

THE ONLY THING THAT HAPPENS

A Sermon by Kathy Fuson Hurt
BUC, April 24, 2011

The woman approaches the shrine slowly, haltingly. Her lips murmur soundless prayers as she makes her way. Severely handicapped by a progressive muscular disease, her wasted limbs provide little support. She uses crutches with a skill borne of long years of practice.

Closer, closer, to the shrine, prayers become audible, emotions intensify. She is beseeching the Virgin Mary to heal her, this one of God's children who has been so devout, so faithful. The woman hopes that the Virgin Mary can do what doctors cannot. She promises a lifetime of religious service in return for being healed.

Closer, closer to the shrine, just a few yards away. The woman casts her crutches aside and approaches the shrine on her knees. Loud prayers, impassioned gestures, then—a miracle. Upon reaching the shrine the crippled woman grasps it, pulls herself erect, and takes a few unassisted steps. She collapses on the ground, weeping. Friends rush up to help, but she waves them away almost angrily. With tremendous effort she rises up, stands, walks—a bit farther this time. Alternately falling and walking, the woman retraces the path she had followed so laboriously earlier. A friend

runs back to pick up the woman's crutches and place one of them at the foot of the shrine as a token of thanksgiving for the healing.

A teenage boy is critically injured in a motorcycle accident: concussion with possible brain damage, a crushed arm, internal injuries, shattered pelvis, heavy loss of blood, trauma, spinal injuries potentially causing paralysis. No one expects him to survive the night. Parents summoned, a priest prepares to administer last rites.

But a miracle: the boy does survive, inches along day by day in the intensive care unit of the hospital under the watchful eyes of doctors and nurses. Sometimes death again seems imminent, lifesaving techniques have to be used, and the boy manages to win another round in his struggle for survival.

In time the boy's condition stabilizes and he begins the real work of recovery: operations to piece together his fragmented body, physical therapy to help him relearn the lost art of walking, a prosthesis to replace the lost arm. His spirits sag, the work is too hard; he will remain bedridden for the rest of his life.

But his caregivers insist on renewed efforts, his family cheers him and berates him, the priest reminds him of all that life still offers, disabled though he may be, the doctors continue working. And one day, a miracle—

the boy walks away from the hospital. He moves laboriously, to be sure, but he does walk away. As his parents load him into the car, the boy's sister dashes back into the hospital to leave a red carnation on the nurse's station, her small offering of thanks for the healing of her brother.

Miracles: this is the time of miracles, this brief moment in the year when much of the Western world recalls and rejoices in the occurrence of miracles, specifically those miracles central in two of the world religions, Judaism and Christianity. And, to add to the occasion, nature begins around now to add its own recurrent miracle of spring, with warmth and robins and a hint of buds on bare tree limbs (though in Michigan an extra degree of imagination is sometimes required to see this).

Miracles: remarkable, unexpected, inexplicable, unearned events, sometimes characterized by an aura of mystery or the supernatural, that break into our existence from time to time. They surprise us, shock us, shame us, uplift us, even anger us. And, worst of all, they confound us.

Because of their confounding nature, miracles do not constitute a popular topic of conversation among liberal, educated, thoughtful people. None of us likes to be confounded, to appear stupid, to lack words for an experience. And for some of us, being the recipient of an unearned miracle may be a blow to the ego, a suggestion that we are not entirely the masters of our fate,

capable of arranging and anticipating what comes our way. For many Unitarian Universalists, the whiff of the supernatural noticeable in some miracles is especially bothersome because of the challenge it poses to rationality.

Accounts of life in ancient times are replete with references to miracles. All about, wherever the eye fell, strange and wondrous and terrifying events were occurring. In our time, the miracle is the rare, seldom if ever seen event; even a devout adherent of a traditional spiritual path will tell you that we have fallen away, that miracles do not come for us, that miracles which churches now celebrate are the miracles of the past. When we do use the word *miracle* to refer to some event today, we intend it to mean only remarkable or surprising—but not inexplicable, not supernatural, and usually not unmerited.

To the extent that you are a typical group of Unitarian Universalists, you may not find the demise of miraculous happenings a lamentable turn of events. Those fantastic accounts of former days, when cadavers were reborn and seas parted and catastrophes were averted and hopelessly sick healed were too much a product of a limited world view in which humans stood too small and weak, and gods were given too great a power. We are stronger now, more confident of our place in the cosmos, capable of casting a

knowing eye on claims to the miraculous and calling them just what they are: hogwash.

Now this being Easter Sunday, perhaps you have already figured out where I am going this morning, concluding that I am about to tell you what the world needs now are more miracles and less confident people, that we have grown fat and sassy and the time for shaping up is at hand. Because don't ministers like to say such things? And did you really expect me to simply pooh-pooh miracles this morning, on Easter of all days?

But try not to let your certainty about what I am going to say prevent your hearing what I actually do say. Rather than taking the tack of insisting that a choice must be made between opposing alternatives, I want to explore the possibility of choosing both ways, of having miracles *and* rational, independent human beings in the same world in a peaceful co-existence.

The garden is the only place there is, but you will not find it
 Until you have looked for it everywhere and found nowhere
 that is not a desert;
 The miracle is the only thing that happens, but to you it will
 not be apparent,
 Until all events have been studied and nothing happens that
 you cannot explain;
 And life is the destiny you are bound to refuse until you
 have consented to die.

These lines from W. H. Auden's poem *For the Time Being* describe the manner in which I, and perhaps many of you, move from one perspective,

one way of being and doing and thinking, to another. I move only when I have to. Only when the old way is exhausted and no other possibilities present themselves will I make the necessary change—and then with protest. Many of us learn and grow the hard way. So Auden observes that certain wonderful experiences, a refreshing garden, a rich life, a miracle, happen to us only when we welcome them, and we become welcoming, receptive to such experiences, only when the familiar ways are depleted.

“The miracle is the only thing that happens, but to you it will not be apparent/until all events have been studied and nothing happens that you cannot explain. . . .” A twist on the usual argument, isn’t it, which says that miracles are little more than echoes of a wishful and not well-grounded mindset or the product of a limited worldview wherein most happenings seemed mysterious and inexplicable, and with the advent of scientific method and explanation and psychological insight came the demise of miracles. Auden claims just the opposite: that miracles become possible only in an explicable, accounted-for, factually ordered world. “Until all events have been studied and nothing happens that you cannot explain,” until the rational approach to self and world has been operative long enough to exhaust its possibilities, no miracles will appear. Miracles are a post-scientific, not a pre-scientific, event.

Go back in time to the vivid stories of an Easter morning long ago, when a group of peasants and fishermen found themselves face to face with the biggest miracle of all, the miracle of life's victory over death, at a moment in their lives when all had been studied and everything explained. A crucifixion had occurred, a man died and was buried (and with him great hopes), and that was that.

“Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. So she ran, and went to Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, ‘They have taken Jesus out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have put him.’ “(John 20:1-8). Grave robbers, of course, or perhaps a political move by Roman authorities; why else would a body be missing?

Until all events have been studied and nothing happens that you cannot explain

“Peter then came out with the other disciple, and they went toward the tomb. They both ran, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first, and stooping to look in, he saw the linen clothes lying there, but he did not go in. Then Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb; he saw the linen cloths lying, and the napkin, which had been on his head,

not lying with the cloths but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed” (John 20:1-8). The disciples saw grave clothes, lying like the shriveled, cracked shell of a cocoon left behind when a butterfly has emerged, and only then did they believe that a miracle had occurred. The Greek used at this point in the story for *see* is not *see* as *observe* and *note*, but *see* as an inner perception, as understanding. Having exhausted their usual worldview—it died with Jesus on the cross—these tired, dispirited people now saw, with a new kind of seeing, the miracle in the mute grave clothes that pointed to a triumph of life over death.

“The miracle is the only thing that happens, but to you it will not be apparent until all events have been studied and nothing happens that you cannot explain.” And just how do we explain the events of the story told us about that remarkable morning? We can, by imagination, enter the tomb as the disciples did, carrying the accoutrements of our contemporary cultural view, our computers and our psychological insights and our scientific methods, and contemplate the stone rolled from the door, the still-coiled grave clothes, the newly energized and enraptured disciples and friends. As we stand observing the scene, do we see anything? Hogwash? A miracle? Do you *see*?

Until all events have been studied and nothing happens that we cannot explain, there will be no seeing for us beyond the literal facts—which in this story, disclose only evidences of grave robbers, an elaborate hoax, much wishful thinking by traumatized, ignorant people. Any of us who have explained and studied and catalogued and ordered and analyzed for a long time, too long, so that experiences begin to thwart our attempts to make them fit—those of us who are at this point may glimpse, briefly but emphatically, the remarkable, inexplicable, unexpected, unearned miracle of undying life that is the heart of all transformative moments.

And if we do find the ever-apparent miracle this time, do not be alarmed, Rationality will not immediately and forever fly out the window. It stays, while we take our golden egg of a miracle and place it in a basket in our hearts, to be recalled and admired on occasion, to be hidden and hunted and found again each year, whenever study and explanation grow weary.

The miracle is the only thing that happens. May we know the joy of a miracle this Eastertime, this spring day, and always.