

AT OUR GATES

APRIL 18, 2021 | ACTS 3:1-21



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It's really nice to have a "good news" story to read today, since it's been mostly bad news kind of week. There's almost too much good news to manage in this short passage from Acts: good news for the man who was healed, good news for the people in the Temple, and good news for the disciples, Peter and John, too. Let's take a break from today's news and imagine our way into that good news-day instead.

A temple gate, back then, was not a little garden gate. It was big and arching and deep – more like a gated passageway into the Temple courtyard. Shady and cool, and the Beautiful Gate in particular was the entrance for the wealthy and important to go to their prayers and worship. Kind of like a vastly larger version of our front entrance, with a covered porch and grand doors.

Every day, this man who could not walk was carried to the Beautiful Gate by his friends or family to beg for money; and it must've been a good spot, since he kept coming back. I imagine some people ignored him, ears deaf to his plea for money, eyes blind to his need; the way he responded to Peter and John's command to look at them suggests that not everyone gave, but that some did, trying to help him. Peter telling this man that he had no money for him likely caused a flicker of disappointment; money to survive on was the only help on offer, as far as the man knew.

Now imagine what it must have felt like, to be raised up, suddenly able to walk. Strength and power pouring through his limbs, pain gone, muscles filling out, legs made healthy and functioning, for the first time in his life. No longer doggedly, defeatedly, asking for money, sitting by people's feet as they walk by, waiting for someone to pay attention and help him. He can walk; and he uses his new ability to walk and leap into the Temple, praising God the whole way. That is good news!

Seeking help when we are in need is a very human thing to do; sometimes, it's an action full of hope, that someone will do something for us. Sometimes, it's an action full of despair or desperation; sometimes, seeking help is a necessary habit, part of one's survival. For the man that Peter and John spoke to, it was probably a bit of all three – hope, desperation, and survival. But that was the

last day that he needed to go to the Temple, seeking money. He had found much better, longer-lasting help instead.

The book of Acts is the story of the early church, the first Christian communities post-Easter. By this point, Jesus has ascended, the Holy Spirit has been poured out upon the believers, and the first worshipping Christ-following community has been established...and nothing has gone wrong yet. The early Christian community held all property and money in common, they ate and prayed and learned together, and they were still Jewish enough that they were allowed to worship in the Temple, too. Already, there have been signs and miracles that showed Jesus' power at work in them and around them. Now, they are venturing out, interacting with other people, to begin the greater work that Jesus called them to. And that really is the key thing about the early church in Acts: they are Spirit-fueled to go out into the world to witness to the good news of Jesus. This post-Easter faith is a faith in motion and in conversation with the rest of the world.

Peter's proclamation of who Jesus is and what that means began – not with his sermon, which we read a little of today – but with an extraordinary, miraculous moment: a hurting, dejected man's need is met, and he is healed in body and in his heart, too. A lot of us meet Jesus that way – when we need him. We come to church or to Jesus, to a metaphorical gate, seeking help with something that is hurting us or burdening us, some personal problem to which we are seeking resolution. And that is where the good news begins. Jesus himself, in the Gospel of Luke, proclaims his ministry to be a healing one: captives set free, blind given sight, burdens lifted. That's how it begins, how the good news comes into the world and into people: it meets their need. And that's the first good news story in Acts 3 today. But it's not where the good news ends.

Those who see faith primarily as an answer to their personal needs and the world's problems will eventually find it difficult to keep going, to keep believing, when one day, the problem is not immediately solved. And that's where the good news comes in for the people in the Temple that day. Confronted suddenly with this well-known, formerly disabled man walking and leaping and praising his way right into the Temple, on his own two feet, the people worshipping there were astonished and amazed. Many of them had walked by that man that very day, as they walked through the Beautiful Gate

and into the Temple. Many of them, we can imagine, must have walked by him every time they came to worship; some of them must have given him money, a gift as they sought to help him, seeking to try and meet this man's needs themselves. And yet, day after day, he would still be there; his suffering and his burdens lifted by a kind word and a generous heart, but never fully relieved by what they were able to do; as faithful believers in a just and generous God, we can imagine that some of those worshippers were frustrated and burdened by the suffering and brokenness around them. Years of giving faithfully, prayerfully watching for God's promised restoration, seeking to help others as best they could...maybe we don't need to stretch our imaginations too far to understand how hard it is to hope for healing of bodies and hearts and communities when, like the crowd in Capernaum we read about last week, surrounding the house where Jesus was, the scope and scale of hurt is everyone, everywhere, and our capacity to help seems terribly small.

But here is good news, seen and heard in the walking and leaping and praise of this man they all knew. Their giving had not been futile, neither had their prayer and worship; they are astonished and amazed because they have seen what they sought to give: healing and wholeness for this broken person. And this is where Peter's sermon comes in, giving foundation and deep roots for the good news of Jesus. In Christ, God has poured out his power to heal into their world, to refresh and restore. The people in the Temple have long known who God is, but now they know what God in Christ has done, what grace and power have been set loose in the world by Jesus' dying and rising – and that good news has helped them to find something, something that, after years of giving and praying and seeking, might well have become hard to find: hope.

Hope that, no matter how small a few coins or a hot meal or a kind word might seem, when we do it because of our faith, the smallest act can lay the ground for God's mighty acts in Jesus to follow, for the healing and restoration of the world, and of the ordinary hurting people who live in it.

The good news for the faithful people of the Temple was that all God's promises are kept in Jesus, that even though they – and we – share responsibility for Christ's death on the Cross, the originator of life responds to death – even his own! – with more life, with new life, for all. And that is good news, too.

Peter and John already knew the good news. But what a moment for them, on this first recorded public foray into miracles. For those of you who are taking part in our Bible study, this healing of the disabled man should sound familiar; it's as alike as you can get to a miracle that Jesus himself performed, early in his ministry. The good news for Peter and John is that Jesus' amazing, astonishing, life-giving work is going to continue through them and through this new church community they were establishing. The power of Jesus was present and available in his name, and the apostles – who knew that Christ can heal – can now introduce Jesus' name to people who are in need of healing. Revealing Jesus is really the heart of their witness to the good news; it's the driving force behind the rapid growth of the early church, and it's also the reason they were almost constantly in trouble with the Jewish religious authorities and the Roman imperial government.

Peter was very clear that the power to heal or do anything extraordinary at all came from Jesus, that the miracles and the signs and even their words all served to point, not at the church or themselves, but at Jesus. In facilitating Jesus' healing of this man, all Peter did was make eye contact with this man in need, see it as a moment where Jesus was present and poised to heal and restore this man's body and heart, and then say so.

That is how Peter and John began their proclamation of the good news that day. In the Temple, with the newly-healed man by their sides, they went on to add depth and substance, elaborating on this new truth about God and Jesus, building a foundation upon which long-lasting faith could be built. But it began by sensing God present and at work in that moment, and having the courage to say so. This is good news too – good news for us.

The example of Christian witness we see here in Acts does not begin by requiring us to speak eloquently or persuasively about Jesus or the church. We are not instructed on how best to corral people for a debate so we can out-argue them. Witnessing does not begin by telling others what they should or should not believe or do or think; it doesn't begin by inviting them to church.

The starting place for sharing the good news out in this post-Easter world of ours is telling others where we sense Jesus at work, at home or in our jobs or among our friends and family, and here at church too. That is the beginning of the good news, the point of entry: to speak the name of Jesus, in our words and by our actions.

We've covered a lot of good news together this morning! The good news of a healed body and heart for a man who had spent all of his life seeking help. The good news of long-sought hope restored for the worshippers in the Temple, when the power of the risen Christ made someone whole right before their eyes, when Peter promised the same kind of restoration and new life for them all. The good news that Jesus' ministry did not end with his ascension, that his followers, represented here by Peter and John, would continue to share Christ's new, abundant, healing life with the rest of the world.

And the good news for us is that wherever we are in our need, whatever we are seeking – whether it's healing for ourselves, hope in our pain of seeing others suffering and the frustrations of trying to help, help with the challenge of sharing who Jesus is with others – wherever we are today, if we go seeking Jesus there, we will find him, ready to be revealed.

So if you feel like you're stuck somewhere alone and needing help, Jesus is waiting for you there, present and full of the power to heal. If you are worried or worn because all the help you can give doesn't seem to be enough, Jesus is with you, adding his grace and love to your compassion and faith. And if you are seeking to witness to the good news, Jesus is already there, waiting for you to reveal him at work to someone he hasn't been introduced to yet. That's a lot of good news for a bad news week. But the very best good news of all is simple: wherever we seek Jesus, we will find him. Thanks be to God! Amen.