, of course, the miracles of resurrection – those of Lazarus his friend, as well as a little girl and an old woman's son, not to mention his own. We can understand this overwhelming fascination with the miracles of Jesus because they fascinate us still today. We wonder – did he really do all these or can they be explained away somehow?

Some will insist that of course Jesus performed all these miracles exactly as the Bible describes and to question them at all is to question Jesus himself. Others will insist that these were not miracles at all but can be explained away by a combination of the superstitious nature of the people with which Jesus was interacting or simple phenomena that went

unnoticed. For example, Jesus didn't walk on water! No, he just knew where the submerged rocks were so he could walk out to the boat on them just giving the appearance of walking on the water. Jesus didn't really miraculously create enough food for 5000 people out of 5 loaves of bread and two fish! People were just so moved by what he was saying that they all shared the food they had with them, so much so that they ended up with more than enough. Jesus didn't really bring the little girl back to life because she had just been in a deep sleep and woke up as a result of his prayers. And so on and so on.

Then there is a third perspective on all these miracles, and this is the one I tend to gravitate to. This is the idea that whether or not these miracles were really miracles – as in contrary to the laws of nature – or not doesn't matter. Whatever happened in the moment of each of these miracles, God was a part of it, one way or the other, and that's all that matters. Jesus made it out to the boat across the water and taught Peter a lesson about faith in the process. That's what matters. 5000 people had enough food to eat, whether by miraculously multiplying loaves and fishes or because selfish people who had been hiding their food decided to share. Either way, that was a miracle. The lame could walk, the blind could see, the mentally ill found comfort and normalcy in life – however these things happened, they were all miracles one way or the other. And Jesus was the common denominator for all of them. When we get hung up on the technicality of the miracle, whichever one we're talking about, we are missing the whole point of the miracle in the first place and that is the faith in the power of God that gave birth to the miracle. Jesus' faith in God and God's power to address any situation was so powerful that amazing things happened wherever he went.

Jesus had that faith like a mustard seed which he talked about with the disciples. You remember that story. He told the disciples that if they had faith the size of a mustard seed, they would be able to move a mountain. Jesus had that level of faith and so much more and that is why miracles, perceived or real, were part of everything he did. They were how people came to hear about him. They were why they wanted to know more about him and what he had to say about God and faith and the difference God could make in their lives. The God Jesus loved and knew and taught

about was so much more than a divine presence who sat on a throne of judgment somewhere in heaven. Jesus' Father was so much more than a deity to whom the Temple priests offered sacrifices. Jesus' God loved each and every person like loving parents loves their children and that was a totally new way of understanding God for the people of Jesus' time. That new description of who God was and wanted to be in the lives of God's people was always the true miracle to the people Jesus reached through his stories and his teachings and his healings and miracles of all types.

The biggest miracle of all was Jesus' Resurrection from the dead. The empty tomb on Easter morning was the final miracle which made all the others pale in comparison. Jesus had, through his resurrection, literally defeated death, making it irrelevant. Of course, we say that in the church but we all know death isn't irrelevant. We've all lost people we love so we know death is anything but irrelevant. It's painful and cruel and difficult to understand or cope with, whether the loved one lost was at the end of a long life or just beginning to live. What it means to say Jesus made death irrelevant is that Jesus proved through his resurrection that death is not the last word, it is not the final chapter of one's existence. What comes after death we do not know with any surety, but we know from Jesus that death itself is not the end. That is the miracle of Easter and the empty tomb.

My favorite story about the Resurrection is the one we read this morning from the Gospel of Luke. It takes place later the same day as the Resurrection as two of the disciples were heading out of Jerusalem, walking to the town of Emmaus. As they were walking along, Jesus came up and started walking with them but they didn't recognize him. He asked them why they were so upset and they told him all about Jesus – himself – and how he had been crucified and now they were hearing these fantastic stories of him being raised from the dead. Jesus then reminded them how the prophets had said these things would need to happen. As they came close to where they were going, Jesus started to walk on ahead but they invited him to come with them and have a meal. He agreed and as soon as he broke the bread and blessed it, they recognized him and – poof! – he disappeared! Then comes one of the best lines in Scripture as the two disciples said to each other, “were not our hearts burning within us while he

was talking to us on the road?” Yes, of course, now that they knew it was Jesus they wanted to convince each other that they really knew it all along!

This story has no less than four miracles contained within it. The first miracle is that Jesus came up along the two disciples and they didn't recognize him. Really? That seems pretty unlikely, doesn't it? The second miracle was the Resurrection itself which they told him all about even though they found the whole thing very confusing. The third miracle is that they finally recognized him in the breaking and blessing of the bread. And finally the fourth miracle is Jesus' disappearance as soon as they recognized him. That always makes me wonder, would he have left earlier if they had recognized him earlier? Or, was the fact that they didn't recognize him until then all part of his plan to prove to them the truth of the Resurrection? So many great questions to ponder in this story! So many great questions to pose to ourselves.

So, dear ones, I have to ask, what questions for yourself can you find in this story? Do you wonder if you would recognize Jesus if he came up beside you while you were walking through town or taking a hike or just walking through the grocery store? How would you know it was him? Do you think you would know him in the moment – like the disciples did when he broke the bread? Or, would you recognize his presence only after he had disappeared once more? These are real questions, dear ones, even though they may sound fantastical. Consider that if Jesus came back to walk beside his disciples, what is to prevent him from coming back again? What is to prevent him from walking beside you on a hike or sitting beside you in the chair in the hospital waiting room while you're anticipating scary news about a loved one? Absolutely nothing! Remember that during every Communion service we pray that being nourished at his table might enable us to see in each other the face of the Risen Christ. What if that prayer were to be answered, for our church and for each of us as individuals. How amazing would that be?

Where in our beloved church we might be encountering Jesus without recognizing him? He's here. I know he is! During this last Covid year, Jesus has been in all those phone calls and notes you've used to reach out to each other when we could not gather in person. He's in every stitch of every face mask sewn by our Missions sewing team. He's in every precaution we

are taking to make sure everyone who comes to worship is safe. He's in every Zoom meeting we have as we invite him to join us through our prayers. He's in all the work and effort everyone has put in to keep our faith community moving forward when it could have been so easy to just give up. Jesus has been the reason we kept moving forward. He gave us energy and inspiration when it was lagging. He was in the approval of that PPP Loan and all the paperwork and dogged determination it took from George and Gary to see it through. I even think Jesus might have wandered into the Attic Treasures Yard Sale last fall and the Christmas Bazaar Pop-ups last November and December. I'm pretty sure I saw him in the joy of all the people enjoying these events after being cooped up for so long.

And the miracles of new life just keep happening all around us in our church. I know because one happened to me just this past week. It happened on Thursday evening when I managed to sleep through the beginning of the PRT meeting I was to be hosting for us on Zoom. I hadn't been feeling too well this past week – my doctor said it was the result of exhaustion and too much caffeine – and I laid down to rest at 3pm and fell sound asleep. Jack was at work and Peter had fallen asleep downstairs. I heard ping-pong in the distance – persistent ping-pong – so persistent that I finally woke up to see what was going on only to recognize the time and see the entire cascade of text messages from the PRT folks who had been trying to reach me. Okay, okay, this doesn't sound so miraculous to you, I'm sure. But it was to me. Why? Because when we finally got together on the Zoom, I was so embarrassed and all of our wonderful folks in that meeting were so kind assuring me that all that mattered to them was that I was okay. I cannot begin to tell you what that kindness and compassion meant to me in that moment. You all know that I am someone who takes great pride in being on top of every situation and here I was late to a meeting I was hosting because I fell asleep. I was disorganized and couldn't even find my notes but the only thing expressed to me was your concern. And it was real and genuine. Dear ones, in these days when we are all so stressed about so many things, you responded to me with kindness and compassion that I desperately needed in the moment. In that moment, you were Christ for me. And that is always a miracle anytime it happens and I thank you for that from the bottom of my heart.

Dear ones, as we mve forward during this Eastertide season as we slowly ease ourselves out of Covid restrictions, the question for us now becomes, how can we be part of God's plan to spread this love and compassion to whomever needs this Good News. How can we be part of creating the miraculous new life for our church, for ourselves and for our community as Covid releases its death grip on us all? What a wonderful question to ponder as our new life beyond Covid begins to take shape! I am so excited to see what God has in mind for us. I sure hope you are too! Amen.