

Easter 2015

The Power of Easter

Acts 3:1-16

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¹ Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour. ² And a man lame from birth was being carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple that is called the Beautiful Gate to ask alms of those entering the temple. ³ Seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked to receive alms. ⁴ And Peter directed his gaze at him, as did John, and said, "Look at us." ⁵ And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. ⁶ But Peter said, "I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!" ⁷ And he took him by the right hand and raised him up, and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. ⁸ And leaping up he stood and began to walk, and entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. ⁹ And all the people saw him walking and praising God, ¹⁰ and recognized him as the one who sat at the Beautiful Gate of the temple, asking for alms. And they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him. ¹¹ While he clung to Peter and John, all the people, utterly astounded, ran together to them in the portico called Solomon's. ¹² And when Peter saw it he addressed the people: "Men of Israel, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we have made him walk? ¹³ The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus, whom you delivered over and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release him. ¹⁴ But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, ¹⁵ and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. ¹⁶ And his name—by faith in his name—has made this man strong whom you see and know, and the faith that is through Jesus has given the man this perfect health in the presence of you all.

Acts 3:1–16 (ESV)

A number of people have asked me how my NCAA bracket picks turned out, and they are quite surprised when I tell them that I really do not get into the world of "bracketology." After a recent conversation with someone, I started thinking about the source of this internal resistance. Here's what I think is the problem. At first I thought maybe it was because I knew that I could never beat my mother-in-law's bracket, so why try? But that wasn't it.

The reason is because I tend to cheer for the underdog or the lower seed. I love Cinderella stories, amazing comebacks, and surprising victories. I love stories like the 1980 US Olympic Hockey Team and movies like *Rocky*, *Hoosiers*, *Karate Kid*, or *The Blind Side*. And I love basketball endings like the 1983 NC State victory where Coach Jimmy Valvano ran on the court like a crazed man.

I love underdog victories, surprise endings, and I tend to cheer for the teams who are not expected to win. And for that reason, I'm not very good at bracketology.

The Surprise of Easter

That is one of the reasons why I love Easter Sunday. The resurrection of Jesus Christ was an unexpected, surprising, and powerful moment that changed the course of history. No one anticipated the empty tomb.

But the surprises didn't stop there. As the disciples of Jesus shared the message of the gospel, there were other stunning displays of unexpected victory and deliverance. Acts 3 is that kind of event. It is a surprising event that I'm sure was very memorable for anyone who happened to be at the temple that day. But that event is not only important because of its surprising nature. It is important because of its connection to the resurrection of Jesus. In other words, the surprising victory of the resurrection led to a surprising healing, and there is a message in all of that which we need to consider today.

The Story

The book of Acts is the historical record of the early church. After the crucifixion of Jesus, the resurrection, and the mass conversion of people at Pentecost, Acts 3 is the first recorded miracle by one of the disciples of Jesus. Its placement in the book of Acts is more than just a record of what happened; the miracle was sending a message. But let's first see what happened.

In verse one we learn that Peter and John make their way to the temple at the ninth hour for prayer. Peter and John were part of Jesus' inner circle, the only disciples who followed Jesus to the High Priest's house after His arrest, and they were viewed as the two prominent leaders of the disciples. There were three times for prayer at the temple each day, and the ninth hour (3:00 p.m.) featured the daily sacrifice. It would have been the most popular time to visit the temple for prayer.

Now the Temple area was a prime location for those who survived by the generosity of others. Religiously-minded people were more inclined to give to those in need while they were making their way to worship, especially given the typical works-based view of religion held by most Jews during this time period. The courtyard and the major entrances into the temple courtyard would have been lined with needy people asking for "alms." And there was one gate, the Beautiful Gate, that was particularly popular for both worshippers and those seeking assistance.

Verse two tells us about a particular man who 1) was lame from birth, 2) had to be carried to the gate, and 3) asked for alms every day. Acts 4:22 tells us that he was over 40 years of age.

In other words, this man's disability was his entire life. Every day someone carried him to the temple gate, and there he sat – all day long – asking people for assistance. That had been the case his entire life, and there would be no other future for him.

Peter and John encountered this man as they made their way into the temple courtyard, and he asked them for alms as he would have asked the masses of people who made their way into the temple area. Peter and John stopped and directed his gaze at them (v. 4). He must have been asking for alms while looking at the crowds as they passed by. This was just another day of begging.

After the man fixed his gaze upon Peter and John and expected to receive some money, Peter spoke these words to him: *"I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!"* (v. 6). Remember these specific words: *"In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up. . ."*

What happened next is amazing to read, and it must have been beautiful to behold:

⁷ And he took him by the right hand and raised him up, and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. ⁸ And leaping up he stood and began to walk, and entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. Acts 3:7–8 (ESV)

Just let your imagination paint a picture here of what it must have been like to witness this event. A man who has been lame for over 40 years stands, walks, and leaps for joy. Remember the scene of Jimmy Valvano? This man was out of his mind with joy and gratitude. It was probably the first time he had ever been inside the courtyard of the temple, and he made such a commotion that everyone in the temple court observed what was happening. Their prayer time had been interrupted by this man's joyful celebration.

⁹ And all the people saw him walking and praising God, ¹⁰ and recognized him as the one who sat at the Beautiful Gate of the temple, asking for alms. And they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him. Acts 3:9–10 (ESV)

The healing of the lame man in the temple attracted the attention of the people. They must have wondered, "How did this happen?"

The Message

The goal of the healing, however, was not just to relieve this man's suffering, as wonderful as that was. Peter healed the lame man in the most famous place and near the most traveled gate in Jerusalem in order for a message to be proclaimed. We find that message in verses 11-16.

Apparently Peter, John, and the healed man moved into the outer courtyard of the temple called Solomon's Portico or porch. This was often a place where people gathered. In fact, Jesus made His famous statement "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them and they follow me . . ." (John 10:27) while teaching at this location, and the early church first gathered there (see Acts 5:12-16). Peter used the attention of the crowd to deliver a very important message.

He begins by deflecting their attention away from himself and John. In verse 12 he says, "*Men of Israel, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we have made him walk?*" (Acts 3:12). Peter knew, and he wanted them to know, that the man was not healed because of Peter and John's power or piety.

What follows is why we are talking about this text on Easter Sunday. Peter links the healing of this man to the death and resurrection of Jesus. And his endgame is to share the message that is central to Christianity. Peter healed a lame man in order to preach about the power of resurrected Jesus:

¹³ The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus, whom you delivered over and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release him. ¹⁴ But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, ¹⁵ and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. Acts 3:13–15 (ESV)

Now there are a number of things to notice in this passage. First, Peter was very candid about the tragedy of Jesus' death and their collective culpability. The phrases that Peter uses are strong: "whom you delivered over and denied . . . you denied . . . and asked for a murder . . . you killed." How do you imagine that was received? Later on, in verse 17, Peter will say "I know that you acted in ignorance. . ." but he is talking to them this way because he wants them to fully understand the tragedy of the crucifixion of Jesus.

What's more, Peter uses some stunning words to describe Jesus. He said that Jesus was the glorified servant of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (v. 13). He has been honored by the God of the Jews. Peter called Him the "Holy and Righteous One" (v. 14), which meant that He was completely innocent and without and guilt. Finally, Peter said that they killed the "Author of Life." This phrase is tantamount to saying, "You killed the one who made life

possible and the one who sustains your life.” All of these phrases are intended to communicate the seriousness of what happened on the day that we call Good Friday.

Jesus was crucified because the Jewish leaders not only disliked Jesus’ teaching but also because they feared that Rome would take away the entire nation (John 11:50). The people were whipped up into a frenzy, and Pontius Pilate just wanted the “Jesus-problem” to go away so that he could keep his military and governmental post. But Peter wants everyone to know that the Jesus was the sinless, innocent, Son of God, who is the Author of life. He was not a common criminal or a blasphemer. He was God in the flesh, and they killed Him.

Now that is bad enough, but Peter wants them to know one more thing about Jesus. He is alive! Acts 3:15 says, “. . . whom God raised from the dead.” The message is simple, clear, and potentially frightening. If the one who was crucified really was the Son of God, and if He is really alive, then those who are guilty are in big trouble. That was part of the message that Peter wanted them to hear.

Here’s the other part. It is found in verse 16:

¹⁶ And his name—by faith in his name—has made this man strong whom you see and know, and the faith that is through Jesus has given the man this perfect health in the presence of you all. Acts 3:16 (ESV)

Do you see what Peter does here? He links the healing of this man to the resurrection of Jesus. He says that it is by the name of Jesus and by faith in His name that the man was healed. In other words, the power of the resurrection has been applied to this man’s miraculous healing. If they doubted the power or the legitimacy of the resurrection, they could not doubt the reality of a healed lame man.

Peter wants the people to put their faith in Jesus, and his message, along with this miracle, serve as the basis to call people to “repent and turn again that your sins may be blotted out” (Acts 3:19). Peter leveraged the miracle of a lame man in order to invite people to put their trust in Jesus. On that day about 5,000 people came to faith in Christ.

And this is not the only place where he does this. Acts 4 tells us that the religious authorities heard about this miracle and message, so they hauled Peter and John before the Council, and here is what Peter said:

⁸ Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders,⁹ if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed,¹⁰ let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well.¹¹ This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which

has become the cornerstone.¹² And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” Acts 4:8–12 (ESV)

I hope you hear, yet again, the connection between the healing of the lame man, the power of the resurrection, and the call to place one’s faith in Jesus. This message is the reason for the miraculous healing, and it is why Easter Sunday is celebrated so passionately. There is power in the resurrection.

The Meaning

This leads us to some summary thoughts regarding the power of the resurrection. In other words, why would Peter make such a significant point about the resurrection in his first miracle? Or, why is this day celebrated so significantly? Let me give you three reasons:

1. The Resurrection makes the broken whole

The message of the Bible is that something is wrong with the world. Our humanity is embedded with brokenness at every level, and the Bible indicates that the ultimate source of this is sin – a refusal to have our lives governed by God’s authority. Sin was the original problem in the Garden of Eden, and the effect was the entrance of death. Sin is the cause; death is the effect.

So when Jesus conquers death by being raised, it means that sin has been defeated. It means that the death of Jesus on the cross inaugurated the forgiveness of sin for those who put their faith in Him. Payment. The death of death has begun.

And part of that mission of redemption is to not only save people from their sins, but to restore all the effects of sin. The entrance of sin brought the brokenness of fractured relationships, crimes against one another, and every kind of illness and disease. The good news about the resurrection is that Jesus came to deal with the cause (sin), and one day He will restore the world with all its brokenness. In other words, there is coming a day when Christ Jesus will remake the world, and His followers will live in that world with no sin, no sickness, no brokenness, and no death. The healing of this lame man is a foretaste of what is to come for those who put their faith in Jesus.

There is a day yet to come when Jesus Christ will restore everything, and the joy of that moment will be just like the joy of the man who was healed.

2. The Resurrection makes unbelief treason

However, there is another side to this beautiful truth. If Jesus is raised from the dead, if He did conquer death, and if He really is the Son of God, then not believing in Him is more than just a

religious decision. It is treason, and it comes with grave consequences. That is why Peter is so blunt when he shares the message about Jesus.

Jesus is not just another prophet or a purveyor of a religious system. He is the creator of the universe, the Author of life, and God in the flesh. So the murder of Jesus or the rejection of Him as Messiah, in effect means that a person chooses to reject the rule of God in his or her life. Unbelief is treason when the one whom you are rejecting is the Son of God.

The resurrection of Jesus was joyful news to his followers who believed in Him, but it was a nightmare for those who rejected Him. The empty tomb sends a strong message and a clear warning: Jesus is alive, and He is God. Without Him there is no other way to be forgiven. Rejecting Him is more than not believing; it is dangerous treason.

3. The Resurrection makes salvation possible

The good news about the resurrection is that the empty tomb means that the death of Jesus provided the means by which sin could be conquered. Since death and sin are so closely linked, then the defeat of death signals that sin has also been defeated.

The crucifixion of Jesus on Good Friday provided a sufficient sacrifice for sin. Jesus died so that there could be atonement. The message of the Bible is simply that those who know that they are sinners can be forgiven by putting their faith and trust in the sacrifice of Christ on their behalf. The same “name” that healed the lame man is the “name” by which people are saved from their sins.

The hope and the power of the resurrection are the same: those who put their trust in Jesus can be forgiven. The empty tomb boldly declares that sin and death and disease and disorder are not the final word in the world. The resurrection of Jesus Christ means that the inauguration of restoration has begun and that people who are hopeless can hope again.

While I love “Cinderella stories” and “underdog moments” in sports, what we are talking about here is so much greater. The power of resurrection is that Jesus can give hope to the hopeless in stunning and surprising ways. My prayer is that today would be the day when, much to your surprise, you are brought from death to life by putting your faith in Jesus.

I want Easter Sunday to be your story – the day when you were raised to new life.

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