

Psalm 23
Acts 4:5-12

“Easter Miracles”

R.P.C.
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In the Acts of Apostles, all the accounts up until this fourth chapter have been quite “spiritual” in nature. In chapter 2, all the believers are gathered in one place; devout Jews from every nation of the then-known earth are present. Miraculously, and quite dramatically, the Holy Spirit of God descends upon the believers. They begin talking in other intelligible languages - hearing and understanding in those other languages as well. There are remarkable signs and wonders.

Jesus had promised that he would give his Holy Spirit to his followers, and at Pentecost that promise was mightily fulfilled. The same spirit that empowered Jesus now empowers his followers, the church. It is a very spiritual moment, perhaps THE most spiritual moment in all the New Testament. Furthermore, there are immediate fruits of the Spirit: Miracles! The church gathers for worship, and the spirit descends and they worship with “glad and generous hearts” - they break bread together, pray, and praise God together. In fact, they are a miraculously “together” church. Luke even reports that ‘they are all of one mind and heart.’

Now the congregation here at Riverside manages to get along amazingly well. Considering the diversity and differences within our membership, with just about everyone ‘coming here from somewhere else,’ we seem to get along fine. O sure, we have our moments of disagreement. We may even have our moments of dissention, but that is natural for any church, for there is a built-in diversity within our unity.

Yet here, the book of Acts is describing a church that is not natural. Frankly, it is miraculous! Everybody worshiped God and did the work of the church ‘with one heart and mind.’ I’ve been involved with churches my whole life, and let me tell you – THAT’S a miracle!

Yet, as impressive as ‘being one in heart and mind is,’ there are more miracles to follow. Luke says that the believers were so full of the Spirit – that is, they were so spiritual – they sold their possessions and distributed the proceeds to anyone in need. . . .

Okay . . . NOW we have moved from ‘preachin’ to meddlin’ ‘cause we are talking about possessions, goods, and MONEY! They gave their stuff away! – And apparently, not just the stuff left over after the yard sale. They gave up the good stuff - put it on Ebay and Craigslist, and ALL the money was distributed to anyone

who had need. There was this amazing distribution of the wealth. It would be like the upper 1% in this country, liquidating all of their stocks, bonds, and assets and distributing the proceeds to the rest of us. So what happened at that early church as describe in Acts may have been the greatest post-resurrection miracle of all.

Throughout the rest of the book of Acts, there are other miracles recorded. Today, we have the account of Peter delivering a man who was crippled by an affliction. As the once-crippled man leaps away in joy, Peter is asked to explain himself. So there, before the authorities – the “rulers, elders and scribes” in Jerusalem, Peter is given an opportunity to share the good news. So he briefly recites the story of Jesus, emphasizing that the same Jesus who was put to death (perhaps at the insistence of some of the very same people who sat on that council) this Jesus has now been raised. The resurrection, it appeared, is not only an event when the world has been turned upside down, but is also a time when the power of God now continues among the church and the apostles.

Easter is the longest celebration of the church’s liturgical year. It continues for 50 days. Several have asked me how long that grave cloth is going to stay up on the cross. The answer is until Pentecost; there are 50 days between Easter and Pentecost. So that means that while the Easter eggs have all been eaten by now and those fluffy chicks have matured into chickens, the Church is still celebrating Easter. It is as if the Church wants to say that we can’t celebrate a miracle like the resurrection in anything less than 50 days. The season of Lent got 40 days, not counting Sundays, but Easter requires a full 50 days.

It is as if the book of Acts wants to say that Easter continues. It is also as if Luke is saying that the power that was unleashed with the resurrection is now unleashed into all the world. People from every nation under heaven are given the Spirit. The Church is born; just look at that miracle! . . . There are miracles of Spirit-filled and unified worship. There is the miracle of a unified church of one heart and mind. There is the miracle of the spectacular, Spirit-filled generosity – only the Spirit could cause that kind of sharing. And there are the many miracles later in the book in which those in bondage to illness are finally liberated and restored. So here in these first chapters of the book of Acts, we have evidence for the truth of the resurrection. How on earth could we otherwise explain the events that are reported there?

The Session of a congregation was discussing the officer’s retreat for the fall. They had used the retreat for the past couple of years for planning purposes. They had set their goals for the coming year and talked about various strategies. They had organized and reorganized their committees and task forces.

So the question before them was, what should we do for THIS fall's retreat? "I would argue for a retreat that is focused on spirituality," one of the elders said. "I'm sort of weary of doing nothing but business – nuts and bolts, mundane stuff." "This is the church after all. Aren't we supposed to be spiritual?" "Why can't we do something on prayer or meditation – something spiritual – something other than all of this business stuff? The group as a whole registered widespread agreement. After all, what is the church but a spiritual institution?

We know that selfishness comes quite naturally to us as human beings. We are born looking out for ourselves. One of the first words a child learns to speak with authority is the first person possessive pronoun MINE! We don't have to teach a child to grab or grasp, to reach and hold on tight; such behavior is innately a part of human nature.

And yet, such behavior is also evident much of the rest of our lives. Our wants and our needs keep expanding. We want more, and then even more. We grab and hoard and get and keep. All of this is actually built-in as a means for our survival – so it is perfectly natural and understandable.

So that means, what has been reported to us in the Acts of Apostles is not natural or normal: It is nothing short of miraculous. Those upon whom the Spirit descended became not only great believers, but also great givers. Because, as the Apostle Paul says of himself, they became ". . . content with whatever I have." This all seems counter-intuitive, yet this is what Christians mean when we say "spiritual."

Eugene Peterson captures something of this attitude when he offers his translation of Psalm 23 with these words from *The Message*: "God, my shepherd! I don't need a thing. You have bedded me down in lush meadows; you find me quiet pools to drink from. True to your word, you let me catch my breath and send me in the right direction." "Even when the way goes through Death Valley, I'm not afraid when you walk by my side. Your trusty shepherd's crook makes me feel secure." "You serve me a six-course dinner right in front of my enemies. You revive my drooping head; my cup brims with blessings." "Your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life. I'm back home in the house of God for the rest of my life."

Sometimes people say that wish we had more evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. The Gospel accounts report no true eyewitnesses to the resurrection. The women go to the tomb of Jesus, right after the resurrection, when it was still dark. The Gospel accounts have their differences about the resurrection event: Mathew says only Mary Magdalene and another Mary (perhaps Jesus' mother)

went to the tomb; Mark says it was Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome who were present. Luke says it was the women who had come with him from Galilee; and John records that it was solely Mary Magdalene.

So if we are going to believe in the resurrection, we mostly have to believe it on the basis of the testimony of the apostles. Yet, there is a sense in which we DO have evidence to the resurrection – that evidence is *the church!* I ask you, would the church still be in existence, if something miraculous had not happened? And what could be more miraculous than the church itself - this body made up of so many different people for over 2,000 years - still bearing witness.

When Jesus encountered sick and suffering people I cannot think of a single occasion when he looked into their eyes and said, “I want you to know that I am getting ready to die on the cross for your sins. Then I am going to be raised on the third day; and that means you will be raised too and will get to live forever.” As they were approaching Jerusalem, he did tell the Twelve about God’s plan concerning his death and resurrection, but he never shared the plan as a context or impetus for healing.

When approached by the sick and suffering, Jesus never made it an issue about himself. He always turned his complete attention to them and their need. He healed them with a physical touch, or the words, “Be healed!” or “Your faith has made you well.” He never told hungry people to feed on religious ideas, or crippled people to lean of the crutch of theological notions. Rather he gave the hungry bread. He made the lame whole. Everything about him was not ethereal, but physical. Even his resurrection was bodily, and is intended to still be physical.

Sometimes it feels like when the church encounters human need, we can be like people who walk into a restaurant, sit down at a table, are given a menu, and try to eat the menu rather than to order nourishing food. Yet, at our best, in our own fumbling, bumbling attempts to be Jesus’ body here on earth, the church becomes the earthly, physical, visible evidence of the truth of the resurrection.

If we don’t believe that the crucified Jesus actually rose from the dead, then how do we explain that ordinary – even ordinary, sinful folks like us - are giving generously to the needs of perfect strangers? How do we explain that folks like us are moved to boldly and courageously take stands on social issues that don’t directly affect me and my family? How do we explain that we are often motivated to self-sacrificially give ourselves to help those in need in our community? How do we explain our participation in Family Promise? How do we explain our response **to Operation Christmas Child, One Great Hour of Sharing, Blanket Sunday, CROP**

Walk, Disaster Relief, and the countless other causes to which we give our resources?

We are not doing this good because we are simply morally better than the other people in our town. We are doing it because we know a great, public, open secret: Jesus Christ is raised from the dead! God has defeated the powers of death and we want to live in accord with that reality.

The wonders that Jesus worked were signs that some new power was breaking into the world – a sign that God was moving decisively to do something about the state of the world. Now, in the Acts of Apostles, we see the once-disheartened and defeated disciples of Jesus speaking, acting and performing some of the same sorts of signs and wonders that Jesus himself performed. And now, so do we.

Our church is here as a kind of beachhead of God's resurrection invasion of the world. We are here to signal and say that the resurrection of Christ is the first great act in a drama in which God will get back the world that God intended. In fact we are bold enough to believe that we gathered here, are a sign that the resurrection of Christ is a fact that changes everything – including us.

So when people show up at our church we want to say and to show them a great Easter message: Welcome! Welcome to this Easter miracle! Welcome to the world AFTER the bodily resurrection of Christ! Amen.