

“Fixing Our Gaze”

Acts 3:1-10

New Revised Standard Version

**This manuscript is an interpretation of the sermonic moment. Use it as a guide for the sermon direction; because of time, not everything you read printed here is actually included in the spoken sermon.*

We could use a miracle story
right about now, couldn't we?

2.8 million people have tested positive for COVID-19. Even though over 800,000 have recovered, we fixate on the deaths don't we? 200,000 worldwide and over 50,000 Americans have died.¹ It's a staggering number considering the short handful of weeks and months since this began. As we learn more, we know that the coronavirus was here earlier than we thought, *and* that it will be here much longer than we want.

The statistics are only going to keep growing. And they're important; science depends upon statistics. But faith depends upon stories. Statistics and stories, together, can heal. Science and faith, together, can give hope. It's a both/and.

And along with the stats, we are hearing about some coronavirus 'miracle' stories on the news. People like 50-year-old Ramon, husband and father of two, who was released from ICU on Easter Sunday after 20 days on a ventilator. Doctors and nurses lined the sidewalk as he was wheeled to his car still on oxygen, still a long road to recovery ahead. He was not jumping up and walking like the healed man in our story today, but he *was* in tears, he *was* praising the medical team that saved him, and he *was* speaking boldly about the faith that got him through this ordeal and that had been strengthened and deepened because of it.²

We crave stories of healing like Ramon's. Because healings and recoveries - whether expected and probable OR scientifically

¹ Coronavirus statistics as of Saturday morning, April 25, 2020; <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>.

² David Rosenfeld, "Coronavirus patient's recovery after 20 days on ventilator is a miracle for family, a welcome boost for doctors," *Daily Breeze* (13 April 2020), accessed on 25 April 2020 at

<https://www.dailybreeze.com/2020/04/13/coronavirus-patients-recovery-after-20-days-on-ventilator-is-a-miracle-for-family-a-welcome-boost-for-doctors/>.

miraculous - they're *always* cause for celebration. Whether it's our own child who's getting the cast off her broken arm; OR our spouse who's made it through their first year of sobriety; OR our grandchild who's learned how to navigate what will be a lifelong, chronic illness with grace; OR our parent who's endured chemo and made it into remission; at least for now, these are all victories for which we celebrate and give thanks.

But they inevitably lead us to ask, what about all the others? What about all the people still suffering, still living in chronic pain, still waiting for their cure? Those being taken off of life support, those who relapse (again), those for whom the chemo does not work, those who die far younger than we think is right or normal or good? What about them? What about you? Your loved one?

Well, yes...what about them? I don't know why some people recover and others do not. I do know that God created us all for life, and that part of living is suffering and part of living is dying, and while we think we should have a certain number of

days on this earth, the truth is - each day we are here is a gift, and none of us knows how many of those days we have.

There's something about illness, suffering, pain, and dying that will always be a mystery to us. And, there's something about recovery, healing, birth, and new life that will always be a mystery too. These things are mysteries because they are often beyond our control. Sure, there are aspects to health and safety we can control (like stay at home, wear a mask, wash your hands), but ultimately, the things in life that bring us the greatest joy *and* the deepest grief are more often than not, beyond our control.

If we are living, we cannot escape death or suffering. But nor can we escape miracles and healings. Both surround us. Both reveal the presence and strength of God within us.

So what does our healing story in Acts 3 today reveal to us about the presence of God? Because yes, while it is true that we desperately need a miraculous healing story right about now, we also need

something that we can take hold of ourselves, something that can anchor us in action when the chaotic feeling of spinning out of control gets to be too much. And alongside the physical healing that is indeed a miracle in Acts 3, there's a spiritual healing that is not really miraculous...it's actually pretty mundane...but it is something we can control.

Our gaze. Our attention. Acts 3 is ultimately about where we fix our gaze. Where we fix our gaze so that we see *what we need to see* and focus on *what we need to focus on*.

Distractions will always prevail unless we actively work on how we see and what we see and who we see in our world. And working on our gaze, our sight, is something we can control; it's a spiritual practice.

Let's look at today's story. Peter and John had been through a lot. They were mentored by their rabbi and friend Jesus. They made mistakes as his friends and followers. They watched him suffer and die. And when he rose, they couldn't quite believe it but they treasured those extra

days with him on earth nonetheless before he ascended.

Last week in Acts 1:5 we read how the disciples were waiting and making preparations to fulfill Jesus' call for them, "*to be Jesus' witnesses in Jerusalem, in all of Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth,*" (1:5).

This story is the first post-Pentecost encounter where the apostles utilize the power of Christ in a tangible way. It's the first miracle story since Jesus has gone and the Spirit has come. Which makes it all the more intriguing for us - because we're in the same boat as Peter and John. Jesus physically left them, and they are living out their faith through the power of his memory and Spirit, which is what we live out our faith with too.

Peter and John are not quite to the ends of the earth yet in their mission, they're still close to home (like most of us); they're in Jerusalem, and on this day, they're at the Temple.

As Celtic spirituality might say, the Temple was a thin place, a

place where the veil separating the spiritual and material world is whisper thin...almost permeable but not quite.³ In other words, you really couldn't get closer to God than in the Temple, and yet Peter and John are about to discover an even thinner place than the Temple...their own skin, their own gaze.

What we learn here in this story, right alongside Peter and John, is that the presence and power of God is literally living *within them*, not just within the four walls of the sacred place where they go to pray and worship.

The whole book of Acts is all about the Apostles learning that the power of the Risen Christ lives within them now, quite literally, and in a weird way, I think we as the 21st century church are learning this as well during this global pandemic when we physically can't go to our Temple, our church, to worship. We are discovering the power of the Risen Christ

that lives within us as the **scattered** church, and not just the **gathered** church.⁴

Acts 3 is a story about two people of faith, who, as they are on their way to gather and meet God in the Temple, accidentally meet God within themselves and this man who is scattered on the outskirts, begging at the Beautiful Gate.

You see, the miracle in this text is about seeing. We're told that this man has been lame since birth and *every day* his friends had brought him to the Beautiful Gate, the gate where the wealthier folks would enter, to beg for alms, that is, for money - for material resources, most likely so that he could eat. But Peter and John have been coming to the Temple for years to pray. How have they *not* seen this man?

Well, we know how. Because we utilize the same vision they do when we don't "see" the man on the street corner holding a sign. We avert our

³ Rolf Jacobson, Craig Koester, & Kathryn Schifferdecker, "NL Podcast 409: Peter Heals in Jerusalem," *I Love to Tell the Story* (18 April 2020), accessed on April 25, 2020 at https://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative_podcast.aspx?podcast_id=1255.

⁴ Bill Wilson, "Now what? Some thoughts about what's next for the scattered and gathered church," *Baptist News Global* (April 23, 2020), accessed on April 25, 2020 at <https://baptistnews.com/article/now-what-some-thoughts-about-whats-next-for-the-scattered-and-gathered-church/#.XqQMelNKg0o>.

eyes so we don't have to see.
Or when we employ selective
hearing as someone says,
“*Excuse me, miss*” as we leave
the grocery store. We pretend
we haven't heard and we
quicken our step. Most of us
are adept at intentionally
limiting our vision and hearing.
And sometimes, we literally
don't see things until our vision
is cued in to look for that thing.

Think about this: back when
you were driving to worship, if
you arrived on a Sunday
morning and I asked you how
many red cars you saw on your
way in, you wouldn't be able to
answer me. You certainly saw
red cars, but your brain filtered
out that information because
it's not necessary for you to
know or retain. But - if I asked
you before you drove to
worship - to look for and count
the red cars that you pass -
you'd probably see almost
every red car and be able to tell
me the number when you
arrived.

Sometimes it just takes an
intentional request to hone our

vision, to actually see what has
been right in front of us all
along. Once something
consciously becomes part of
our awareness, we start to see it
everywhere.

On *this* day, it was the man
who was lame, the man who
was begging for some money,
who *saw* first. The fact that this
man was lame meant that he
could not enter the worshipping
space of the Temple. He was
excluded from life physically in
many ways, and he was
excluded socially and
spiritually in even more ways.
But in verse 3 we read that this
man “**saw**” Peter and John. The
word translated here is *eidon*. It
means “the simple act of
seeing.” Hey, there's two able-
bodied men walking by.
Another source of loose
change.⁵

So he calls out to them. Verse 4
says, “They [Peter and John]
looked intently at him.” This is
the word *atenizo*. It's where we
get the word attention.⁶

⁵ Steve Thomason, “The Healing Touch | An Illustrated
Sermon from Acts 3:1-10,” *Following the Cloud* (12
April 2016), accessed on April 26, 2020 at
[https://www.stevethomason.net/2016/04/12/healing-
touch-illustrated-sermon-acts-31-](https://www.stevethomason.net/2016/04/12/healing-touch-illustrated-sermon-acts-31-)

[10/?fbclid=IwAR3ALspNqw8WmDVgsKormV2oGxG
TxTnfqtkIV0uxYTFchJG7ah_3GY7QiK0](https://www.stevethomason.net/2016/04/12/healing-touch-illustrated-sermon-acts-31-10/?fbclid=IwAR3ALspNqw8WmDVgsKormV2oGxGTxTnfqtkIV0uxYTFchJG7ah_3GY7QiK0).

⁶ Thomason, *ibid*.

This is where Peter and John have a red car moment. They fix their gaze, their attention, more acutely and specifically on the man they had walked past and seen but not seen for years. Now they stopped.

They say something odd here to the man, “**Look at us,**” (v4). Why’d they say that? The man is obviously looking at them. He called out to them first. Well, the word *look* here is *blepo* and it is often used to mean a deeper, or spiritual insight. “*You see us, but really look at us.*”⁷

Verse 5 says, “*and [the man] fixed his attention on them.*” This word here is *epochon* and it has the sense of what a rabbit does when it smells the fox. It perks up and pays close attention, but with extreme caution. Verse 5 continues to say that the man was expecting to receive something from them.

Do you see what’s happening here? Vision is shifting and so then is expectation and possibility. What this man is trained to see when he looks at

Peter and John is that they ‘HAVE’ and he ‘HAS NOT’ and the only transaction that can ever happen between them is the tossing of some loose change. But something shifts in their seeing beyond what society says should happen in this transaction and this is when the miracle begins.

Peter says, “*I don’t have silver or gold, but what I do have, I give to you.*” What does Peter have? The power of the Risen Christ. That is, the power of love and belonging and relationship.

He says, “*In the name of Jesus Christ, Walk!*” (v6) We might think that this is the moment of the miracle. You know, say the magic word and “poof” he’s healed. But notice what happens next. Verse 7 says, “*and he took him by the right hand.*”⁸ Why not just say, “*he took him by the hand?*”

Well, some scholars think it’s because of the expression “*the right hand of fellowship.*” In that culture, the right hand was the one you used to greet a friend, or someone in your own

⁷ Thomason, *ibid.*

⁸ Thomason, *ibid.*

station in life. In this gesture, Peter is breaking all the rules. He's crossing over the barrier between those who were seen as LESS THAN and those who were seen as MORE THAN and he's touching this man as an equal. Luke writes, "he took him by the hand and raised him up."⁹

This word for "raise up" here is *egairo* and it can be translated as "alert, awake," or (wait for it) ... "resurrected." **This story is about the power of the resurrection at work in the world...at work in the disciples...in you...in me.**

We learn in verse 7 that immediately the man's legs are healed. But it wasn't until *after* Peter took him by the hand and raised him up that the physical healing took place. Then, for the first time ever, the man enters the temple with Peter and John. He's never been allowed in to worship before!

And when the people saw *this* - not that the man had been physically healed but when they see that the man who had not been allowed to worship

actually enters the Temple with Peter and John - they are filled with awe and wonder.

Yes, the man was physically healed. He was also socially and spiritually healed. All because of how he fixed his gaze on Peter and John and how Peter and John in turn fixed their gaze on this man. None of the three of them had anything physically wrong with their sight. But they had not been seeing each other. For years.

On this side of Jesus' resurrection, Peter and John now see this man, not as an object of pity, but as a fellow human who deserves the right hand of fellowship, the blessing of community, the dignity of the fullness of human experience. Which is a miracle they can provide. And so can we.

And the man, for the first time in his life, he does not see himself as the man who is always in need and Peter and John as the source of loose change to meet his needs, but

⁹ Thomason, *ibid.*

rather as fellow humans whom he can trust.

Friends, we are called to carry out the same mission that Peter and John were called to live. We are called to be Jesus' witnesses. We are called to look intently at the world and see it the way God sees it. It is only when we ensure that we extend the right hand of fellowship to ALL people that the resurrection power of God's kin-dom can be seen at work.¹⁰

Where are you fixing your gaze these days?

Are you focused on the statistics of death and dying? On all that you have lost? On all that is not working? On all that you're missing? On all that you wish were different?

Or - are you fixing your gaze on the people around you as if you are seeing them as God sees them? As if you have the power, through your own conversation and presence, to bring hope and healing into the world?

Are we fixing our gaze on what we cannot control or what we can?

Sure, we may not be able to cause physical healings, but we can be the agents of spiritual and social healing for those who are depressed and suffering, for those who need to be seen and heard and listened to, for those who simply need someone to acknowledge the situation they are in and look them in the eyes and not try to fix it, but just say, "*I see you. I hear you.*"

And this is especially important for those who are most vulnerable because our society overlooks them because of race, age, gender, socio-economic status. Because of who they love or how they live or where they were born. Our gaze matters because God's gaze is always looking where we are not...and trying to direct our line of vision to what we are not seeing and need to see.

It has been said that all acts of compassion begin with *seeing*. Where we fix our gaze

¹⁰ Thomason, *ibid*.

determines who or what we see,
and who or what we overlook.

When you feel helpless and like
what you have to offer is so
minimal, remember this story.
The man in need asks Peter and
John for money. They don't
give him what he asks for,
because they don't have it. But
instead of walking away
because they don't have what
he asks for, they look a little
deeper and work to see what
they do have to give.

Did you catch that? When Peter
and John don't have what the
man is asking for, they do not
walk away. They stay in the
conversation. They stay
present. And together, the three
of them discover, something
even more that can be given - a
relationship, a connection, a
healing of spirit.

Fill in the blank here: **I may
not have _____, but what I
do have is _____...**(blank)

It has always been true that the
gaze of God does not fixate on
what cannot be done, but on

what can be done, on what IS
possible.

HOW we see WHO we see and
WHAT we see has a direct
correlation to HOW we serve
and WHO we love and WHAT
we work for.

As the 16th century nun, Teresa
of Avila, poetically and
powerfully proclaimed:

*"Christ has no body now but
yours.*

*No hands, no feet on earth but
yours.*

*Yours are the eyes through
which he looks compassion on
this world.*

*Yours are the feet with which
he walks to do good.*

*Yours are the hands through
which he blesses all the world.*

*Yours are the hands,
yours are the feet,
yours are the eyes,
you are his body.*

*Christ has no body now on
earth but yours."*¹¹

What we see and who we see -
doesn't just change us, it

¹¹ Poem accessed on April 25, 2020 at
https://www.journeywithjesus.net/PoemsAndPrayers/Teresa_Of_Avila_Christ_Has_No_Body.shtml.

changes the world. One glance
at a time. Because glances
become gazes. Gazes become
conversations. Conversations
become relationships. And
relationships heal and give
hope.

We cannot afford to avert our
eyes. The Risen Christ is
depending upon our gaze to
extend his grace.

Amen.