

It's so Beautiful
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz
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14:00

A couple of months ago I attended a workshop at Andover Newton, and the keynote speaker was Phyllis Tickle—the founding editor of the Religion Department of Publisher's Weekly, and she's also a college professor and author of many books on religion in America. It was an amazing workshop, and she told the best story about our struggles with miracles in the Bible. She explained that new movements in Christianity think about scripture as actually true but not necessarily factually true.

In these new Christian movements scripture isn't taken any less seriously even if it's not taken literally—and she explained this by telling us about an experience she had when speaking at a church around Christmas. There'd been a church dinner beforehand, so a few youth were in the kitchen cleaning up as she was teaching an adult education class on the Christmas story. She noticed one teenage boy who seemed to get slower and slower in his cleaning duties because he was intently listening to the conversation. He had one pot that he had scrubbed clean for probably ten minutes, and it was pretty spotless. At one point, he just gave up trying to look like he was scrubbing that pot and sat in the back of the room to listen.

The adults were challenging Tickle to explain the Virgin Birth, asking her to tell them the story without it appearing miraculous. A good conversation ensued about how we wrestle with faith claims like the Virgin Birth when we've developed a more adult faith. How do we reconcile texts like this that make us uncomfortable and leave us full of doubt? How do we deal with these crazy stories of Jesus healing people, feeding the 5,000, Mary giving birth as a virgin, and the ultimate miracle we wrestle with today—Jesus raised from death on this Easter morning? That's what the conversation was about with various views getting thrown out, all the way from having to accept it all literally to claiming that the entire thing is a metaphor and none of it actually happened so let's stop pretending we believe these stories are true.

As the adults were leaving, the teenager who scrubbed that pot clean came up to Phyllis Tickle. He looked really troubled and he asked her, what in the world were all those adults talking about? With absolute awe and wonder on his face, he told this renowned Christian scholar that the story of Mary and the Virgin Birth of Jesus Christ "is so beautiful, it has to be true, whether it happened or not." [1]

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When she told this story to all of us gathered at this workshop, you could have heard a pin drop and there was this deep murmur of awe in the audience as we all, clergy and laity alike, let these profound words sink into our souls. This statement by this young man is one of the best iterations of how many modern Christians view miracle stories like Jesus raised from death on this Easter morning. There are movements in Christianity to not be literalists and yet not explain everything miraculous or mysterious away either. There's a movement within Progressive Christianity to live into the mystery of our faith and be able to curb our need to rationalize and doubt everything to the point that we have nothing left to believe in. Analysis Paralysis might not actually make our faiths that strong.

In our United Church of Christ lingo, if we really believe that God is Still Speaking, then we have some work to do to figure out what God is saying to us today with these stories of Virgin Births and Resurrection in the face of modernity. Maybe we don't just say that the whole

miracle thing in the Bible is so unbelievable so let's just move on to social justice issues and be done with it.

UCC Minister Dwight Wolter explains how he thinks about miracle stories when he states, "Entering a church for the first time at age 34, I did not need the miracle stories explained away. I was fascinated with this faith tradition that—knowing they appeared nuts to much of the world—told startling stories about healing lepers, cripples, and demoniacs; curing blindness, vanquishing storms and raising people from the dead! I was drawn to these stories and to Jesus the way a flower is drawn to the sun. Maybe this Jesus could even quell the storm in me and feed my malnourished soul in a time of spiritual doubt and drought. I didn't need a miracle explained; I needed one enacted." [2]

My friends, I don't want to explain away the miracle we witness on Easter. I don't want to have analysis paralysis up here, so that by the time I'm done taking this faith claim away and that faith claim away, we have nothing left to feed our "malnourished souls" in our times of "spiritual doubt and drought." [3] Maybe next year.

Today I just want us to realize how beautiful our Easter story really is. I want us to not be embarrassed about how nuts we may seem to the rest of the world if we take this amazingly beautiful story to heart, not literally, but to heart. I want us to see that "it's so beautiful it has to be true, whether it happened or not."

Look at the devotion of Mary Magdalene, who comes to the tomb when it's still dark for heaven's sake! When she sees something's amiss she runs to get Peter and the Beloved disciple, and they run to see what's happening. There's such urgency about their actions, in some ways they are running right into the arms of God.

Think about the miracle in that action, and compare it to how we often live our lives, sometimes failing to recognize all the gifts we receive and just be thankful for all that God does for us. Sometimes when God comes calling, we slam the door, put the deadbolt in place, and figure out an escape plan. It's like we're spies trying to escape before things get too dangerous and messy. These disciples all of a sudden have more courage than ever when they run to discover that death is not the end of God's story, when they run to find out what in the world just happened to their teacher and friend.

When Mary Magdalene confronts Jesus himself, who she mistakenly thinks is a gardener at first, she cries in despair and says, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." [4] She is desperate to find him and make things right. It's a beautiful moment. Mary Magdalene, not the eleven disciples left, but Mary Magdalene becomes the first person to encounter the Risen Christ. I always make sure to tell that to anyone who gets huffy about women ministers. Thank you very much.

In describing our Easter story, one of my favorite theologians William Sloane Coffin once preached that, "Love never dies, not with God, and not even with us. The Easter message says that all the tenderness and strength that on Good Friday we saw scourged, buffeted, stretched out on a cross—all that beauty and goodness is alive again and with us now, not as a memory that inevitably fades, but as an undying presence in the life of every single one of us, if only we would recognize it." [5] I hope we can recognize that the beauty and goodness of God is alive again, that the undying presence of God is with every single one of us all the days of our lives.

Death and animosity, hatred and jealousy don't have the final say. Love wins—all the beauty and goodness of God is alive. Like Mary, we are left with the presence of Jesus to sustain us and guide us in this life. Even though I've been talking about getting to the heart of our Easter faith, there's also the historical reality of Easter too. Jesus' movement and teachings could

have died with him, but they didn't. In fact whatever happened on Easter ushered in a whole new way of being, a whole new way of seeing the world. Marcus Borg explains that "the historical ground of Easter is very simple: the followers of Jesus, both then and now, continued to experience Jesus as a living reality after his death . . . Christians throughout the centuries have continued to experience Jesus as a living spiritual reality, a figure of the present, not simply a memory from the past." [6] Jesus is a living spiritual reality in the present. It's so beautiful, it has to be true.

And on this day I'll end with another favorite story about getting to the heart of miracles like Resurrection on this Easter Sunday, while not abandoning our minds and our reason to have a little bit of faith (or at least a little bit of comfort with mystery.) UCC Minister Martin Copenhaver tells about an experience he had in seminary at Yale Divinity School, hardly an institution I would label as anti-intellectual or advocating literal Biblical interpretations. But this story shows that we must get to the heart of these miracle stories, and that God still speaks to us through them today.

Copenhaver says, "When I was a student in divinity school, I attended a gathering of the faculty where a professor of New Testament read a paper about . . . the story of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. The scholars present entered into the kind of debate that is common in the academy. They argued about the veracity of the account, its various literary and historical influences, and presented different theories about how the story had taken its final canonical form. Then someone turned to Paul Holmer, a curmudgeonly professor of theology, for his opinion because he had been uncharacteristically quiet during the exchange, seemingly lost in thought. He paused for a moment and then he said, 'Well, I don't know about all of that stuff. I was just thinking that if Jesus could feed all of those people, perhaps he can feed me.'" [7]

Perhaps he can feed me.

Perhaps he can feed you.

It's so beautiful, it has to be true. Amen.

[1] Phyllis Tickle, Lecture at Woodbury Workshop at Andover Newton Theological School, February 1, 2013.

[2] Dwight Lee Wolter, "Jesus Performs a Non-Miracle!" Reflection on Mark 6:41a, 44 in the UCC Still Speaking Daily Devotional, March 15, 2013.

[3] Ibid.

[4] John 20:13.

[5] William Sloane Coffin, Letters to a Young Doubter, 168-169.

[6] Marcus Borg and N.T. Wright, The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions, 135.

[7] Martin Copenhaver, "Perhaps He Can Feed Me" Reflection on Mark 6:35-44 in the UCC Still Speaking Daily Devotional, June 16, 2012