

"Wonders Beyond Measure"

Psalm 150; John 20:19-29

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

April 30, 2017 – 3rd Sunday of Easter – Rev. Ronald Botts

For many months a naturalist had been studying chimpanzees in the wild. One day he observed a certain male stop by a waterfall. It wasn't clear at the time whether the chimp went there deliberately or came upon the spot by chance. In any case it was a beautiful setting. A stream of water cascaded down from a 25-foot height, thundering into a pool below, and casting a fine mist upward.

The animal moved closer and closer, then sat mesmerized and began to rock back and forth. He stared ahead as if in contemplation. After a while he became more excited and started running back and forth, jumping, calling out, and slapping trees with his palms. On subsequent days the chimp returned to this spot and repeated this same activity.

The naturalist decided to return to that same waterfall and over time began observing **other** animals do similar things. None of them appeared to have any practical interest in the water, for they didn't drink from it nor did they cross it. Yet, it seemed that the waterfall drew them there all the same. Something inside them became fascinated by it and, after a time of standing quietly, the creatures became quite animated. It was as if they had no choice but to respond in some way to what they experienced there.

Humans and animals may not be so different when something stirs them. I think you can see it best in children. Watch them when fireworks go off on the 4th of July. Their eyes will be open fully in order to capture every bit of whatever there is to see, but they won't be able to stand still very long. They have to do something physical to respond to the delight of the moment. They'll reach for the sky or whirl around or even do cartwheels. It's as if they can't contain themselves—and maybe they can't. Whenever fireworks flash, children can help but jump. Whenever music plays, children just can't help but dance. Watch a child or grandchild. See if that isn't true.

A strange thing occurs once we get to adulthood, however. We stop acting on all the wonder around us. The writer H. G. Wells once confessed: "There was a time when my little soul shone and was uplifted by the starry enigma of the sky. That has now disappeared. [Now] I go out and look at the stars in the same way I look at wallpaper."

Something happens to most of us on the journey to getting older. Instead of being more surprised and delighted with life, we lose the excitement of living in such a fascinating world. We tend to become very serious as we mature. After all, isn't that what it means to be an adult? Unfortunately, we often jettison the good qualities of childhood along with those we properly put behind us. And, in the end, we are usually short-changed by this.

There are probably many reasons why we do this. Carl Sagan suggested one explanation. He said: "I think everyone is born with that wonder and society beats it out of you. That's why people say nostalgically, 'When I was little, I was interested in [so and so].' I want to help people recapture that sense of wonder." In his own way, I think Sagan did that through his books and TV shows.

Well, it's true that life does beat us down a good deal. Things don't always turn out the way that we would want or expect. Take the case of Job, for example. Life was certainly rough for him. Little by little he became more disillusioned. In some ways that's our story, too. Our hopes in life often get dashed. Our plans get altered. Our desires go unfulfilled. For most of us it's hard to stay optimistic under such circumstances.

Realistically, life is a struggle. No one promised us that it was going to be easy; so then why we are surprised? Perhaps we've read too many stories that end by saying: "And they lived happily ever after." We want to believe this assurance and apply it to ourselves, but it continually disappoints us. So, after a while there's a tendency to give up. Days can become something to endure rather than to enjoy. We can easily become doubters and cynics. Does this seem at all familiar?

After the crucifixion the little band of disciples were filled with disappointment and doubts, too. True, according to the Gospel of John, Mary Magdalene reported an encounter with the risen Christ, but that was her experience, not theirs. They may have wanted to believe, but to pin their hopes on one witness—a woman at that—was more than they were prepared to do.

This was a group of confused and frightened men. Even the bolted door of the house where they gathered did not make them feel secure. Everything in life seemed to have gone wrong. Nothing had turned out the way they wanted. Now they even feared for their own safety.

The disciples we know were reduced by one after the betrayal of Judas and, on this occasion, Thomas was not with them for some reason. They were broken in spirit by the realization that they had failed their Master at the very time they should have been at their best; yet, perhaps they may have also wondered to themselves if Christ had failed them as well.

Had his confidant promises proven to be nothing more than hollow words? Had this one, on whom they had pinned their faith and for whom they had risked everything, been self-deceived? Jesus had awakened in them an amazing dream, a hope beyond their greatest expectation. Yet, when he was put up on that cross to die, the dream seemed to die with him.

At that terrible low point for them, that sense of total anguish, they are suddenly startled by a sense that they are not alone in the room. They clearly hear a familiar greeting, "Peace be with you." The shadowy figure shows them his hands and side so they would truly believe who it is. "Peace be with you," he repeated.

Jesus appears now in the fog of despair which encircles the disciples. Through his presence he reminds them that they did not choose him, but that he chose them. He returns to affirm his unconditional love for them despite their wavering faith. Upon seeing him the text says "the disciples rejoiced." Well, I would think so.

When the absent Thomas returns the others pour out their story. Thomas sees how they have been moved and wants to believe, but can't do so. He says to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my fingers in their marks and my hand in his side, I will not believe." When he is then given that very opportunity, he replies the only way he can at this moment of wonder: "My Lord and my God." Despair is now gone and hope is restored for all of them, Thomas included.

When an individual comes to a personal sense of Christ's presence with them, she or he no longer lives with a second-hand faith. To be able to do that, however, requires being open to possibility. You have to allow it to happen even if you don't understand it. "Stop doubting," Jesus said to Thomas, "and simply believe. Take it for the wonder of what it is. See and experience me. I am here"

For all of us life is filled with wonders. While it could be a waterfall in the forest that draws even the wildest of creatures, it is more likely to be experienced closer to home. It starts with being given the wonder of each new day. We wake up and laid out before us is a whole new set of opportunities. Even within the limits and constraints of our rather ordinary lives, the possibilities are really quite endless.

We're given the wonder of family. We have the connection of spouses; of children and parents; of sisters and brothers; of aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces and nephews, godchildren. What a joy to be part of all that! When we reclaim and celebrate what is already there, we realize how rich we are in what really counts.

We're given the wonder of friends. What a delight to find other souls with whom we can share more than just trivialities. No one can have too many friends, nor be a friend of too many others. Friendship grows from valuing its worth and builds on the sheer enjoyment of being together.

Then, too, we're given the wonder of faith. A whole spiritual world lies around us and inside us which that can bring harmony and purpose to our living. To get the most from our faith, however, we have to rediscover how to approach it like as a child. We have to open our eyes wide, expect the best, and be ready to receive whatever surprises we may be given.

Our Gospel text for the day tells us of lives filled with despair, of a space permeated by gloom, of persons feeling defeated. Into that bleak setting came Christ himself to draw those persons back to him and to restore them to hope.

The continuing good news of Easter declares that even for the likes of us—tired, sad, beaten down, despairing, or whatever—there is wonder breaking into our lives at the same time... and it is beyond our expectations. Jesus comes to us as he did to those of long ago, offering himself on our behalf, willing to take us to places of rest and renewal, showing us possibilities we would surely have missed otherwise. Maybe we can't see Jesus, but I believe we can **sense** Jesus—and that's a wonder in itself!

So watch for the fireworks to be set off. Be ready to get up when you hear the music. Old bones like ours can't help but dance when hearts are once again opened to promise. Even a "Doubting Thomas" can't sit still and mope when the soul is filled to overflowing.

So today don't worry if you can't understand the "how" of the Risen Christ, just welcome the one who could not be constrained by even death itself. Marvel at this wonder beyond all measure and allow yourself to be moved by the changes it can bring about in you. It's the most amazing Good News of all time and it's yours for the accepting.