

## Gospel: John 20:19-31

*The unprecedented events of the day of resurrection continue as the risen Jesus appears to his fearful disciples. A week later, after Thomas worships Jesus, Jesus pronounces that the blessings of the resurrection are also for those who "have not seen and yet believe."*

<sup>19</sup>When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." <sup>20</sup>After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. <sup>21</sup>Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." <sup>22</sup>When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup>If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

<sup>24</sup>But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup>So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

<sup>26</sup>A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." <sup>27</sup>Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." <sup>28</sup>Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" <sup>29</sup>Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

<sup>30</sup>Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. <sup>31</sup>But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

There was a hospital where everyone was awaiting a visit from Pope John Paul II. While he was waiting for the visit, a doctor with a handful of paperwork decided to sit down so he could relax and get some more work done. In the immediate area there weren't any chairs so he took a seat in a wheelchair and busied himself with his notes. Soon the Pope and his entourage swept in, as he walked by, he blessed the doctor, who immediately stood up and walked forward. At that, devout believers in the Pope's company instantly crossed themselves and turned their eyes upward. Surely an act of God had occurred in their midst. Surely they had seen a miracle.

What is a miracle, in our estimation? Do miracles occur in 2019? How can we tell when a miracle has occurred? What would we think if we encountered a dramatic scene? Would it shake us up? Would it challenge some of our deepest held beliefs about the nature of the universe? Would we consider it a miracle, or do we immediately enter into our minds and begin to try and figure it out?

It was Easter Sunday evening. The disciples had heard reports that their Master had risen from the dead. They were meeting behind locked doors out of fear. Suddenly Jesus stood among them! After greeting them, he showed them his hands and side. One of the disciples, named Thomas, "The Twin," was not present. The disciples told him what had transpired, but he said that unless he saw the wounds of Christ for himself, he would not believe. Eight days later it happened. The disciples were together again; this time Thomas was with them. Again, the doors were locked; but suddenly, Jesus stood among them again. And he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it my

side. Do not doubt but believe." We know how the story ends. Thomas exclaims, "My Lord and my God!" Then the Gospel of John adds an important postscript: "Jesus' disciples saw him do many other signs besides the ones told about in this book, but these are recorded so that you will believe that he is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you will have life in his name."

Jesus did many other miracles. How do we feel about miracles today? Do we look for miraculous in our own lives? Do we believe that real miracles are restricted to the Bible? What would we consider a genuine miracle? If we saw a genuine miracle, would it increase our faith? If our faith were increased, what would that look like?

A number of years ago now, an Eastern Orthodox monk was cleaning the chapel of the Christ of the Hills Monastery in Blanco, Texas. At first, the monk thought nothing of it when he discovered that one of the icons of the Virgin Mary had moisture on it. When he wiped the moisture off, however, he smelled the familiar fragrance of myrrh. He was curious, but he left for other duties. Returning a few hours later, he found that this same icon of Mary appeared to be "weeping." The tears continued, and after a full investigation by church officials, the Russian Orthodox Church declared the "weeping Mary" to be a miraculous event. The tears of the weeping Mary reportedly resulted in miraculous healings for some. Even today, as thousands of people visit Christ of the Hills monastery, it is said that the icon still weeps its fragrant oil.

Well, what do we think? Was it a miracle? What do we do with these stories that make it to the news and magazines? It is hard not to be skeptical. Then there is the story from Estill Springs, Tennessee; a woman claims to have seen the face of Jesus on her General Electric freezer on

the front porch of her mobile home. Not everyone in the town was impressed with the heavenly vision. People magazine reports that mayor of Estill Springs said, "If Jesus were coming to this town, he would have come somewhere different than on a freezer."

What do we do with claims of the miraculous? It is my hunch that many of us are like Thomas, if we are not in the room when it happens, we respond very much like him, we say: "Unless I," and then we attach personal conditions of proof. Most likely, I would have said something very similar to what Thomas said if I was in his shoes. People were claiming that a person, who was dead, was alive again.

A major magazine once reported that 76 percent of Americans believe in miracles and 39 percent report that they had "personally experienced or witnessed a miracle." So, what do we consider a miracle? For many of us, the birth of a child is a miracle or flowers on a spring morning. Who can take issue with that? But also, many of us know someone, or have ourselves experienced personal miracles. These are miracles that occur within people. A healing takes place. Perhaps that healing is physical; perhaps it is emotional; maybe it is even spiritual. The doctors can't explain it. The psychologists can't explain it. The people who know the individuals best can't explain it, but healing comes. The lump is no longer there. The anger and hurt are no longer there. The old rebellious spirit is no longer there. We are familiar with these incidences either firsthand or secondhand. And it may cause us to wrestle with our faith. Is this God at work in our lives? If so, does this mean that the individual did something to find favor with God, that somebody else did not do? In other words, is the occurrence used to somehow measure against somebody else who did not have a similar experience? It is then that we get in to the

danger zone. For if we use such episodes as a measurement of the lack of faith of others who do not have a similar experience, we have moved faith into another unintended arena.

It is interesting to note that in the Gospel of John, the word sign is used rather than miracle. A sign points beyond itself to a major truth about God made known through Jesus Christ. A miracle is never a miracle for its own sake. As used by the writer of John's Gospel, the miracle is always a sign that points beyond the event to a greater truth. It points to the in-breaking of God's presence in the world in a new way. It points to a new reality, now, and in the future. It points to a new covenant.

Jesus praised faith in the absence of signs and miracles. Jesus says to Thomas: "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." The Christian faith is not dependent on more signs and miracles! We need to be careful not to put too much emphasis on the dramatic or the supernatural. We have to be careful not to use a perceived miracle as a proof of faith for everyone else. The Christian faith is an ongoing relationship with the living Christ that perseveres even when God seems to be silent.

For most of us the times that we feel God active in our lives, God especially close to us, when we feel touched by God in some way, it is likely that crowds won't gather in amazement. Church inquiries won't bother to test authenticity. This does not mean we cannot get a glimpse of God's presence in our lives. This does not mean that such experiences are not real. In the end, we simply do not know, in some cases what has happened. But through personal life journeys we know that such things have occurred. It is then we are pointed to the greatest miracle, the greatest sign that we celebrate – Jesus Christ risen from the dead. It is this

miraculous act of God that lies at the foundation of our faith. Whatever, we may encounter on this journey of faith, the touches of God in our lives and in the lives of people around us, in the end, are to point us to God's promises, God's love of humanity, and God's future reality. "I am the Alpha and Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty." Amen.