

“Ain't Gonna Let Nobody, Lord, Keep Us from Believing in Miracles”

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

2 July 2023

Rev. Paulo Gustavo França

Text: Mark 5:21-43

“...your faith has made you well; go in peace...” – Mark 5:34

Prayers

Living God,

Speak to us this morning.

Startle us with the Good News of the Gospel

And give us courage to respond in faith, hope and love.

In Christ and through Christ we make this prayer. Amen.

A poor woman, who has been living with a debilitating chronic illness for 12 years, sneaks up behind Jesus, touches his clothes and is made well on the spot. A twelve-year-old girl who everyone believes to be dead gets up from her deathbed and starts to walk about as soon as Jesus holds her hand and says in Aramaic, ***“Little girl to you I say, arise!”***¹

Miracle stories like the ones we heard in today’s Gospel lesson tend to make us a bit fidgety and uncomfortable. We don’t know how to fit these biblical stories into our experience of the world. Our first impulse is either to dismiss the Gospel stories as nothing more than religious fairy tales or to seek to demythologize them, which is what we do when we squeeze everything that smacks of supernatural out of the Gospel until our sacred texts are safely re-packaged for our scientifically enlightened and rational way of life.

This impetus to reduce the story about Jesus to the size of what is reasonable and believable impelled Thomas Jefferson to go through the time-consuming and painstaking work of editing the Gospels. At the age of 77, retired from politics and away from public life, Jefferson poured over six copies of the New Testament – two in English, two in French, one in Latin and another in Greek – to compare the different translations. Then the former president of the United States cut out passages from each of the four Gospels and glued them to a blank paper in four columns divided by each language. Jefferson’s intent was ambitious. He wanted to separate what he believed to be the common-sense moral teachings of Jesus from the superstition of Jesus’ Pre-Enlightenment biographers. Anything that was contrary to human reason was left out of Jefferson’s version of the New Testament. There were no stories about Jesus’ birth or his multiplying of the fish and the loaves or the stilling of the storm or the healing of the woman with a blood flow or the raising of the 12-year-old girl or the resurrection. Historians often talk about Jefferson’s version of the Gospels as *“scripture by subtraction.”*² And there is a good reason for this epithet; even though Jefferson was

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hoping to capture in his own words, “***the most sublime morality which has ever fallen from the lips of man***,”³ his version of the Gospel turned Jesus into a teacher of uninspiring and trite morals that had little to offer to humankind.

There is something in the human soul, in each one of us, that hungers for wonder and refuses to be satisfied with the mundane only. There is something in every human heart that cannot be restrained by our rational and limited understanding of the natural world; something that transcends our knowledge and reason and searches for a deeper meaning beneath the ordinary moments of life. That’s why we still marvel at the sight of a beautiful sunrise. Intellectually, we understand that the sun doesn’t really rise. It is our planet that rotates on its axis until our side of the Earth faces the sun and we begin to see our life-giving star around the curvature of the Earth. Still, we look at the sun coming up slowly in the horizon and we can’t help but be enthralled by the stunning beauty of the morning star. Music, which many describe as a “*language of emotions*,” is basically structures of tones and yet music arouses complex emotions in us that can cause tears or prompt laughter, evoke national pride and kindle a sense of religious transcendence.

There is something deeply rooted in our humanity that longs for awe-inspiring moments and experiences that give us a glimpse of a world made right – a world where peace is possible and human life is sacred and humankind is finally able to nurture a life-sustaining relationship with the environment. That’s why we feel fully alive when our imagination takes us beyond our ordinary realities and makes us thirstier for a world of human friendship where violence does not turn humans into refugees and poverty does not force families to board rickety boats that often sink before reaching safe harbors and the highest court in the land does not undermine the diversity of university campuses across the nation and state legislatures do not pass bills that target the rights of transgender Americans and patriotism refuses to be blind to the injustices created by our historic divisions of race, class and gender. There is something in us that does not want to live in a world where miracles have been subtracted from our lives because we know that it is from this indomitable longing for the miraculous, the unimaginable that the possibilities for human flourishing are birthed into human history.

First century Christians would have been completely blown away by the miracle stories we heard this morning. They knew that in Jesus’ first century Jewish society it would have been unthinkable for a woman with a blood flow to touch any man, especially a religious man, intentionally. Jesus and this woman, who remains nameless, lived in a world ruled by strict laws of purity that labeled people as “clean” or “unclean.” Any woman in her menstrual cycle was considered to be “*non-Kosher*” because her blood flow was perceived as a sign of God’s punishment on Eve for having led Adam to sin. Anything the woman touched, any place she sat on, and even her bed was unclean. For seven days, menstruating women were ritually impure and were excluded from society.⁴ According to the Law, any man touched by a woman with a blood flow would be defiled and become impure himself.

This morning's passage says that for 12-long-years this is how the woman in the story lived, namely, as a social outcast, as an undesirable human being, as a person who was a threat to the men in her society and as someone who was beyond help because of her pre-existing health condition. But the Law and social taboos did not keep the woman from reaching out and touching Jesus. Against all reason, she believed this daring effort was her last and only chance to be restored to full health and reclaim her place as a full human being in her community. And, Mark says, the woman's bold faith made her well. Rather than defiling Jesus with her touch, the woman is healed.

We often get hung up on whether or not to believe in the miracle and we miss what is profoundly transformative in the Gospel. This is not just the story about one woman who touched Jesus and walked away feeling well. This is a story about how Jesus' willingness to confront the social and religious systems that allowed his society to rationalize and normalize the discrimination against women and people with disabilities empowered the woman's decision to wrest her own freedom from a male dominated world. Jesus' faith and way of life affirmed the woman's conviction that God's love is wide and deep enough to welcome, accept, heal and set free even someone who had been declared "unclean" by Scriptures and religious institutions. And rather than becoming impure by the woman's touch, Jesus looked at her and called her "daughter." In doing so, Jesus not only spoke against the religious practices that shamed women and tried to control women's bodies, but he also showed his followers that the greatest miracle in life is the miracle of compassion, solidarity and love that makes human beings see each other as equals.

And the evangelist doesn't stop here. The story continues as Jesus, Peter, James and John make their way to Jairus' home where his 12-year-old daughter lies lifeless in her bed. When he gets to the house, Jesus encounters the "*shomers*" – the "watchers" in Jewish religious tradition who stayed with a body from death until burial. ***"Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping."*** Jesus' words sounded downright absurd and irrational. The mourners were there when the child took her last breath. It seemed almost cruel to give Jairus and his wife any hope that their beloved little girl might still be alive. So, the bystanders responded to Jesus' words the only way they thought appropriate... with laughter of disbelief and derision.

Undeterred by the reality of death or the sneers of the realists, Jesus throws everyone out! The writer of the Gospel employs the same Greek verb that is used to describe an exorcism. It is as if Mark wanted the Church to know that there comes a time when it is imperative to cast out the fearful voices of the status quo that seek only to manage human pain and suffering without ever offering the possibility for new life, for a life lived to its full potential, for a life of hope, for a life of freedom and happiness.

There is something in all of us that rebels against a life lived only on the plane of realism, reason and science. These miracle stories, laughable as they may sound to our enlightened and well-educated ears, still inspire many of us because they free our

minds from the constraints of what is real and provoke us to imagine even the impossible as a possibility.

Frederick Douglass, the child of an enslaved woman and, most likely, her white holder, experienced in his own skin the harsh reality of human existence divested of the rights to life, liberty and happiness. Even though he was a slave for half of his life, Douglass taught himself to read and began to lead Bible studies to other enslaved men and women on Sunday mornings. During those clandestine weekly gatherings, Douglass' mind and spirit were unshackled by the same Gospel stories we heard today. He began to see the miracle of freedom not just as a dream but as a way of life within his reach. He attempted to escape several times and in 1838 Frederick Douglass finally succeeded in claiming his own freedom. He moved to Massachusetts where he became a preacher and joined the abolitionist movement. Douglass became one of the most prominent authors, abolitionists, statesmen, and political voices of his time. And he often used Thomas Jefferson's own words in the Declaration of Independence not only to denounce slavery as a national sin, but also to call Americans to live up to the ridiculously unreasonable revolutionary ideals of human equality and the unassailable rights of every human being to live a full and meaningful life.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”⁵

John Adams chose Thomas Jefferson as the draftsman of the Declaration of Independence because of Jefferson's ***“happy talent for composition,”*⁶** but I doubt Jefferson or any of the Founding Fathers had a clue about the power these words would have in the nation's history. Perhaps Jefferson never meant to suggest that Blacks and Whites, men and women are truly equal. Jefferson was after all an aristocrat whose wealth was built on and sustained by the institution of slavery. Even the children he fathered with Sally Hemings remained enslaved until his death. But the same man who sought to subtract the miraculous from Jesus' life somehow found in our Sacred Scriptures the inspiration to affirm something much bigger than he probably ever thought to be possible in his lifetime. And once those words about our God-given human equality were let loose in the world, there was very little anyone could do to cage them in again. Whether this was Jefferson's plan we will never know, but the miraculous possibility for human equality, life, freedom and human flourishing became enshrined in our national ethos and imagination.

In the decades after the independence, rational pragmatists and enlightened realists tried to contain the powerful truth that Jefferson spelt out when he spoke of the Creator endowing every person with inviolable rights. The Constitution pronounced Black male slaves to be only three-fifths of a man. Powerful political figures like John Calhoun sought to tame the enthusiasm of the revolutionary period by claiming that the United States were a plural construct of one and many, equal and unequal. In fact, Calhoun regarded people as naturally unequal.⁷ But it was too late! The imagination of

men like Frederick Douglass was already awoken to the seemingly impossible dream of human equality.

On July 5th, 1852, Douglass stood before more than 500 abolitionists in Rochester, NY to give a speech about a young independent nation that was filled with patriotic fervor and hope for a bright future. Douglass said, “***The Fourth of July... is the birth day of your National Independence, and of your political freedom. This [is], to you, as what the Passover was to the emancipated people of God. Pride and patriotism, not less than gratitude, prompt you to celebrate and to hold [this day] in perpetual remembrance. I have said that the Declaration of Independence is the ringbolt to the chain of your nation's destiny... The principles contained in that instrument are saving principles. Stand by those principles, be true to them on all occasions, in all places, against all foes, and at whatever cost.***” Then Frederick Douglass confronted the crowd gathered in the Corinthian Hall with a revolutionary question, “***Are the great principles of political freedom and of natural justice, embodied in that Declaration of Independence, extended to us?***”⁸

For nearly 247 years, Blacks, women, LGBTQ+ activists, religious minorities, and waves of immigrants have asked that same question. “***Are the great principles of political freedom, equality, justice and happiness, embodied in that Declaration of Independence, extended to us?***” And by asking this same question time and over again, they have kept alive that miraculous vision the Founders wrote into the Declaration of Independence of a nation that strives to ensure that every person, especially those who have faced historic discrimination and disadvantages, has the opportunity to realize their full potential as a human being and a child of God.

And people like Frederick Douglass expect nothing short of a miracle! They do not simply look back to the moment Jefferson’s happy talent put those bigger than history ideals into writing; they are not interested in recovering the original meaning of the Declaration of Independence. They want to make those great principles work in our present to close the gap between the dream of equality and justice and the reality that discrimination based on race, gender and class still keeps hundreds of Americans from poor, vulnerable and underprivileged groups from realizing their full potential in our society.

Affirmative action, which the realists of today accuse of flying in the face of our “colorblind Constitution” – the same Constitution that declared that enslaved Black males were only three-fifths of a human being, was for 45 years part of the ongoing attempt to bring the implausible and impossible great principles of July 4th a little closer to reality! Justice Sonia Sotomayor was right to say that the Supreme Court’s decision to strike down the use of affirmative action in college admissions will further entrench racial inequality in education in our society, which is already endemically segregated and where discrimination still exists and race still matters. But Justice Sotomayor also reminded us of the power of our collective dream. She wrote, “***society’s progress toward equality cannot be permanently halted.***”⁹ This is the hope that has sustained

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one of the wildest dreams human history has ever seen, namely, that human beings are created equal and that our striving toward equality does not take anything away from anyone of us but rather allows us to be more human, to live more fully, to enjoy the priceless gift of freedom and to flourish together as sons, daughters, and children of God.

It takes courage to pay attention to that miraculous something in us that believes in the God-given equality of humankind. It takes a great deal of intentionality to resist the temptation to subtract the irrational and absurd vision of human equality from the Gospel stories we hear every Sunday morning. It takes a deep faith in the eternal truth that Jefferson's happy talent for composition wrote into the national fabric of America to speak up against the very pragmatic and rational political forces that threaten to make some people unequal and unwelcomed and that seek to make all of us fearful of the greatest American motto – "***Out of many, One.***" As Frederick Douglass said so wisely, our call is to stand by our revolutionary principles, be true to them on all occasions, in all places, against all foes, and at whatever cost.

I hope you will enjoy this Fourth of July. Enjoy the parades and fireworks, the barbecues, concerts and family gatherings. And as you give thanks for another Independence Day in this land of dreams of freedom and human rights, I hope you will take some time to listen to that something in you that still believes in miracle stories, especially in the miracle of human equality, even when those stories sound utterly preposterous and unattainable. This week, ask yourself what you can do to make true the flourishing of all people in America today. Take some time to remind yourself that as followers of Jesus Christ, the Teacher who believed that God's love is big enough to include everyone and who affirmed our God-given equality, it is our responsibility to do everything possible and impossible to make the Church, society and our institutions of higher education more diverse and equal. Keep believing in the miracle of solidarity, justice, fairness, and equality. Pledge to make the words of that timeless Civil Rights Movement song your own personal commitment to keep this promise of life, happiness and freedom and the miracle of human equality alive in our present and in our dreams for tomorrow.

***"Ain't gonna let nobody, turn me round,
Turn me round, turn me round,
Ain't gonna let nobody, turn me round,
I'm gonna keep on a-walkin', Lord, keep on a-talkin', Lord,
Marching up to freedom land."***

May it be so. Amen.

¹ Mark 5:43 – my translation.

² By Owen Edwards in How Thomas Jefferson Created His Own Bible, Smithsonian Magazine, January 2012.
[<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/how-thomas-jefferson-created-his-own-bible-5659505>]

³ Jefferson to Short, 31 October 1819, Thomas Jefferson Papers, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William and Mary. Transcription available at Founders Online.

⁴ Leviticus 15:14-30.

⁵ The Second Paragraph of the United States Declaration of Independence, 4 July 1176.

⁶ Thomas Jefferson in The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson, p. 271.

⁷ See America Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present, pp. 83-104.

⁸ By Frederick Douglass in The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro, A speech given at Rochester, New York, July 5, 1852.

⁹ Quoted by Charlie Savage and Daniel Victor in In a scorching dissent, Sotomayor says ‘the devastating impact of this decision cannot be overstated.’, The New York Times, Digital Edition, 29 June 2023 [<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/29/us/politics/affirmative-action-dissent-sotomayor-jackson.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage§ion=US%20News>].