

John 20:19-31
Easter 2B + April 8, 2018
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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Unseen Miracles

The Word of the Lord from John 20:29: "Jesus said to [Thomas], 'Have you believed because you have seen Me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'" This is the Word of the Lord.

Dear hearers in Christ, He is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Miracles, miracles, miracles. The ministry of Jesus is full of miracles. You hear of miracles about 20 times in Matthew, 18 times in Mark, and 21 times in Luke; and some of those simply say that Jesus "healed many" (Mark 1:38). In Matthew, Mark and Luke, there are a ton of miracles to be had, and the reason is primarily this: these miracles are recorded to demonstrate that Jesus is, in fact, the long-awaited Messiah. He fulfills prophecies about the Messiah who heals; He demonstrates His authority over nature; and He demonstrates His power over sickness and death. And in all these things, He works miracles not to strike fear into individuals, but to demonstrate the mercy and compassion of God.

In the gospel of John, though, you hear about far fewer miracles – a grand total of eight. John isn't claiming that the other evangelists are wrong and that Jesus did fewer. I have a hunch that John only writes about eight of them because (by the Holy Spirit's inspiration) he's using miracles to make a different point. See, John writes his gospel years after Matthew, Mark and Luke; so by the time he writes, it's been established that Jesus was the Messiah who worked lots of miracle – there are plenty of Christians around who believe this already, and it's part of their message to all who will hear. Therefore, I think, John is recording miracles to teach something else.

Of the eight miracles in John, only two of them are *directly* from Jesus to the recipient. In John 5, Jesus tells a lame man to pick up his bed and walk, and the man is healed; and in John 11, Jesus tells Lazarus to come out of the tomb, and Lazarus lives. I suppose a third could fall into that category: when the disciples are caught in a boat during a wild storm, Jesus walks on water to them and delivers them to their destination immediately.

But the other miracles are *indirect*, if you will. Jesus turns water to wine at the wedding at Cana in John 2; but to everybody watching, He seems to do nothing. He simply tells the servants to fill jars with water and take it to the host. If you were watching surveillance footage trying to piece together what happened, you'd never suspect that it was Jesus behind the miracle – it must be the servants who do something to the water. In John 4, when an official asks Jesus to heal his son who is dying back home, Jesus doesn't go to the boy: He simply says, "Go, your son will live;" and it's only because the father tracks the timeline of healing that he knows that Jesus did the miracle.

In John 6, Jesus feeds the multitude with five loaves and two fish. How does He work this miracle? He takes the bread and fish and gives thanks for them, as He would at the start of any meal; this time, though, the food feeds 5,000 with leftovers! In other words, it doesn't look like Jesus has done or said anything unusual at all. In John 9, He meets a blind man. He makes mud out of dirt and spit, puts it on the man's eyes and tells him to walk to the pool at Siloam and wash his face. The man does so, and when he washes off the mud, he can see ... and he can see that Jesus is nowhere to be found.

Finally, in chapter 21, the disciples are fishing and having the same luck that I usually do. In the morning twilight, a stranger from shore tells them to try casting their nets on the other side of the boat. They do, and they haul in all sorts of fish. The stranger on shore, of course, is Jesus.

Most of the miracles that Jesus performs in John, then, don't look like He's the one working them. The words he speaks sound so mundane. He tells people to fill water jars, go home, wash their face or throw nets in the water. You may well have told people to fill jars, go home, wash their face or go fishing. Yet when Jesus says these things, miracles happen.

In Matthew, Mark and Luke, the writers are declaring, "Jesus has come, and look what He can do!" When John writes his gospel decades later for many Christians who were born later and haven't seen any wonders, he demonstrates that Jesus' miracles may not look like miracles at all ... but they are.

We could put it this way: when Jesus attaches His Word to everyday things, He works miracles. When He attaches His Word to water in John 2, wedding guests get wine; and when He combines His Word with mud in John 9, a blind man gets His sight.

How can water and mud do such great things? Certainly not just the water or the mud, but the Word of God which is in the water and the mud that does these things.

See where this is going?

It's also notable that John is the one gospel that has no record of Jesus' baptism or the Lord's Supper. At the same time, of the four gospels, it may well be the most sacramental of them all.

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That said, we arrive at our gospel lesson from John 20. It is Easter evening, and the disciples have reacted to the news of the resurrection by courageously hiding behind locked doors out of fear. No matter: Jesus is faithful despite their doubts, and so He stands in the midst of them and says, "Peace be with you." Not "You're fired" or even a sarcastic "Really?!" to mock them for their unbelief. Instead, it's "Peace be with you." In other words, "You and I are at peace because I died for your sins – I took everything that makes you an enemy of God to My grave. I'm risen again, and your sin is gone. You are at peace with Me, which means that you are at peace with God."

Jesus then breathes on them and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."

In other words, "You're going to spread My peace to others by giving them forgiveness in My name." And don't forget: where there is the forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation. And eternal healing. And eternal comfort. And eternal rest and deliverance from all those things that leave you anxious and tormented and shamed and sick and dying in this world. Where there is forgiveness of sins, there is the promise that Jesus will raise you from the dead.

Always remember: the forgiveness of sins is the greatest miracle because it delivers all other miracles with it. Healing a blind man is impressive: but if the blind man is unforgiven, he is still going to hell. But if the blind man is forgiven, he will have his sight restored in heaven forever, even if he remains sightless for as long as he lives in this world.

Forgiveness of sins is the greatest miracle of all. And, like so many of the miracles that Jesus works in the gospel of John, Jesus works this miracle indirectly. Just like servants took the water-made-wine to the host at Cana, so the servants of Jesus bring forgiveness to you. That's what Jesus commands and institutes when He says, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them."

So, for instance, a pastor stands before you at the start of a service here and says, "In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all of your sins." In other words, "I'm here to

say what the crucified and risen Jesus has called me to say, and what He would say if He were standing here; and Jesus would say to you, His repentant people, 'I forgive you all of your sins.'"

So also goes the miracle at the font, where water is poured on one's head along with the words, "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." By water and the Word, the one is forgiven and joined to Jesus' death and His resurrection, because the Lord Himself is at work.

And, likewise, the miracle up at the altar, where you receive the body and blood of Jesus Christ – in, with and under bread and wine.

This is how Jesus works the miracle of forgiveness: indirectly. Or to put it a better way: Jesus works the miracle of grace through means, which is why we call Holy Absolution, Holy Baptism and Holy Communion His means of grace.

But because Jesus chooses to do it this way, skeptics will naturally object that nothing is happening. Old Adam wants to say, "I didn't see *Jesus* forgiving sins at the absolution; and who does the guy in the white robe think he is to be saying, 'I forgive you?'" You'll find plenty of people, even plenty of Christians (!), who deny that baptism is anything more than water and nice thoughts; and you'll find plenty of people, even plenty of Christians (!), who would say that the Supper is bread and wine, but nothing more. Your own sinful nature is always jawing at you in a similar fashion, so that you hear the absolution but think it's an announcement only as powerful as a traffic report on the radio, or that the sacraments are only check-boxes because you don't see anything special happening. That's why we give thanks to God for these indirect miracles of John: you don't see anything miraculous happening at the wedding at Cana; but Jesus speaks, and *boom* – wine. You don't see anything miraculous at the Sea of Galilee, but Jesus speaks and the net fills with fish.

It's why we also give thanks for Thomas in our Gospel lesson. He's absent when Jesus first appears to the other disciples and gives them the Office of the Keys – this calling to forgive sins. When Thomas reappears, they tell Him they have seen the Lord – and I've little doubt that they also tell Him what Jesus said about peace and forgiving sins. As they tell Thomas what Jesus has said and done, Jesus is speaking His Word through them to Thomas. He is giving Thomas grace and faith to believe. When Thomas doesn't believe, it's not that he's doubting the other disciples, but that he's doubting Jesus Himself.

When Jesus appears to Thomas and shows him His hands and His side, He also says, "Have you believed because you have seen Me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.

In his doubting, Thomas illustrates a temptation that will badger God's people until Jesus returns in glory – the false teaching that "seeing is believing," which these days has largely been refashioned into "feeling is believing." But Jesus never said, "Faith comes by seeing" or "Faith comes by feeling." He does say, very clearly, in Romans 10, "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of Christ."

And in his repentance, Thomas lets you see Christ's grace and forgiveness for you. You'll always be plagued by doubts in this world, because you're still stuck with your sinful flesh until the resurrection. Keep in mind: many have asserted that, "If you have doubt, you do not have faith," but that statement is as false as it is terrifying! No, rest assured that doubt and faith will coexist in you until the Last Day. It's why one of my favorite characters in the Bible is the father in Mark 9 who cries out to Jesus, "Lord, I believe – help my unbelief!"

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed. Blessed are you. You have not seen Jesus, but you have heard and you have believed. You rejoice in the absolution because it's not some

guy in a white robe telling you not to sweat your sins, but it's Jesus speaking His Word through his mouth to take your sins away. You remember your baptism; and you know that there, by water and the Word, Jesus has already given you His death and His resurrection. He is risen indeed, and so are you – you just don't see it yet. And you run to the Supper as soon as possible, because Jesus promises that He is there, giving you His very body and blood, giving you peace and faith and life.

You know these things to be true, because Jesus says they are true; and Jesus is working no differently in His means of grace today than He was at the wedding at Cana, or the pool of Siloam, or the Sea of Galilee.

Blessed are you, says Jesus. For though you have not seen, you believe. You believe because you have heard; and by the work of the Holy Spirit, faith comes by hearing. That is why, as John concludes, "these [things] are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name."

You do have life in His name, because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen