

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“Healing”
The Resurrection Community, series.
4th Sunday of Easter
Acts 3:1-10
April 17, 2016

This morning we are back to our series on the Resurrection Community where we’re looking at the stories in Acts with a very particular question: ***What does it mean to be a community formed in light of the resurrection?***

That is, after all, what the church is. We are the community of the Resurrected One.

We are formed out of resurrection.

It’s central to who we are.

And Acts is more or less the story of the forming of this community. So, we’re reading Acts trying to discover what shape does the resurrection community take? What is it doing? What does it look like?

A few weeks ago we started by looking at the very first summary of the church at the end of Acts 2. When the church is first born and Acts says they devoted themselves to the Apostles teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

In other words, their gathering together, and what happened in their gathering, was central to who they were. Everything else flows from what they did as they gathered together. This is how chapter 2 ends.

But then, immediately on the heels of that summery, we have the story we heard earlier from Chapter 3. Peter and John are on their way to do just those things. They’re on their way to pray in the temple. They are on their way to their Gathering. But they are interrupted by the lame man.

It’s almost as if Acts is reminding us that our gathering together is never about ***an escape*** from the world and it’s pain. In fact, sometimes we have to walk through the pain of the world in order to gather authentically before God. The path to prayers, the path for our gathering for worship, must include the place of brokenness. It must include the pain of the world.

Peter and John are on the way to the temple to pray. There is a lame man begging on the road, and they don’t pass him by. They don’t ignore the broken humanity on the side of the road. They don’t hurry past him to get in the nice clean space inside the temple.

Verse 4 says they stopped, and they stared at him. They looked at him intently... and invited this man to look back at them. Eye to eye, they see one another. Eye to eye, they encounter one another.

You can't look someone in the eye like that without it changing your relationship to them. When you look in the eye of a stranger, and they look back at you and you hold that gaze for a moment... something happens. Something unexpected, and sometimes uncomfortable, but a connection is created between you.

I don't know about you, but let me just be honest and say, that's exactly why I don't make eye contact with the beggar on the side of the road that I don't plan on helping. I won't make eye contact unless I have sometime to give them. If not, I'm going to avoid eye contact and just wait for my light to turn green so I can get on with my day... and leave that awkward moment behind me.

Like I've said before, sometimes I'm not a very good Christian.

But Peter and John, they stop. And stare at him, and tell him to look at them... and surely that eye to eye moment must have affected the lame man as much as it affected Peter and John. It changes their relationship. It changes their relationship as strangers in this calculation of need and source,
a simple calculation of beggar and giver,
of obligation and guilt...
to a relationship of: human being to human being... person to person.

And in that moment of personal connection... eye to eye... Peter and John are honest with the man about what they do have and they don't have... about what they can and they cannot do.

They have no money for him. They don't have what he's asking for... what he's hoping to get from them. But they offer him what they *do* have... the life of God in Christ. They offer him healing in Jesus' name.

Now, this is the first of several healing stories that are peppered throughout Acts. As you read the book of Acts, you start to realize that one of characteristics of the Resurrection Community, is that it is a *Healing Community*.

And so, I've decided, next month, we are going to host the next Joyce Meyer Faith Healing conference here at Dayspring.

After all... if we start guaranteeing people that we can cure them of whatever ails them, we might be able to take over the Missouri Baptist Hospital across the road and turn it into Missouri Baptist Mega-church.

Of course, those kinds of guarantees might not be that honest, but it sure would be nice, wouldn't it? It would be nice to be able to cure anyone I wanted. I would be nice to know a secret prayer to take care of the pain around me.

You know, I wish I could have cured my grandmother's cancer.
I wish I could have cured my aunt's alcoholism.

I wish I could cure my Dad's heart disease.
But I can't.

Oh, I've prayed for them, yes. And I've seen evidence of God's presence working in those painful realities. But my prayers haven't cured them.

Some faith healers out there would say that means I don't have enough faith. And they are probably right. My faith isn't what it could be...

And my patience hasn't been that great with my kids this week.

And I got angry when I shouldn't have.

And... well I won't tell you what kind of choice words I was mumbling to myself to myself in the car when I was stuck in traffic with a whole lot of whining and fighting in the back seat.

Like I said sometimes I'm not a very good Christian. So, those faith healers are probably right. Maybe I don't have enough faith, or "good enough" faith.

But you know, I've never known God's grace and God's willingness to act in our lives to be based on how good my faith is or how strong I believe, or how well I behave. That's not the God I know in Jesus.

The God I've come to know through Jesus is the God who enters into our brokenness, who enters into our suffering. Who knows what it is to be in utter pain and cry out, ***"My God my God, why have you forsaken me?"***

The God I've come to know in Jesus lives among the least, the last, the prisoner, the sick, the homeless, the wayfaring stranger... It's the God who drops everything to look your pain in the eye and say, "I see you. You are not alone. I Am Here"

Sure, I wish I knew a secret formula for handing out cures like candy. And when you look around at a lot of popular Christianity, you start to get the idea that's what people are looking for. And so in the modern-day church and you'll find a lot of folks peddling the gospel like it's a product to sell... like there are certain "results" that we can promise about have to have a pretty and perfect life... how to have "Your Best Life Now." or how to get the "cure you need."

But you know, even Jesus didn't cure everybody. And the truth is, the Church has never been in the business of curing everyone,
of quick fixes...
or knowing all the answers.

You see, there is a difference between a cure/a quick fix, and healing... and the church is in the healing business. As Rachel Held Evens puts it: ***We are "called to the slow and difficult work of healing. We're called to enter into one another's pain, and to anoint that pain as holy, and to stick around no matter the outcome."***¹

¹ Rachel Held Evens, *Searching for Sunday*, 208.

So, if you've been comin' to church to have a perfect and painless life, you're either going to end up terribly disappointed, or end up finding something all together more needed than a quick fix.

Brene Brown describes her own experience with the church in that way. She said:

"I went to church thinking it would be like an epidural, that it would take the pain away...But church isn't like an epidural; it's like a midwife..."

I thought faith would say,

'I'll take away the pain and discomfort,'

but what it ended up saying was,

'I'll sit with you in it.'"²

"I will companion you through it."

You see, the church is called to be a community that practices death and resurrection. We don't have any quick fixes here. But we do offer the messy, inconvenient, gut-wrenching, never-ending work of healing and reconciliation.

Anything else we try to sell is a cheap knock off... that will fall apart at the first bump in the road you hit.

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Shannon loved her busy metropolitan church. It was where she hung out with her best friends, where she met her husband, where she found a meaningful ministry with the homeless, where she fit. When her husband landed a job on the church staff and Shannon learned she was pregnant, life seemed to be falling into place.

"Two months before the baby was born, our house flooded and we had to move out," Shannon said. **"One month before the baby was born, my parked car was hit and was rendered inoperable. One day before the baby was born, he stopped moving."**

"I didn't know that healthy, full-term babies could be born stillborn. I went to the hospital with hope and fear. They never found a heartbeat."

Her church rallied around them in some wonderful ways. They helped with funeral costs and meals and even provided a cabin for a weekend getaway for Shannon and her husband. It was a really beautiful gesture. But when they returned to face down the long and difficult journey through grief, they found themselves all alone.

You see, in her church, there weren't songs for those mourning a traumatic death. There were no testimonies about feeling forsaken when God doesn't save your child.

"We wanted so desperately for our church and pastor to struggle with us, to question, to face this ugly, brutal truth," Shannon said. **"But our agony was only met with platitude, bible verses, theological answers, and promises of better days ahead."**

² Quoted in Evens, 209.

³ The following story is adapted from Rachel Held Evens, *Searching for Sunday*, "Healing," 205-208.

Eventually Shannon found healing outside the church walls—in counseling, with close friends, on Internet forums where faith, doubt, and grief were all discussed openly. And eventually they found another church. But Shannon still finds herself struggling to worship.

“Being part of a church in the midst of grief can be like having ten thousand sensitive antennae,” she said, **“Anything and everything hurts.”**

Her story isn’t all that unique. There are all kinds of people who fit right into the life of the church, when things are going well. They feel at home. They fit in... *until...*
the divorce.
the diagnosis.
the miscarriage.
the depression.
someone comes out of the closet.
someone asks a question.
an uncomfortable truth is spoken out loud.

And then, when they bring their pain, or their doubt, or their uncomfortable truth to the church, someone immediately grabs it out of their hands and tries to fix it. They grab it out of their hands and try to make it go away.

Bible verses are quoted. Assurances are given. Plans with 10 steps and measurable results are made.

And of course it’s all good intentioned. But it’s good intention wrapped in fear... fear that we won’t be able to fix this one. Fear that maybe *our* faith will crack. Fear that it might happen to us.

So well intentioned Christians scour their inventory for a cure. A fix.

But there is a difference between curing and healing. And the church is *called to the slow and difficult work of healing. We’re called to enter into one another’s pain, and to anoint that pain as holy, and to stick around no matter the outcome.*

Sara Miles explains it this way. **“Jesus calls his disciple, giving us authority to heal and sending us out. He doesn’t show us how to reliably cure a molar pregnancy. He doesn’t show us how to make a blind man see, dry every tear, or even drive out all kinds of demons.**

“But he shows us how to enter into a way of life in which the broken and sick pieces are held in love, and given meaning. In which strangers literally touch each other, and in doing so make a community spacious enough for everyone.”⁴

⁴ Sara Miles, *Jesus Freak*, quoted in Evens, 208.

And isn't that at the heart of what we see Peter and John doing here in Acts 3? They aren't able to give the man what he came looking for that day. But they do stop, and look at him eye-to-eye... and by doing so they are holding his brokenness in love.

And they reach out and take him by the hand, "raise him up," the text says. They bring him into the Resurrection Community.

They "raise him up" from that lowly place on the ground
and bring the lame man *with them*, into the temple...
into the very place he had probably been discouraged to go in his broken state.

They raise him up, and bring the man into the community.

The lame man didn't get what he was there looking for... anymore than we always get what we want from the church or from God. But he did get what he needed that day. And what he got changed him... and changed his life.

We're not going to start handing out cures anytime soon, as much as I'd like to be able to. But Dayspring, if we are a resurrection community, then we are called to the slow hard work of **death and resurrection**, of sitting with people in their pain, and holding it in the suffering love of God.

Ralf Jacobson is a professor at Luther Seminary in Minnesota. I recently heard him talk about his experience with cancer in high school. And the way he describes it he says that he was cured by not made whole... because in the process of fighting his cancer as a high school student is that he lost both his legs.

What he wants the church to know is that some people experience incredible isolation when they are ill. When he was fighting his cancer, he was in the hospital a lot, and not once did his best friends ever come to see him there. And these were really good friends.

One of his friends actually told him, "**I just don't like to see you that way.**" And so these high school guys did what most of us are inclined to do: stay away from the brokenness and pain... to avert our eyes. There is something about watching another person in pain, that pushes us away, that makes us afraid... especially when we know that there is nothing we can do or say to make it better.

But the work of healing is the work of community, of presence, of sitting with people in their pain and in the brokenness and being present to it with them... even if there is nothing else you can do. Just be present.

You see, the work of healing ultimately flows from a place of love. It's learned in the work of loving one another. The more we learn to love in community... the more we learn the gift of healing.

And in a world of quick fixes and cure-alls, a true healing community may be one of the most powerful and counter-cultural gifts we have to offer the world.

So, Dayspring, may we surrender our impulse to offer a cure. Instead, may we be a resurrection community committed to the slow meandering work of healing.

Amen.

Reflection

When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives means the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand. ~Henri Nouwen.