

“The Miracle Worker”

Rev. Brian R. Louis, Faith Presbyterian Church, June 30, 2024

Mark 5:21-43

Our gospel reading this morning shows a bunch of different sides and characteristics of Jesus. We see compassion and caring; a giver of his time and a humble servant; and the most prominent characteristic, he was a healer and miracle worker. Which makes me think of a couple of jokes.

The greatest miracle in the Bible is when Joshua told his son to stand still and he obeyed him.

I was listening to Christian radio and heard a lady call in. “Pastor, I was born blind, and I’ve been blind all my life. I don’t mind so much being blind, but I have some well-meaning friends who tell me that if I had more faith I could be healed.” The radio pastor asked her, “Tell me, do you carry one of those white canes?” “Yes I do,” she answered. “Then the next time someone tells you that, hit him or her on the head with your cane and say, “If you had more faith that wouldn’t hurt.”¹

How many people here this morning have experienced or seen a miracle? Or suspect they have? It’s OK to not be sure. You can raise your hand. It’s OK. I won’t ask you to share it.

Here’s a definition of a miracle from German theologians Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz: “A miracle is an event which goes against normal expectations and has a religious significance: it is understood as the action of a god.”²

I haven’t done a study, but I don’t think there are a ton of sermons preached on miracles. I can understand why. It’s not easy to preach about something going against “normal expectations.” We all want answers. We want to know for sure the way things work. We want explanations to be black and white. We want answers to things that are simple and easy and clear cut. But life isn’t black and white. It is all too often gray. Sometimes there are things we cannot explain. Sometimes what we are dealing with is beyond us.

The miracle stories we heard in Mark this morning of the woman being healed of her bleeding ailment and the raising of Jairus’ daughter are just

¹ Paul Miller, ed., *World’s Greatest Collection of Church Jokes* (Uhrichsville, Ohio: Barbour Publishing, 2003), 238.

² Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1996), 309.

two of many such stories in this gospel. The gospel according to Mark is big on healings and miracles. Mark has 13 stories of Jesus healing, according to James Dunn's 2003 book, *Jesus Remembered*.³

In this morning's gospel reading, we have two classic examples of Jesus' miracles. We have the faith of the woman and the power of Jesus, all she had to do was touch his clothing, and she was healed. And Jesus felt that. He could feel the healing power flow out of him just by the touch on his clothing. And then there is the story of Jairus' daughter. Both stories tell of great faith. Don't be afraid; just believe. Jesus is bold. He goes into Jairus' house and says, hey, she's OK. He is confident and knows the power of healing that flows through him. Talita koom, Jesus commands, and she gets up.

In Theissen and Merz's book, they note that before modernity that miracles were thought of as God reaching into the world and altering the course of natural events. People used miracles to convince non-Christians of the truth of the faith. But in modern times with the advent of scientific knowledge and the fact we can explain more things now, theologians have found miracles to be a problem.⁴

Critics would say that the miracle stories about Jesus are invented to make him seem like God. The miracles of Jesus are metaphors and fantasy or based on ancient fables. In recent centuries, people have tried to explain miracles away. For example, Theissen and Merz cite C.F. Bahrtdt, a theologian who lived from 1741-1792. Bahrtdt posited that Jesus didn't walk on the water but instead walked on logs that were on the Sea of Galilee at that time.⁵ With all due respect to Mr. Bahrtdt, but if that is the case, the true miracle is how did Jesus keep his balance on those logs as he was walking across them? Have you ever tried to walk on a log in the water? Then they write about Rudolf Bultmann, who in 1921 speculated that the miracle stories were just borrowed from Greek stories.⁶

A miraculous event and the stories of miracles can be a problem for us to believe and grasp because they are outside of our experience. Theissen and Merz write that because miraculous events are outside our own experience, we can see them as unhistorical, or untruthful. It couldn't have

³ James D.G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2003), 670.

⁴ Theissen and Merz, 285.

⁵ Theissen and Merz, 286.

⁶ Theissen and Merz, 287.

happened that way. Anything outside of what we have experienced in our own lives is something that couldn't happen.⁷

But how do we explain the stories we have all heard throughout our lives of miraculous events? We have all heard them, haven't we? Stories of miraculous healings or events that defy explanation? Here's one reported by ABC News in 2014. It's the story of Ruby Graupera-Cassimiro. Ruby went in for a C-section and gave birth to a healthy baby girl. However, complications arose, and doctors suspect she had a rare condition that caused her heart to stop beating. Doctors tried to revive her completely over the course of three hours, and for forty-five minutes she didn't have a pulse. She said that during that time she felt like she was floating along and she said, "I remember seeing a spiritual being who I believe was my dad" and that "I remember the light behind him and many other spiritual beings." But then she said a "force" stopped her movement. A hospital spokesman said that "even though doctors hadn't touched her in several minutes" her heart began beating again.⁸ I'm going to pause there. We'll return to Ruby's story later.

So, what do we do with the miracles of Jesus in the New Testament? We are all people of 2024. Speaking for myself, I can say I'm skeptical of a lot of things, especially modern stories of healing. Two reasons for that: one, I'm naturally skeptical of the unusual and events that go against the laws of nature and science that are outside of my experience; and two, I suspect that I am jaded by charlatans and scam artists who have been exposed over the years as phony faith healers.

James Dunn's book *Jesus Remembered* helped me a lot in intellectually digesting the miracle stories in the New Testament. Dunn's book focuses on the oral history of Jesus' life and the stories of Jesus that were passed along by his early disciples and followers before these stories were written down by the apostle Paul and the gospel writers decades after Jesus' death. We all know how stories can change as they are passed on from one person to another. People don't hear the details correctly, or they forget things, and the story many times changes drastically as it is related from one person to the next. Dunn realizes this. He writes that the stories of miracles may have been "elaborated" or altered as they were passed on.

⁷ Theissen and Merz, 310.

⁸ <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/ruby-graupera-cassimiro-heart-stopped-45-minutes/story?id=26819365>

However, even with this, there was a “stability of subject matter and core.” In other words, while some of the details changed, there was a commonality at the core of the story, and “the element of miracle” was at the center of the story. Dunn writes, “*The stories were being told as miracles from the first.*”⁹

Dunn writes, “All we have is the remembered Jesus, Jesus seen through the eyes of those who followed him, Jesus enshrined in the memories they shared and the stories they told and retold among themselves.”¹⁰

Something amazing was happening with Jesus. If it was not, he would have faded from memory quickly, and eventually disappeared in the mist of time. His followers would have walked away and gone back to fishing and tax collecting. There would be no Jesus the Christ or Christianity. If he was remembered at all, he would have just been a popular rabbi for a few years in modern-day Israel and the areas surrounding it. He would have been a footnote in ancient Jewish literature. Without the miraculous healings and exorcisms of Jesus, I don’t think we’d be here.

Miraculous events don’t happen as much as we would all like. We all have people we know who we want healed of their illnesses. Or we have people we loved who have died that we wished would’ve been healed. We do not know the mind of God, nor do we know why some are healed and some are not. We don’t get to dictate the details of the miraculous. It is in these times that our faith is tested, and we must trust in God’s love for us, even though sometimes we do not feel it in these painful circumstances.

But we must also remember that miracles come in many forms; they are not always amazing physical healings or exorcisms of the kind Jesus is known for. We live in a world full of miracles. We can expand our definition of miracle to the inexplicable in nature, the grand design of God in plants and how they feed animals and how plants and animals feed us. How the myriad of ecosystems in the world operate in a delicate dance where each piece fits perfectly in its environment and does exactly what it is supposed to do. The miracle of a hopeless drug addict or alcoholic recovering from their disease and becoming a solid citizen again. How their hearts and minds can change in one moment of divine intervention. And then there is the healing of our hearts through the power of prayer.

⁹ Dunn, 672.

¹⁰ Dunn, 672-673.

I want to wrap up with the conclusion of the story of Ruby, the woman from Florida who was almost declared dead after delivering her daughter via C-section. When her heart started beating again and her breathing returned, she didn't have any brain damage (even though her heart stopped for 45 minutes). She didn't have any ribs that were broken, even with all the chest compressions the doctors tried on her, and she didn't have any burns on her chest from the four or five times the doctors used the paddles to shock her heart back to life. No pulse for 45 minutes; the doctors about to declare Ruby dead, and then, a blip on the heart monitor. A miracle.¹¹

The miraculous was there in Jesus. The miraculous is still with us friends. Just ask Ruby. Amen.

¹¹ <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/ruby-graupera-cassimiro-heart-stopped-45-minutes/story?id=26819365>