

Magical or Miraculous?

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on John 11: 1-45

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We begin with a death. We don't know what caused the death. We don't know the age of the person who died, but it is a death and every death matters; every death is important. The one who has died is the brother of two women named Mary and Martha who live in Bethany outside of Jerusalem. The one who died is a man named Lazarus. If you know your gospels, you know that Mary and Martha were friends with Jesus and Jesus was friends with Lazarus, too.

We don't know how old Lazarus is, but there is a legend which says he was about thirty years old when he died. But that's just a legend. And we also know he didn't just die suddenly. We are told that for some time he was ill, and Mary and Martha got a message to Jesus saying he was ill. Why would a thirty year old have an illness that leads to death, if indeed he was thirty? Two thousand years ago, a thirty year old could have died from all kinds of things. Maybe he had appendicitis, maybe he had pneumonia. Maybe he had an ear infection. In the days before antibiotics and vaccines all kinds of things could kill you at the age of thirty. Who knows what happened in Lazarus' case?

We also know that when Jesus gets the message that Lazarus is ill, he is not in any hurry to get to the man's hometown of Bethany to see him—and that is just fine with his disciples. Bethany is in Judea and the last time Jesus was in Judea his opponents tried to stone him. We can see their reluctance to go to such a dangerous place when Jesus finally tells them that Lazarus has fallen asleep. Not understanding what he means, the disciples say, "Lord, if Lazarus has fallen asleep, he will wake up." Jesus then explains that he has died.

When Jesus finally gets to Bethany, Lazarus has been dead for four days. Martha says to him, "Lord, if you would have been here, my brother would not have died."

Jesus says to her, "Your brother will rise again."

She says, "I believe he will rise again on the last day."

"I am the resurrection and the life," the Lord says to her. "Those who believe in me, even though they die will live. And whoever lives and believes in me will never die." Then he says "Do you believe this?"

She says "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

When they get to the tomb, it is clear that after four days, Lazarus is not just slightly dead, but seriously dead. External heart massage would do nothing at this point. A cardiac defibriliator would do nothing at this point. The man's flesh is rotting. Rigamortis has set in. To paraphrase the coroner of Munckinland in the wizard of Oz, he's not only merely dead, he's really most sincerely dead. Martha expresses all this to Jesus with the words, Lord there is already a stench because he has been dead four days. But Jesus says to her "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

Jesus orders the stone rolled away from the tomb and after a brief prayer, he shouts "Lazarus, come out!" And it's like a scene from *The Mummy*. Lazarus come out of the tomb wrapped up in bands of cloth as if he really was just asleep as Jesus said. As if in spite of the rigamortis and rotting flesh and four days of being cold in the grave, he has just awoken from a long nap.

Jesus said to Martha, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, if you believed you would see the glory of God?” You know, when I preach to you I don’t know if my questions are always the same as your questions, but here’s what I want to know. Why didn’t Jesus just say “Did I not tell you that you would see the glory of God?” Why ‘if you believe’? Why ‘if you believe?’ Well, let me explain why I am so puzzled.

One of our central beliefs as Presbyterians, as people more broadly of the Reformed tradition is that God is sovereign. God is Lord of the universe and God is in control—and part of what that means is that God does not need our belief or our faith in order to be God. What we believe as Presbyterians and Reformed Christians is that God is in control of this universe whether we believe it or not. God’s control of this universe, his reign over this universe is not just something we believe, it is an objective fact. If we believe that, great. If we don’t, oh well, but it is a fact either way. God is in control either way.

So why does Jesus say “if you believe” as if Martha’s believing had anything to do with it, as if Martha’s believing could somehow tie the hands of the spirit of God and control what God could do or couldn’t do through the hands of Christ?

Well, I don’t think Martha’s belief or her failure to believe had anything to do with what the spirit of God could do or not do. I don’t believe that for a moment. But there is a difference between Christ being unable to raise Lazarus apart from the belief of people like Martha and his refusal to raise Lazarus apart from the belief of people like Martha.

I remember one time a few years ago I was having a conversation with one of my students who was taking one of my classes, and this was someone who was rather skeptical about the value of religious faith, and he was also someone who happened to know that I was an

ordained minister. Well, this student said to me, “You’re an educated guy, reverend Holmes, so what about all those magic tricks in the gospels like Jesus walking on water or raising the dead, do you believe in all those magic tricks?”

Well, of course, I had to correct him. I said “Walking on water and raising the dead, my friend, these aren’t magic tricks, these are miracles.” He said “You say ‘miracles’, I say ‘magic tricks’, we’re talking about the same thing.” Is that right, were we talking about the same thing? Is that right? Is miracle just another word for magic trick?

Well, I don’t know that there was anything I could have said to make this student change his mind. He seemed pretty certain in his cynicism about the miraculous, but no, no it is not. Miracle is not just another word for magic trick. In the first place, a miracle is not a magic trick because a magic trick is a trick. It is a deception. No educated person who goes to watch a show where someone pulls a rabbit out of a hat comes home believing in magic because he knows that there is no such thing as magic. He knows that he was tricked. He was tricked with illusions, smoke and mirrors, and sleight of hand allowing him see things that aren’t there. And miracles are not tricks.

But more importantly, the point of magic, even if there were such a thing would be to dazzle, to entertain, to show off. And our Lord simply refused to do that. Time and again, he simply refused to show off in the name of God. When Jesus was in the wilderness being tempted by Satan, Satan told him to turn stones into bread and he refused. We learn in the eighth chapter of Mark that the Pharisees came up to Jesus and asked him for a sign, some kind of miraculous sign and he said “Why does this generation ask for a miraculous sign. I tell you the truth, no sign will be given to it.” And finally, when he was on trial for his life, Jesus stood

before Herod and Herod also wanted him to perform a miracle we are told in the twenty-third chapter of Luke, but Jesus would not. Performing a miracle for Satan or for Herod or for the Pharisees would have entertained them and amused and impressed them along with all those other verbs we can think of that go along with a magic show as people say ooh and ah. But that is not why Jesus came into the world. He didn't come into the world to entertain and amuse and impress. He came into the world to do the work of a loving, healing, and saving God for those who would recognize it as the work of a loving, healing and saving God.

So that is why, that is why, I think that Jesus said to Martha "Did I not tell you that you would see the glory of God if you believe, *if you believe*. It is not because Martha's belief had any power over him, it would be against his purpose in the world, his calling to do miracles for those who didn't believe. And that is also why, I think we have this conversation between our Lord and Martha where he tries to get her to confess her faith, to say the right words just as we too bring our faith to speech when we say the words of the Apostle's Creed or the Nicene Creed. And he works with her trying to get her to confess the right words just like maybe you were worked with in confirmation class. And so she says to him, Lord, if you would have been here, my brother would not have died. Jesus says to her, your brother will rise again. She says, I believe he will rise again on the last day. He says, yes Martha you're almost there, but Martha, I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die will live. And whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" And finally she is ready she says "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

You know, because miracles are not magic tricks, because their purpose is not to show off, to dazzle and to impress, I think they tell us something quite important about our Lord. Our Lord's purpose in this world was not to force faith on anybody. Unlike so many street evangelists I see who try to corner you and literally push religious tracts into your hand and who won't leave until you have to practically push them away, our Lord isn't like that. The wonders, the signs the miracles he works don't follow you around and push tracts into your hands. And so whether or not you have faith is your decision, it is up to you. It is in your hands.

I want to close with a story about a wise old man, a smart-aleck boy and a bird. The story goes like this. One day this smart aleck boy had a plan to make a fool of this wise old man. The smart aleck boy's plan you see, was to catch a bird in his hands out in the wilderness and to go up to the wise old man and say "Old man, what do I have in my hands."

And the wise old man would say, "My son, you have a bird in your hands."

And then the smart aleck boy would say "But old man, is the bird alive or is it dead?" And if the old man said were to say "The bird is dead" well then the smart aleck boy would say "See old man" and open his hands and the bird would fly away free into the forest and into the woods. But if the old man said "The bird is alive, then the smart aleck boy would crush it and crush it until all the life was out of the bird and it died. And he would open his hands and say "See, old man the bird is dead."

And so, with this clever plan in mind, the smart aleck boy went to the old man and said "Old man what do I have in my hands?"

"You have a bird in your hands, my son."

And he said "But old man, is the bird alive or is it dead?"

And the wise old man said, "The bird is in your hands, my son." And so it is. Let us pray.

Remind us, O God that you have not come into this world to perform and to dazzle and to amaze, but to heal and to save and to call us to a life of faith. In Jesus' name, Amen.