



# **"Power in the Name"**

a sermon by

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This afternoon we will hear from Acts 3:1-19. It is a scene that follows close on the heels of the resurrection story, after the charge to the church in the great commission, and just after the gift of the Spirit to actually carry out that charge is poured out at Pentecost. Here we find the disciples going forth and engaging the world in a new way in light of the resurrection, a challenge that is every bit as pressing today as it was then.

“One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, at three o’clock in the afternoon. And a man lame from birth was being carried in. People would lay him daily at the gate of the temple called the Beautiful Gate so that he could ask for alms from those entering the temple. When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked them for alms. Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said, “Look at us.” And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. 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.” And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. Jumping up, he stood and began to walk, and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. All the people saw him walking and praising God, and they recognized him as the one who used to sit and ask for alms at the Beautiful Gate of the temple; and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

While he clung to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them in the portico called Solomon’s Portico, utterly astonished. When Peter saw it, he addressed the people, “You 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 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 murder given to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. And 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. “And now, friends, 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 ...”

The 3:00 sacrifice crowd gathered at the temple as usual that day. They didn’t offer a fine \$5 lunch afterwards, but you can bet there were refreshments. It was a few weeks after Easter and perhaps some of them, like many of us, were starting to feel their routines settle back in to place now that the commotion about Jesus has died down. There had been rumors passing among the crowd about the new church that had sprung up around his followers, who had clearly experienced some sort of group hallucination that made them believe he had been raised from the dead. That’s an easy one to discount - there were only a few of them that said they actually saw him, and some women of course, for whatever that is worth. But then there was the more disturbing account of what had happened in Jerusalem recently. A few folks that came with their sacrifices now had actually been there that day and had seen it with their own eyes. Hundreds of Jews talking like madmen in a dozen different languages. Most witnesses accused the whole lot of them of being drunk, but then their new leader, a guy named Peter, had stood up and joked

about how it was impossible as it was only 9 in the morning. But in fact what they were experiencing was the fulfillment of the prophet's vision that had declared that one day God would pour out his Spirit upon all flesh, and sons and daughters would prophesy, and young men would see visions, and old men dream dreams. This guy Peter had said that that Spirit was now upon them. And it was upon them because Jesus of Nazareth, whom they had crucified, had been raised by God from the dead, and so God had sent his Spirit so that all would believe it. The Jesus movement, the one they called "the Way," gained thousands that day, while skeptics struggled to understand what all the fuss was about.

The beggar's friends dropped him off as usual around 3:00 at the gate of the temple that day too. He joined the sacrifice crowd but remained on the periphery of their prayers - the crippled aren't welcome beyond those doors. They can only go so far before they start profaning something with the sin they carried - so clearly evidenced, in the first century mind, by a mangled foot or brittle legs. Any rumors of Jesus circulating among the crowd would have been gathered by this man in much the same way as his collection of so many loose coins, I'd imagine. A bit here, a little more there. But for one who spends his days on the ground with palms up and eyes down in search of daily bread perhaps he too wondered what all the fuss was about over this Jesus. Especially when that familiar refrain came from the mouth of one of his disciples now standing before him, "Sorry, I have no gold or silver."

And so perhaps as some among the crowd gathered we too now find ourselves needing to reconnect with what all the fuss really is about as we settle back into our routines after the events of the resurrection. Jesus had told his disciples in the gospel of Luke that in him the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and that the poor have good news preached to them. And while this was certainly the case in one part of the world roughly two thousand years ago, as we bustle in and out of those places where business as usual reigns supreme we find that the world still stumbles in the darkness of sin, the lame in body or mind are relegated to the outer edges of our community, the poor are always with us, and death persists in being a reality of life. And while the sanctuaries of our city swelled on Easter morning on one of the two days of the year when going to church just "seems like the right thing to do," for those of us left in the pews two weeks later, it seems that accusations of being part of some sort of mass hallucination stir just beneath the surface of the mainstreams we swim in. And discussion of the difference of Jesus in our lives and the way we look at the world is relegated to the periphery, brought in only so far for fear that it will start profaning the sacred comfort of others. In the difficult days we travel through, with the world asking for alms and answers we have to realize that we cannot always give them what they want, but we can always offer them what they need.

"I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you," Peter said. "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk." Stand up and walk. And when the crowd flocked, "Why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk? ... We are witnesses to Jesus, the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. And by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong ... and now, friends, I know that you acted in ignorance ... repent therefore, and turn to God." Wow. It is hard to believe that just a short time prior in Jesus' life Peter, who now proclaims him so boldly, had denied him three times for fear of

persecution, being mocked, offending others, and a whole host of reasons known only to him. And now when Jesus is gone and the threat of being scoffed at is more real than ever and with the promise of persecution breathing down his neck, he demonstrates his confidence in the power of Jesus' name in a way that is undeniable to the 3:00 sacrifice crowd and the man now shouting God's praises and dancing in the street. He stakes an irrefutable claim to the crowd that there is power in Christ's name and then challenges them to repent, to turn toward God, and seek out for themselves that power that can be found only in a relationship with Christ. Peter presses the issue of repentance because there is too much at stake, too much love for anyone to miss, too much possibility for healing, too much need in the world that is just waiting to be filled, too much sin to be redeemed. There is much too much at stake for others to be deprived of the possibilities in Christ because of his fear or self-consciousness or sense of propriety. And so he reaches out and touches this man and the crowd watches in amazement as his feet and ankles were made strong, and no longer crippled he strides into that temple to gaze upon the inner walls that he had never seen, to join the ranks of those healed in the name of Jesus, and find himself in the company of such men as those who would say, "I believe, Lord, help my unbelief," and, "all I know is that once I was blind but now I see."

There is something to be said for the way we understand the meaning of the resurrection and live out the power of Jesus' name after the chocolate is finally all eaten and the chatter over the Sunday sermon dies down until Christmas. Because the lesson of Peter is not to say that we are to drop the name of Jesus to impose a cure on a debilitated and demoralized world but that we are called to evoke the power of his name in full confidence that we might be agents of healing and hope within it. It reminds us that as his disciples today we are called not only to believe that there is power in his name, but to actually live like it as well even though the stakes are high. For there is much too much at stake not to. For today we find ourselves in a world and a church where those who are deemed 'unclean' by society are still pushed out of the temple for fear of infecting the rest of us. And the beggars and the lame still take their place on street corners expecting so very little from us, accustomed to watching us blend in to the crowd on the way to worship. And while good Presbyterians so rarely talk about it, we are still in a world that so desperately needs to hear the call to admit its need, to turn to God and repent. A call that will only go out when believers recall that the Spirit has been poured out upon them so that they might know the power of a changed life in Christ themselves, and find courageous enough to look the world in the eye, reach out a hand, and proclaim Jesus as the source of all healing and hope.

Peter shows us that claiming our part in the great commission is a task that is as joyful as the Easter celebration and as serious as the grave. For as disciples of Christ we are called to claim the power of the name that restores the outsider into the company of the inner courts of the temple, and brings the downcast into communion with the community of faith. To act in the name that restores those wounds that cripple from birth and call for repentance to the one who can transform the world's most desperate realities with a touch. For behind the name of Jesus is a Savior who gave his life when our hopeless humanity was still begging for alms. Who greets us as beggars and sends us away blessed. Amen.