



## **The Good News is Life Giving**

**Acts 3:12-19**

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Again, good morning – and Happy Easter! Yes, it is still the season of Easter. We continue the celebration of Easter all the way through the ascension of Christ and the gifting of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

In the season of Easter, the Revised Common Lectionary utilizes the book of Acts – or the Acts of the Apostles – in highlighting the formation of the church in those first years after Christ’s resurrection. It considers how the early church lived, how they grew, and how they proclaimed the witness of God’s love in Christ following the resurrection.

I thought this might be a good season for us to look at the early church as a model for the church today. I’ve said this publicly before, but I’ll reiterate, it’s one of the greatest challenges of my job: I find myself apologizing on behalf of the organized Christian Church far too often. The recent Gallup poll is thus unsurprising, as it names that for the first time in our nation’s history, less than 50% of our nation’s population claims membership in a religious body.

We – the Christian Church – we’ve strayed so far from whom God created us to be. So, in the coming few weeks leading up to Pentecost, we’re going to consider how we might reclaim for the Church our call and our witness.

This morning’s text comes from Acts 3. Leading up to what Lindsey read for us, beginning in verse 12, we have a story about Peter and John healing a man who had been lame from birth. Luke, the author of Acts, narrates the story, saying that the man was brought to the gate of the temple each day so he could ask for alms from those coming and going from the temple. I’m not sure if he had a cardboard sign, but the man was there to ask for money since society did not have a job in which he might earn his own money, as a man who was lame.

As Peter and John arrived at the temple gate, they saw the man asking for money from everyone entering the temple. They looked at him, and said, “Look at us.”

Do you know how powerful such a look can be for those who often feel unseen?

Many of us have had that moment of looking away when someone comes walking by our window at a traffic light asking for help. There’s often that awkward moment when we try to not make eye contact so as to not give the person hope we might have something to give them ... or perhaps to not feel guilty about not giving to them what we might have available. But for the person, for the one who so often has people glancing away, there’s power in being seen, in having your reality acknowledged.

Peter and John make eye contact with the man, and sure enough, Luke tells us, fixing his attention on them, the man has an expectation to receive something from them, and so he asked them for money.

“But Peter said, I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.”

Peter reached out and grabbed the man's hand, and he helped the man stand up. The man jumped up, he stood on his own accord, and he began to walk. He went in to the temple with Peter and John, walking on his own, leaping and praising God. He was freed from that which has so long held him captive, that which had for so long oppressed him. He leapt and he praised God for he could walk.

Obviously, this man can't go jumping around the temple without drawing some attention. People recognized him – they had walked right by him on their way into the temple that day and every day prior – and the people who saw him were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

And then we get to verse 12 and our reading for today. The man is standing there with Peter and John, and others in the temple are coming up to them in astonishment. And Peter realized that something needed to be said – the interest of the people needed to be addressed. And so, Peter begins to preach.

It's important as we hear Peter's words to remember, Peter is Jewish. He is a Jewish man in the presence of other Jewish men (they are in the temple, so there's a cultural expectation at the time that he's only speaking to Jewish men.) He's in the most revered of Jewish spaces – the Jerusalem Temple itself. And, as we'll see, he's using the Jewish scriptures in his sermon.

The Jewish context of this moment is an important note, because many a Christian have heard this sermon as supporting anti-Semitism. Refuting anti-Semitism is not the point of today's sermon, but it's certainly one thing many a Christian church have gotten wrong. Peter is not shaming the Jews for being Jewish, nor is he blaming Judaism for Jesus' death.

Let's look at what Peter says, and how what Peter says offers instruction to us, as the Church, today.

Peter begins by addressing the sheer look of shock on the faces of those around them, saying, "Israelites, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk?"

The first thing Peter does is decenter John and himself from the work of this miracle. This healing is not about Peter and John, or their power and piety – their faithfulness. No – this miracle is about the faith of another, the power of another, and Peter wastes no time redirecting the focus.

This is lesson number one for the Church: we need to humble ourselves in the church to remember where power really comes from. We are quick to accept praise and honor for the good work of the church, often forgetting to humble ourselves in acknowledging the right recipient of such praise.

Peter continues, "The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus, whom you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him. But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead."

Again, Peter is framing this conversation in the Jewish history, naming Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all of *our* ancestors. His intent is not to separate himself from Judaism, but to couch Jesus' arrival as the fulfillment of the covenantal promise of Jewish history. And in so doing, he declares that even our mistakes, even our inability to recognize what God is doing in our midst, cannot overcome God's doing it. Though our mistake may have been to give Jesus over to be crucified, though our actions brought about the death of the Author of life, God raised him from the dead.

As Bishop William Willimon states it, “When confronted by God’s Messiah, humanity got together and did what it often does in the face of truth – violence and crucifixion.”<sup>i</sup> Jesus’ truth challenged the way of life for even the most ardently faithful Jews, and because his proclamation was a threat to the existing power structures, he was hung up on a tree. For a people who had so long been awaiting the arrival of the Messiah, when the Messiah finally showed up and challenged their way of believing and living, instead of acknowledging the power of the one in their presence, they turned him over to be silenced by the empire.

But the empire has no power over God. Death has no power over the Author of life. And so Peter continues, having framed Jesus as the fulfillment of God’s promise, he now names Jesus as the one through whom this lame man was healed. Peter says, “By faith in *his name*, *his name* itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know; and the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you.”

So here’s lesson number two we need to relearn from the witness of the early congregation: the faith of Christ, the power of the Author of life, doesn’t just help people *get by*. Peter and John didn’t just give this man a meal, or a few dollars to get through the day. They didn’t offer to put him up in a hotel for the night. They didn’t call the non-emergency police line to ask for a wellness check. They believed that the power of God in Jesus Christ could help this man claim a new life in which he could walk for himself, work for himself, fend for himself, support himself, and no longer be an outcast in society.

The Church today focuses so much on charity – doing things that make us feel good about doing them – that we’ve lost sight of the power of God in Christ which calls for comprehensive reconciliation. God doesn’t desire people to be seen as outcasts, God desires for each one of the created humanity to be able to live fully into community without hindrance or barrier.

And no, that’s not a common desire in society, not even in the so-called progressive Northern Virginia. Just two years ago, the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors approved a motion to prohibit panhandling at traffic intersections. What better way to feel ok about not giving panhandlers money than to not have to see them asking for money? Instead of passing reform to help those who rely on panhandling to receive training to take on new jobs, or to provide additional housing support so they could be housed on a minimum wage job, the decision was to take away one of the few ways this subset of our community was able to receive any money at all.

Peter’s sermon here in Acts 3 is just the second recorded sermon in the Christian movement. From our earliest foundation, the church has been called to understand the power of Christ to lead those who have been outcast into a new life where they are no longer separated from the whole of society, where they no longer hold stigmas as *unseen*, or *unwanted*, or *unwelcomed*.

Peter keep preaching, turning now more directly to what it takes for us as individuals to claim this faith in Christ. “And now, friends,” Peter says, “I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer. Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out.”

Peter knows they acted in ignorance. Had they known the Jesus was the Messiah, had they fully understood who Jesus was and why he had come – why he preached and taught what he preached and taught – they wouldn’t have handed him over to be killed. But they didn’t know, they were ignorant in their sin.

It’s graceful to know that we might be forgiven of our ignorance. It’s merciful to be told that our doing wrong without knowing we were doing wrong does not condemn us to our eternal demise.

Peter's invitation is to repent, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out. The Greek word here for repent is *metanoia*, which means to completely change one's mind.<sup>ii</sup> The invitation Peter offers is for them to change their minds from their ignorance to truth.

In the Church today, we often get worked up with this word "repentance." It's so often used as a way of condemning those who don't think like we think, or believe as we believe, or do as we do. Which is funny, because Peter's criticism here is that the historical faith of Judaism is so locked in to thinking, that they didn't even see the new work God was doing in their midst. It was the firmness of their faith that led to their ignorance and inability to accept the truth that was being proclaimed in their very presence.

And so here, I find a third invitation for the church today to relearn who we were created to be: we are not exempted from the invitation to repentance. We have been ignorant to the detrimental nature of the church's teaching and practice. We have been ignorant to the ways our body of believers has participated in handing people over to be strung up on a tree. We have participated in the silencing of those voices that call us to greater faithfulness. We, not unlike those in the temple where Peter was preaching, have often failed to share in the proclamation of reconciliation that defines God's work in Christ.

But hope is not lost – do not miss the joy of Peter's proclamation. ... It is because of my ignorance – all the times I've uttered those words, "I never knew that" – that I am so thankful for Peter's preaching. I am grateful to know that I worship a God who can see past my ignorance. I am so thankful for a Lord whose death proclaims my ignorance will not have the final say. I am so blessed to give praise to the One who, in spite of my ignorance and wrong doing, invites me into a new headspace, a new existence, a new life which grasps a change in understanding.

And here, I find one final lesson for the Church today: Peter's invitation should be our invitation. Without hesitation, I feel as if we can say with due cause, there's a lot of ignorance in the world today as to how we each play a part in the continual oppression of others in the community. Just as we are called to claim our own ignorance and repent from our own participation in such oppression, we too are invited to call out such ignorance among the greater community and call for a change in the communal understanding. But our invitation carries no weight if we aren't witnessing to the power of such a change ourselves.

Peter's invitation in the temple that day carried weight because his presence had shown the power of Christ in reuniting community, by breaking through social stigmas that declare some people as unworthy or unwanted. He had already proclaimed the reconciling and communal building nature of Christ's power by reuniting the one man with the community. When the Church begins to witness to the power of Christ as Peter did that day, the invitation for others to embrace this power will carry the weight of the glory it proclaims.

For the power of God in Jesus Christ, the witness of the resurrection, the glory of new life – it is not some fairy tale we tell, it is life changing, community building, world altering power. This is the power of Easter, to give new life that which is dead. To revive even the aged Church, as we reclaim and relearn what it means to be God's people for the world today. So may it be. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> William H. Willimon. *Acts: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

<sup>ii</sup> Stan Mast. *Acts 3:12-19*. [cep.calvinseminary.edu](http://cep.calvinseminary.edu). Retrieved April 13, 2021.