

Lucia Lloyd's sermon
July 24, 2011
John 20:11-18

Feast Day of St. Mary Magdalene

If God can create the universe, is there any solid reason for concluding that God can't do miracles? I believe in miracles because I figure a God who can create the wonders of nature isn't limited by nature. If God can create the universe, God can do miracles. So the incarnation and the resurrection are not impossible. I believe in both of them. And I don't feel the need to come up with non-miraculous explanations for all the other miracles presented in scripture. If God can create fish, it seems to me God can take five loaves and two fish and create enough fish to feed the 5,000.

Today as we celebrate the feast day of St. Mary Magdalene, our gospel reading from John 20 tells us about Mary Magdalene's experience at the empty tomb. At first, she assumes that the man speaking to her is the gardener, as any normal person would. But what matters most about Mary Magdalene is that when he calls her by name, she believes in the miracle. She proclaims it: "I have seen the Lord!" There are plenty of people who don't believe her, but she knows what has happened to her and she continues to believe in the miracle. The God who created life can come back to life.

Believing that God can do miracles is not the same thing as believing that every single event someone claims as a miracle is genuine. There are always con artists in the world. Human beings sometimes exaggerate or get things mixed up, whether intentionally or accidentally. Some events turn out to be false, other events are true.

Also, it is not always obvious what events are supernatural and what events are natural. I don't even try to distinguish between miraculous healing and natural healing. My attitude is that all healing is a good gift from God. And what did your mother teach you is the appropriate response when you receive a good gift? You say, "thank you." All healing is a gift from God, so I thank God for all healing. If I get a cut that heals with no treatment, I thank God for that healing. Penicillin is a gift from God, so I thank God for healing through penicillin. When people are healed after prayers for healing, I thank God for that. When people are healed in circumstances that seem completely amazing, I thank God for that. It's all good, so I thank God for all of it.

Also, some legends are based in factual events, some legends are simply legends. There is a legend about Mary Magdalene that is not in scripture but is popular among the Eastern Orthodox. It says that Mary Magdalene was at a banquet with Emperor Tiberias, with all sorts of food, and as they ate she telling him about her experience of Jesus' resurrection. Emperor Tiberias scoffed, "It is just as impossible for a man to rise from the dead as it is for the egg in your hand to turn red!" And then, the egg in her hand turned bright red. I have no idea whether this is based in a factual event or whether it is simply legend, although I love that picture of God watching the arrogant emperor telling Mary what God can't do and God saying, "Oh yeah? Ping!" And the little egg turns bright red. And I expect God just smiles and nods.

Anne Freeman and I were having a great conversation in which I said that my attitude is that if God can create the universe, God can do miracles. The next day, Anne mailed me a copy of one of her favorite short stories. The author, Philip Roth is Jewish, and he gave his story the provocative title: "The Conversion of the Jews." Now that we are used to kids listening to rap music, it seems almost quaint now to think back to a time when boys would be shocked to hear the word "intercourse" and there is a lot of humor in the story, but it also explores some spiritual areas that extend well beyond the classroom the boys are in, and it extends beyond Judaism to areas we can all relate to. So today, as part of the sermon, we'll read a story. It begins with the two boys:

"You're a real one for opening your mouth in the first place," Itzie said. "What do you open your mouth all the time for?"

"I didn't bring it up, Itz, I didn't," Ozzie said.

"What do you care about Jesus Christ for anyway?"

"I didn't bring up Jesus Christ. He did. I didn't even know what he was talking about. Jesus is historical, he kept saying. 'Jesus is historical'" Ozzie mimicked the monumental voice of Rabbi Binder.

"Jesus was a person that lived like you and me," Ozzie continued. "That's what Binder said-"

"Yeah? . . . So what? What do I give two cents whether he lived or not. And what do you gotta open your mouth!" Itzie Lieberman favored closed-mouthedness, especially when it came to Ozzie Freedman's questions. Mrs. Freedman had to see Rabbi Binder

twice before about Ozzie's questions and this Wednesday at four-thirty would be the third time. Itzie preferred to keep his mother in the kitchen; he settled for behind-the-back subtleties such as gestures, faces, snarls and other less delicate barnyard noises.

"He was a real person. Jesus, but he wasn't like God, and we don't believe he is God." Slowly, Ozzie was explaining Rabbi Binder's position to Itzie, who had been absent from Hebrew School the previous afternoon.

"The Catholics," Itzie said helpfully, "they believe in Jesus Christ, that he's God." Itzie Lieberman used "the Catholics" in its broadest sense--to include the Protestants.

Ozzie received Itzie's remark with a tiny head bob, as though it were a footnote, and went on. "His mother was Mary, and his father probably was Joseph," Ozzie said. "But the New Testament says his real father was God."

"His real father?"

"Yeah," Ozzie said, "that's the big thing, his father's supposed to be God."

"Bull."

"Binder says: 'The only way a woman can have a baby is to have intercourse with a man.'"

"He said that, Ozz?" For a moment it appeared that Itzie had put the theological question aside. "He said that, intercourse?" A little curled smile shaped itself in the lower half of Itzie's face like a pink mustache. "What you guys do, Ozz, you laugh or something?"

"I raised my hand."

"Yeah? Whatja say?"

"That's when I asked the question."

Itzie's face lit up. "Whatja ask about-intercourse?"

"No, I asked the question about God, how if He could create the heaven and earth in six days, and make all the animals and the fish and the light in six days--the light especially, that's what always gets me, that He could make the light. Making fish and animals, that's pretty good--"

"That's damn good." Itzie's appreciation was honest but unimaginative: it was as though God had just pitched a one-hitter.

"But making light. . . I mean when you think about it, it's really something." Ozzie said. "Anyway, I asked Binder if He could make all that in six days, and He could pick the six days he wanted right out of nowhere, why couldn't He let a woman have a baby without having intercourse."

"You said intercourse, Ozz, to Binder?"

"Yeah."

"Right in class?"

"Yeah."

Itzie smacked the side of his head.

"I mean, no kidding around," Ozzie said, "that'd really be nothing. After all that other stuff, that'd practically be nothing."

Itzie considered a moment. "What'd Binder say?"

"He started all over again explaining how Jesus was historical and how he lived like you and me but he wasn't God. So I said I understood that. What I wanted to know was different."

What Ozzie wanted to know was always different. The first time he had wanted to know how Rabbi Binder could call the Jews "The Chosen People" if the Declaration of Independence claimed all men to be created equal. Rabbi Binder tried to distinguish for him between political equality and spiritual legitimacy, but what Ozzie wanted to know, he insisted vehemently, was different. That was the first time his mother had to come.

"And he kept explaining about Jesus being historical, and so I kept asking him. No kidding, Itz, he was trying to make me look stupid."

"So what he finally do?"

"Finally he starts screaming that I was deliberately simple-minded and a wise guy, and that my mother had to come, and this was the last time. And that I'd never get bar-mitzvahed if he could help it. Then, Itz, then he starts talking in that voice like a statue, real slow and deep, and he says that I better think over what I said about the Lord. He told me to go to his office and think it over." Ozzie leaned his body towards Itzie. "Itz. I thought it over for a solid hour, and now I'm convinced God could do it."

Ozzie had planned to confess his latest transgression to his mother as soon as she came home from work. But it was a Friday night in November and already dark, and when Mrs. Freedman came through the door she tossed off her coat, kissed Ozzie quickly

on the face and went to the kitchen table to light the three yellow candles, two for the Sabbath and one for Ozzie's father.

When his mother lit the candles she would move her two arms slowly towards her, dragging them through the air, as though persuading people whose minds were half made up. And her eyes would get glassy with tears. Even when his father was alive Ozzie remembered that her eyes had gotten glassy, so it didn't have anything to do with his dying. It had something to do with lighting the candles.

As she touched the flaming match to the unlit wick of a Sabbath candle, the phone rang, and Ozzie, standing only, a foot from it, plucked it off the receiver and held it muffled to his chest. When his mother lit candles Ozzie felt there should be no noise; even breathing, if you could manage it, should be softened. Ozzie pressed the phone to his breast and watched his mother dragging whatever she was dragging, and he felt his own eyes get glassy. His mother was a round, tired, gray-haired penguin of a woman whose frail skin had begun to feel the tug of gravity and the weight of her own history. Even when she was dressed up she didn't look like a chosen person. But when she lit candles she looked like something better; like a woman who knew momentarily that God could do anything.

After a few mysterious minutes she was finished. Ozzie hung up the phone and walked to the kitchen table where she was beginning to lay the two places for the four-course Sabbath meal. He told her that she would have to see Rabbi Binder next Wednesday at four-thirty, and then he told her why. For the first time in their life together she hit Ozzie across the face with her hand.

All through the chopped liver and chicken soup part of the dinner Ozzie cried; he didn't have an appetite for the rest.

The story goes on to describe the class on the dreary November afternoon in which Ozzie, struggling to understand, receives a soul-battering from Rabbi Binder, and is pushed to his limits. Itzie and the other boys start acting out, and the order of the Hebrew school class quickly falls apart.

Binder twisted quickly to see what had happened and in the midst of the commotion Ozzie shouted into the rabbi's back what he couldn't have shouted to his face. It was a loud, toneless sound that had the timbre of something stored inside for about six days.

"You don't know! You don't know anything about God!"

The rabbi spun back towards Ozzie, "What?"

"You don't know-you don't-"

"Apologize, Oscar, apologize!" It was a threat.

"You don't-" Rabbi Binder's hand flicked out at Ozzie's cheek. Perhaps it had only been meant to clamp the boy's mouth shut, but Ozzie ducked and the palm caught him squarely on the nose.

The blood came in a short, red spurt on to Ozzie's shirt front.

Confusion breaks loose. Ozzie screams an insult and dashes out the classroom door, eventually wiggling through the trapdoor to the synagogue roof and locking it shut. He is just as surprised as anyone that he is doing this. The crowd of boys forms on the street below as the Rabbi orders him to come down immediately.

Ozzie didn't answer. Only for a blink's length did he look towards Rabbi Binder. Instead his eyes began to fit together the world beneath him, to sort out people from places, friends from enemies, participants from spectators. In little jagged starlike clusters his friends stood around Rabbi Binder-- who was still pointing. The topmost point on a star compounded not of angels but of five adolescent boys with Itzie. What a world it was, with those stars below, Rabbi Binder below. . . Ozzie, who a moment earlier hadn't been able to control his own body- started to feel the meaning of the word control: he felt Peace and he felt Power.

The rabbi gives him a count of three to come down. The elderly custodian remembers you can call the fire department to get a cat off a roof. When the fire engines, all four of them, arrive, Rabbi Binder has given Ozzie the count of three, four times.

When the fireman asks if he's going to jump Ozzie realizes he hasn't thought at all about what he might do, he was just trying to get away. But he says he'll jump, scampers to the edge and flaps his arms. As the firemen scurry to try to keep the net below him, he scampers to the other edge. The custodian thinks, "It wasn't like this with the cat."

But he was off now to the other corner, flapping his wings fiercely. Rabbi Binder couldn't take it any longer--the fire engines from nowhere, the screaming, suicidal boy, the net. He fell to his knees, exhausted, and with his hands curled together in front of his chest, like a little dome, he pleaded, "Oscar, stop it, Oscar. Don't jump, Oscar. Please Come down. . . Please don't jump."

And further back in the crowd a single voice, a single young voice, shouted a lone word to the boy on the roof.

"Jump!"

It was Itzie. Ozzie momentarily stopped flapping.

"Go ahead, Ozz-jump!"

Itzie broke off his point of the star and courageously, with the inspiration not of a wise-guy but of a disciple, stood alone. "Jump, Ozz, jump!"

Still on his knees, his hands still curled, Rabbi Binder twisted his body back. He looked at Itzie, then, agonizingly, back to Ozzie.

"OSCAR, DON'T JUMP! PLEASE, DON'T JUMP . . . please please. . ."

"Jump!" This time it wasn't Itzie but another point of the star. By the time Mrs. Freedman arrived to keep her four-thirty appointment with Rabbi Binder, the whole little upside down heaven was shouting and pleading for Ozzie to jump, and Rabbi Binder no longer was pleading with him not to jump, but was crying into the dome of his hands.

Ozzie tells his mother to get down on her knees like Rabbi Binder or he'll jump. She kneels, and he tells the whole crowd to kneel. They kneel.

Ozzie looked around again; and then he called to Rabbi Binder.

"Rabbi?"

"Yes, Oscar."

"Rabbi Binder, do you believe in God?"

"Yes."

"Do you believe God can do anything?" Ozzie leaned his head out into the darkness. "Anything?"

"Oscar, I think--"

"Tell me you believe God can do Anything."

There was a second's hesitation. Then: "God can do Anything."

"Tell me you believe God can make a child without intercourse."

"He can."

"Tell me!"

"God," Rabbi Binder admitted, "Can make a child without intercourse."

"Mamma, you tell me."

"God can make a child without intercourse," his mother said.

Next, Ozzie made everybody say it. And then he made them all say they believed in Jesus Christ--first one at a time, then all together.

When the catechizing was through it was the beginning of evening. From the street it sounded as if the boy on the roof might have sighed.

"Ozzie?" A woman's voice dared to speak. "You'll come down now?"

There was no answer, but the woman waited, and when a voice finally did speak it was thin and crying, and exhausted as that of an old man who has just finished pulling the bells.

"Mamma, don't you see--you shouldn't hit me. He shouldn't hit me. You shouldn't hit me about God, Mamma. You should never hit anybody about God--"

"Ozzie, please come down now."

"Promise me, promise me you'll never hit anybody about God."

He had asked only his mother, but for some reason everyone kneeling in the street promised he would never hit anybody about God.

Once again there was silence.

"I can come down now, Mamma," the boy on the roof finally said. He turned his head both ways as though checking the traffic lights. "Now I can come down:"

And he did, right into the center of the yellow net that glowed in the evening's edge like an overgrown halo.

Ozzie, descending into a net like an overgrown halo, is a little like Mary Magdalene, isn't he? No matter what the cost, they both dare to believe that God can do miracles. And he's a little like you, isn't he?