

Everyday Miracles

Pentecost 11 (Proper 16C)

Written by Penny Duffy

August 21, 2022

In the Gospel today, Jesus lays his hands upon the bent-over woman and she stands up straight. I envision her crushed by something — fear, sorrow, or yes, maybe a curved spine. But I must confess that I've never been drawn to stories about Jesus performing miracles. They seem to detract from his message. Do we need Jesus to be a superhero, calming the seas, healing people, and raising them from the dead to believe his message?

My father was an Episcopal rector. His last parish had a massive cathedral-like church in Baltimore with but 80 congregants when we arrived. Twenty years later, he had a congregation of over 700, and a local radio station broadcast his services to listeners in Pennsylvania and Virginia. He was liberal in his theology and his ministry attracted many an adult who had fallen away from the institutional church. Then one day, a group of more conservative priests got together and presented a formal motion to the Bishop of Maryland to bring my father up on a heresy trial — yes, a heresy trial — in the 1970s, claiming that he did not believe in the divinity of Christ. As a means of avoiding that debacle, the Bishop insisted instead that my father spell out his belief in the divinity of Christ in a written document. Which he did. It more than satisfied the bishop. I wish I had a copy of it. How much it dealt with the miracles of Jesus, I cannot say.

The point is, one does not need to believe that Jesus had superpowers to believe in his divinity. One has only to listen to his message to understand how inspired—from an understanding far beyond our own—it was. And how radical. How mind-bending. How dangerous it must have seemed. Hypocrites, he calls the temple elders, more than once. Perhaps in order to follow Jesus, the people, a people whose religion defined them—their history and culture as well as their spiritual beliefs—needed to believe Jesus not only *spoke* a divine message, not only *acted* upon it, but also had miraculous powers. And perhaps he did.

I'm not interested in scientific explanations for what may have happened back then—was Lazarus really dead? Did the demon-infested man in the cave simply need someone to look him in the eye and accept him as a human being? Was the woman in today's Gospel bent over from sorrow and inner turmoil or from a physical disability? Did Jesus produce all those loaves and fishes or did his act of sharing encourage everyone to share? Does any of this really matter?

What matters is that Jesus inspired awe and wonder and, in a short three-year ministry to a tiny slice of the world's population, transformed the world ever thereafter. He taught us that by loving our neighbor we are loving God, we are *living* in God – we are in God's time, in God's space, in God's grace. And that that kind of love transforms the giver and the receiver—expands them, lifts them up beyond their earthly bounds. A miracle occurs.

Miracles occur every day—the unexpected kind word, the welcoming of a stranger in our midst, the lost found, the prayer answered. The tiny bud emerging, a harbinger of winter's end. Miracles come in unexpected places and in unexpected shapes. In September 2020, during the height of the pandemic, that dark time a year before vaccines or treatments were available, a writer named James Parker said he'd "taken to hauling balloons into his apartment, in the interest of general mood elevation." Bringing them home, singly or in groups, the balloons made people on the street, fearful of human contact, smile, wave or cry out reflexively with joy. Of the helium balloons, he writes:

"Each balloon represents a thwarted attempt by that noble and high-spirited gas, helium, to fly joyfully up to heaven.

"But the balloon doesn't care. Brainless and glorious, it bobs about. Its urge to transcend is perfectly contained. Life is heavy, heavy, heavy. Since we crawled up onto dry land, gravity has been patiently dismantling us—we sag, we stoop, our lower backs hurt. Experience accumulates, and it has its own weight. Bring on the balloons. . . ."

He ends with this, ". . . [they] are like Yeats's wild swans at Coole: 'mysterious, beautiful' . . . They travel unaccountably from room to room, trailing their strings. They nudge me at my desk. They drift together, and nod, and seem to confer—a symposium of balloons. They touch one another so gently."

Let us go forth into the world, touching one another gently, gently, and in that gentle touch, ourselves be healers and helpers living into the words and acts and life of Christ. Let us risk kindness, risk forgiveness, risk selfless love and then, expanded, released from earth's gravity, let us know the miracle of living into heaven here on earth. Amen.

--Penny Duffy