In today’s reading from the Gospel according to Matthew, we hear of the restoration of life to a dead woman, and the healing of the sick, transformations made possible by the power of faith, articulated in the presence of Jesus. What is chiefly striking in these incidents is of course the audacity of the proposition that our mortality and its death-bound trajectory could be reversed at all. What is equally striking, but at the level of narrative and imagery, drama and pace, is how un-dramatic it all is. A thought, expressed in an ordinary way, and then a touch, produce instantaneous transformations without build-up or fanfare. The extraordinary takes place in an instant.

A poet, unknown in her lifetime, who wrote frequently about precisely this theme was the American poet Emily Dickinson (1830 to 1886). Dickinson wrote nearly 1800 poems, only 12 of which were published in her lifetime. The rest were bound in packets, and discovered only after her death. The poems are preoccupied by the extraordinary within the ordinary – the beauty of snow or the Fall in New England, the power of the elements, but also the transformative effects of thought, of relationships and instants of sudden and extraordinary illumination. One famous poem begins ‘There’s a certain slant of light,/ Winter afternoons -/ That oppresses, like the Heft/ Of Cathedral Tunes -// Heavenly Hurt, it gives us -/ We can find no scar,/ But internal difference, / Where the Meanings are…’. Emily Dickinson’s relationship to Christian belief was complex. Some poems have a directness and plain-speaking piety that would have delighted her Puritan ancestors in New England, but she embraces, too, their restless spirit of contradiction, the relentless introspection, and the periodic wildness and darkness of thought characteristic of
her seventeenth century forebears. Dickinson rages in her search for
answers, challenging customary patterns of thought. Yet her poetry is
often witty: one poem begins, ‘Why do they shut me out of Heaven?/
Did I sing too loud?’ Such comic moments are no laughing matter. In
another poem she reflects on her own habitual recourse to whimsy
and concludes glumly that ‘Mirth is the mail of anguish’. Humour, the
writer’s chain-mail, hid despair – a word she uses often. As with the
English poet Byron, who wrote ‘if I laugh at any mortal thing, ‘tis so
that I may not weep’ – Dickinson’s comedy is deadly serious. Her
poems are philosophical instances, sheathed in Gothic elegance. She
writes ‘Because I could not stop for Death-/ He kindly stopped for me
-/ The Carriage held but just Ourselves -/ And Immortality –‘. This is
part of the art of lyric poetry, of the shift in sense one simple word
can bring, that swerve in sense spelling the beginnings of a shift in
consciousness. Imaginative play is what poetry encourages in the
reader’s mind while inscribing it on the page. The mind’s play with
possibilities increases empathy, stimulates the power to conjure new
connections between familiar things – makes us broader, better.
Bolder. What may appear at first to signal escapism and a removal
from the real world into the reaches of subjectivity can be in reality
an exposure to a deeper stratum of the real:

‘Tis Compound Vision-
Light- enabling Light-
The Finite – furnished
With the Infinite –

If the relentless introspection of Dickinson’s ‘compound vision’ finds
its roots in Calvinism it was also a daily necessity. What was her real,
day to day life like? Emily Dickinson suffered from what we now
presume to be a severe and almost life-long agoraphobia. She did not leave the house shared with her parents, and after their deaths, rarely left her room. The physician summoned when she became mortally ill was seated in a chair and asked to make his diagnosis on the basis of seeing her walk, once, fully clothed, across an open doorway. Her handful of relationships outside her immediate family were mostly conducted by correspondence. Even in this profound isolation there is style, and play; a poetry of the person. She always wore white. She was a good cook, and would hang cakes on long pieces of string from her windows for the schoolchildren passing by, whom she would never meet. She writes beautifully about the sea – which of course she never saw.

Rather than viewing these eccentricities as limitations that prevented Dickinson from living fully, I believe that we should look at how she used the things she could not help, the things she could not change about herself, to achieve insight. The severe restrictions of her existence enabled her to see reality, human and other, in microscopic detail. Her retreat into an interior world paradoxically furnished her with the best-equipped laboratory in which to expose the processes of time, to open the gates of suggestion to eternity, to record the swift transition from the ordinary to the extraordinary. The ultimate purpose of her verbal explorations is religious in the most profound sense. The poems have no titles, and in one sense are the same poem, perpetually re-begun, a regular return to prayer and meditation and questing.
One particularly extraordinary, in fact unique feature of Dickinson’s poetry, which literally puts her purposes onto the page, is her use of the dash as punctuation. While she does use commas and full stops, she preferred a horizontal dash-mark, frequently peppering the poems with them, giving a simultaneous impression of hesitancy and a breathless rush forward. The dash also allowed her to draw two or more differing conclusions at one time, a form of verbal counterpoint.

I shall read one of her most celebrated poems, which does this:

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading – treading – till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through –

And when they all were seated,
A Service, like a Drum –
Kept beating – beating – till it seemed
My Mind was going numb –

And then I heard them lift a Box
And creak across my Soul
With those same Boots of Lead, again,
Then Space – began to toll –

As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear,
And I, and Silence, some strange Race
Wrecked, solitary, here –
And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down –
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And finished Knowing – then –

Does she mean I finished knowing then – that there was no more knowing, only the flooded passive consciousness of a mind hitting a world at every plunge... or does the dash mean I finished knowing (but/dash) THEN I saw something new, some sign of hope, a transformed perspective? The complexities of poetry all hang on a simple transformative word, or, as here, on a tiny, black horizontal dash of the pen.

And so we are returned to the reading from Matthew. A simple dash, a simple word, or touch, can turn the material world into the world transformed by faith. We think the miracles wrought by Jesus extraordinary. They are also, importantly, ordinary. We can follow in these footsteps and perform our own small daily miracles – with a touch of the pen, or the hand – the mind, or the heart. Amen.