

Impossible Thinking

Late Thursday afternoon, when I left church, the sky here was incredible. There was a storm east of us, and in the direction of Atascadero the sky was a heavy, dark grey-mauve – and there was this short section of rainbow schmeared across the storm clouds that looked like it was being raked by rain bands, and kind of above us, here, was the edge of the system, the sky off to the west was blue, and here the sun was shining, and there were a few puffy white clouds bouncing across the sky. It was a sight: something unusual, quite beautiful, just the kind of thing that stops you in your tracks, when, for a little bit, you can almost step out of time and connect completely with the experience, you *feel* it, completely.

And this got me thinking, because ‘the quality’ of this experience is something we’re generally not equipped to understand, even with all our learning and with all the knowing that comes with living in this country in the 21st century.

Sure, quite a lot is known about the weather ... at least when the weather is actually happening. Quite a lot is also known about the way the human eye works, how I’m seeing it, and the brain, how light and color are processed to give us an image of the world. Sure, a fair bit is known about all that. And on a physical level, there’s quite a lot known about what’s happening when we feel, the millions of tiny events kicking off in our bodies that give rise to certain ways of feeling.

But thinking only about cells in our bodies, or neurotransmitters in the brain and gut, this doesn’t begin to approach the richness, the felt and known breadth and depth of the human experience, and it doesn’t explain the amazing variety of uncommon and unexpected experienced phenomena countless humans have witnessed and recorded through history and continue to witness and speak of today.

The scientific method, so immensely valuable to humanity for all that it's brought and continues to bring, may not, arguably, ever be able to capture the quality or the full dimension or possibility of *lived human experience*. It might just be the wrong tool for the job; but for so many of us, in this dominant culture especially, it's the only tool we've been given.

This is a particularly important thing to consider for us, as Christians, because we follow Jesus, fully divine and fully human, whose very existence is a literal embodiment, an enflesh-ment, of the miraculous, the extraordinary, the highly unusual. The centrality of miracles in our Gospel texts has been a particular problem to Christians in the western world for hundreds of years, where science and scientific-type thinking have reigned supreme for a long time now. Here, thinking "scientifically" dominates as *the* way to understand life, the universe, and everything, and so really, the only way to fit Jesus into all of that, is to flatten him out.

In an attempt to make the Christian story more reasonable, that is, more intellectually feasible, we might invoke 'symbol' and metaphor as ways of interpreting the miracles we read about in the Gospels. To "make sense" of the miraculous, we might think to ourselves: well, of course that didn't *really* happen, it's a metaphor, surely, or: it's allegory, or: those people of ancient times didn't really understand what it was they were witnessing, they thought it was a miracle, but really it was an illusion, or a delusion.

It wasn't really real. It can't have been, because that would have been impossible.

What then of the "miracle-of-all-miracles" – the Resurrection – about which Jesus is teaching his disciples in today's reading. What do we do with that?

The way we connect with the miraculous, the way we define it, the way we connect with the Resurrection, the way we make sense of it, matters because our spiritual practices in this church are centered on the extraordinary, miraculous event of the Resurrection. We gather each Sunday to remember it. Our liturgical year has its apex at Easter, our most important feast day, proclaiming the Truth and significance of the Resurrection.

So how we understand Jesus' Resurrection, or not, is important because it sits at the heart of our theology and at the very heart of our shared spiritual practices.

I don't believe it's my job to tell you what to think. At all. I think it's my job to hold the door open – hold the door open, possibly, to new ways of thinking, new ways of thinking about faith that sit in addition to ideas that are generally accepted and more culturally conventional. I think it's my job to emphasize spirituality, both as a critical aspect of what we are as human beings, and as a way to shift and enhance our thinking.

Our spiritual experiences may be of a different sort to our “normal” experiences, the ones science can mostly, reliably predict and observe, the ones that involve certain cells and neurotransmitters ... but *spiritual experience* is, absolutely, *human experience*.

I do not believe in any separation or split of the physical and the spiritual. I firmly believe these two aspects of being human become separated only because of the ways in which we are taught to think.

So, I think taking seriously “the quality” of our spiritual life, investing in our spiritual practices and increasing our awareness of our spiritual experiences, may give us a way to understand reality, and the miraculous, and our faith, in new and very interesting ways.

I think we've likely all had moments in Creation where we've known/felt a sense of one-ness, a quality of experience that pulls us out 'out-of-

time,’ out of ‘ordinary experience.’ What if we cultivated lives, through commitment to spiritual practice, that increased our confidence in understanding the world around us both conventionally *and* spiritually, simultaneously, perceiving our reality as marvelous, miraculous – miracle-filled even – even when we don’t quite understand it.

What if we took that seriously?

As Christians, in this place and in this time, our tradition still points to the Resurrection, and so maybe now, as Christians in this time and place, our understanding of that and its implications depends on us taking our spirituality, our spiritual life and experience, seriously.

Today we hear Jesus prepare his disciples for what is to come. They don’t understand, yet they continue on – as should we. Cultivating an acceptance of the incomprehensibility of the Resurrection is a critical practice of intellectual humility, and a vital aspect of our spiritual lives, because it changes the way we encounter the world around us ... Creation and all that is in it. It’s not naivety, or a demonstration of gullibility, or an abandonment of our God-given reason. It is: a commitment not to settle for a flattened reality, created by minds trained in school and shaped by the culture at large for its own purpose.

Miracles today risk being dismissed - the highly improbable, the impossible, just doesn’t fit with a contemporary, “sensible” worldview. As spiritual practitioners let’s not settle for the sensible, the reasonable, privileging only what’s objective and practical. Let’s encourage one another to keep reaching for the fullness of reality, through the spiritual Truths, only really ever known through our own direct experience of the highly improbable, and the utterly extraordinary. Let’s encourage one another in “impossible” thinking.¹

¹ This sermon was much inspired by a book I read recently by Philosopher and scholar of Comparative Religion, Jeffrey J Kripal. If you’ve read it too, or decide to read it, let me know – I’d *love* a conversation partner! Jeffrey J Kripal “How To Think Impossibly: About Souls, UFOs, Time, Belief, and Everything Else” (University of Chicago Press, 2024).