

Easter 6, Life after death – the counter narrative of life powered by God the Holy Spirit¹
Acts 3:1-10

“Walking and leaping and praising God.” The familiar song captures the Good News of this story. The man’s response to being pulled up onto his feet – to being resurrected – isn’t to quietly join Peter and John into the temple to pray. Oh no, he’s leaping with joy and shouting praises to God. We can imagine the commotion that he causes and the temple-goers straining their necks to see what’s happening. And when they do see, they recognize the man. This was one of the people lying out by the gate of the temple. To enter into the temple, they had to walk through a corridor of bodies, women and men who were suffering in some way.² These sick, lame, vulnerable people were at the mercy of those who gave them coins on their way into the temple.

It’s a good place to go to ask for alms, isn’t it? If you’re on your way to worship the Living God, you *have* to give *something* to these poor, unfortunate people.

But one day, something else happens. As listeners to this story, we know that something big is about to happen. Peter and John are on their way into the temple. And I want us to pause and see that that these two apostles as going to the temple. In this *life powered by God the Holy Spirit*, going to the temple to pray is part of their practice.³ As Gentile Christians, there is often the unconscious assumption that once the Holy Spirit descended, the apostles would have abandoned the temple. Because with Jesus, the temple is no longer relevant, right? But that isn’t true. This story tells us otherwise. John and Peter are living into the revolution of the Holy Spirit. And going to the temple is part of building and living the Reign of God.

¹ *Much* credit for inspiration and content goes to Willie James Jennings and his *Acts Commentary*.

² This is Jennings’ insight.

³ Jennings again.

On this particular day they go at three o'clock in the afternoon. And that's our cue that something extraordinary is going to happen. The time of day isn't a throw-away detail that Luke is giving us, but an essential piece of the story. In the New Testament, there are only a few things that happen at three o'clock in the afternoon. The first time is in a parable that Jesus is telling, about workers being hired at different times of the day. The landowner hires workers some in the morning, more at noon, and others at three o'clock in the afternoon. And he pays them all the same. Another time, in each of the synoptic Gospels, three o'clock in the afternoon when Jesus is on the cross, the world turns dark until three o'clock. It is at that hour that Jesus cries, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" And finally, later in the Book of Acts, it will be three o'clock in the afternoon when Cornelius is given his vision.

World-altering things happen at three o'clock in the afternoon. Events that happen at three o'clock disrupt the order of things, disrupt creation itself. So when Peter and John go to the temple at three o'clock in the afternoon, we know something revolutionary is about to happen. Of course, this *is* the Book of Acts...the acts of the Holy Spirit...and where the Spirit is, amazing and revolutionary things happen at any time of the day!

As John and Peter are living into their lives powered by the Holy Spirit, here, on their way to the temple they encounter suffering. And one of the persons laying at the Beautiful Gate calls to them, asking them for money. This has been the order of things. The one suffering, the poor, vulnerable one asks the strong, healthy person for help. This man has been doing this for a long time; he's been lame all his life.

And again, this isn't just incidental information. The storyteller is letting us know that his condition is not his fault; it isn't because he has sinned and is now being punished. He was lame in his mother's womb. He was *born* that way.

So this man, who has been low and on the ground his whole life, looks up at those going to the temple. And when John and Peter pass, he lifts up his hand, opening it to receive, and asks them for charity.

And this is when we see the revolution turning.

Peter responds to the man's request, not with coins, but with a gaze. He "looks intently" at the man. Or, he "fixes his gaze" on the man. This is particular kind of looking, a verb that isn't used very often in the Bible, and mostly in Acts. It is the same *look* as the look of the people in the synagogue after Jesus had read from the scroll for the first time. John and Peter aren't just looking at this man who is asking for alms, they're *seeing* him. They're seeing *who he is*. They recognize his fundamental identity as a human being of value and worth, a beloved child of God, a sibling.

Let's take a minute to imagine this scene, *to see* it. The man is on the ground, hand reaching up and open, waiting for coins. Chances are, his eyes were on the ground. After so many years of being at the receiving end of charity, he had learned to become invisible, a nobody. He had seen John and Peter, and asked for alms, but he knew his place. He was at their feet, beneath them. And that's where his eyes belonged, as well. To have looked at them would have been to claim a place and space that he had no right to.

And as he's holding up his hand, he hears Peter talking to him, "Look at us," Peter says. "See us."

So the man turns his head and looks up at them. He's still fully expecting to receive something from them. He's someone who *receives* charity. That's his role, to receive. And it is the role of these two men to give charity. It's the order of things. So he turns to look at them, bracing himself, because he wants and needs their coins but at the same time he hates the look of condescension and pity that he's seen all too often.

But when he looks at Peter and John, he sees them *seeing him*. He meets their gaze. There is no pity or disdain in their eyes. Instead, he sees aliveness and love looking *into* him. He's never seen anything like it. His world begins to tumble and turn as he finds himself being drawn into this compelling and powerful gaze. "To be seen for who I am rather than for what I am not! To be seen as some body rather than a no body! To be seen without judgment or condemnation! To be visible, to be seen as an equal, as a human being, whole and complete!" The man was overcome with a fullness of being and joy that he'd never before experienced.

Peter and John are fluent in the language of the Holy Spirit. And this man sees and hears the love they are speaking. He experiences the abundance of life they are embodying. We can imagine that the man's heart is bursting with the aliveness that is rising up within him. And when Peter speaks again, the man is ready to receive his words...not his coins...but the words that would begin to make sense of the profound love and aliveness that has filled and covered him.

Peter speaks, "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." And then Peter reaches his hand out to the man, grabs him by the right hand, and raises him up.

Again, I want to slow this down so we get a closer look at what's happening. It's so easy for us to focus our gaze on the miraculous healing that we miss what else is going on. And if we don't see what else is going on, we miss the fullness of the story.

A first thing to see is that there were, and still are, people who perform miraculous healings. And it is glorious and wonderful to experience such a healing. But the healing of the Holy Spirit is so much more profound and complete and transforming than any biological cure or medical miracle can ever be. The healing power of Jesus touches not only

our bodies, but also our spirits, our very identities and souls. When the power of the Holy Spirit grabs us by our right hand, we are created new. And we are given new stories, new histories, new futures to live into. We are given a place of being and belonging in the body of Christ that fills us with inexplicable joy and hope and peace.

A second thing to see in this story is that John and Peter are living into their call. Before ascending, Jesus commissioned them to be his witnesses, *to see as Jesus sees*. And that is exactly what they are doing. They learned from Jesus the power of *seeing* people as human beings. Mostly we don't see people for who they are created to be. Instead, we see their positions, their power, their social standing. We see *homeless* people, *poor* people, *victims*. We see their conditions, their circumstances, but not their humanity, not the sameness that we share with them. But Peter and John had experienced the creative and transforming power of Jesus' gaze, a gaze that recognized every person as a fellow human, created in the image of God, a gaze that recognized their value and worth that had nothing to do with their social location or their life's circumstances. And now, powered by the Holy Spirit, they were *seeing* as Jesus saw.

Peter tells the man that he doesn't have gold or silver. It isn't just that Peter's pockets are empty, it's that Peter and John are living within an entirely different economy. The economy of empire turns on gold and silver.⁴ And we know all too well that in empire, there are some people who have money and there are others who don't. And those who have money control the power and those who are poor and vulnerable are at their mercy. People with money are *somebodies* and people without are *nobodies*. That's the order of things. So Peter is being explicit here, telling the man that he and John are not participating in the order of empire. Giving alms keeps the wheels of empire turning, the powerful offering the

⁴ Jennings' insight.

occasional coin while keeping the poor on the ground, weak and powerless. John and Peter have something else. The life and power and economy of the Holy Spirit are far more satisfying and enduring than gold and silver.

Peter and John will not be giving coins. Not when they're living lives powered by God the Holy Spirit. They know the creating power of God. They know that the Spirit is in the world, creating all things new. And God the Holy Spirit has the power to create new life and to restore broken and dying life. In impossible places, the Spirit raises up life. John and Peter know this. The hand Peter extends to the man is an invitation to resurrection life and aliveness in the Spirit.

So Peter extends his hand saying, "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk." Peter is pulling the man up out of baptismal waters. The baptism of the Holy Spirit is a baptism through the body of Jesus. And at three o'clock in the afternoon the man stands up, created new in the Body of Christ. This time born not from his mother's womb, but out of baptismal waters and into new life powered by God, the Holy Spirit. And life powered by the Holy Spirit is a life that cannot be limited or bound by the order of things. Life powered by God the Holy Spirit is always turning us in the revolution of the Reign of God, a revolution turning toward liberation, salvation, healing, and well-being for all creatures, all creation. At three o'clock in the afternoon, a new day dawns, filled with God's presence and aliveness.

May we turn our eyes to be held in the gaze of Creator God.

May we be witnesses, seeing each other, seeing all others as Jesus sees.

And may we leap with joy and praises!