

Easter Power

By
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from the pulpit of
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Psalm 31:1-5

¹In you, O Lord, I seek refuge; do not let me ever be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me. ²Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily. Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me.

³You are indeed my rock and my fortress; for your name's sake lead me and guide me, ⁴take me out of the net that is hidden for me, for you are my refuge. ⁵Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God.

Acts of the Apostles 3:1-10

One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, at three o'clock in the afternoon. ²And 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. ³When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked them for alms. ⁴Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said, "Look at us." ⁵And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. ⁶But 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." ⁷And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. ⁸Jumping up, he stood and began to walk, and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. ⁹All the people saw him walking and praising God, ¹⁰and 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.

Historians tell us that most religions were born as “healing cults.” In what we might now call “primitive” cultures, people gathered around bodies of water that were believed to have healing properties. A location where a miraculous healing took place might become a destination of pilgrimage and prayer; or they erected a monument to gods they believed could bless and cure the ill. Church historian, Martin Marty, has noted that where the complexities of knowledge and technology developed in the healing art of medicine, the faithful often forgot these roots of their faith. They might offer general prayers to their God as healer, but that was that. Over time even the religious would say, “Let the physicians and medicine take care of the body; let religion take care of the spirit or soul.”

However, studying the scriptures, you find that we can hardly separate notions of physical healing from spiritual and social wellbeing. Marty writes: “Dig deep and deeper into the scriptures and you will find both the Old and New Testaments tend to use the same root word for *healing* and *saving*. World views have changed since biblical times, and most believers do not expect miracles of the sort that come with the prophets and Jesus. But world views have again changed more recently to bring us back into congruence with understandings of healing and wholeness.”¹

That’s true. Whereas, there was a time when the medicine was thought to deal only with physical science; we are now recovering a sense of that mind-body connection. We better appreciate how our spiritual lives are embodied and rooted in creation; and how health is best viewed holistically within a larger social order, how our individual health is contingent on the health of other people and the health of social structures around us.

A close reading of the healing story before us today from Acts shows precisely that. Biblical stories never operate only at the literal

¹ Martin Marty, *The Living Pulpit: Healing*, p. 39.

level. They usually contain other theological themes in the middle of the details of the story. This story about Peter healing the man born lame at the Beautiful Gate is not just a miracle conferred upon one person. It is about the power of resurrection being conferred upon the followers of Jesus so that we can join God in healing the world.

During this season of Eastertide, we have considered the ways Christian people assimilate the good news of resurrection into our lives. Just weeks after the crucified Jesus was raised from the dead, little snapshots of the early church have invited us to think about what it means to live in light of the resurrection. The gospel writer Luke wrote the Acts of the Apostles to show us how the followers of Jesus became the church - a community gathered in order to be sent and to share the good news the Risen Christ unleashed upon the world. We have heard how the first Easter People were called to reorient their lives, to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins, and then to do the work of God - forgiving others and extending God's love to the world. These early witnesses to resurrection became the Easter Community. Extraordinarily diverse, they shared their goods in common, and helped one another with a particular focus on those in need.

And now today, the very next story in Acts shows us how these first post-resurrection people, are endowed with Easter Power. The first time that power is exercised is in today's healing which, of course, is about more than a lame man getting up and walking. Outside the Gate of the Temple, it is about crossing a boundary line between who is out and who is in. It is about the call of the church to serve those in need. It is about the political realities of human community, healthcare and social welfare.

In his commentary on Acts, Yale theologian, Willie James Jennings, shows how very contemporary sounding issues - like diversity, equity and inclusion; like race, politics and economics -- have been bound together with the church's role in the world from the beginning. Jennings says the Book of Acts is about the revolutionary news of

resurrection. In Jesus Christ, God invaded human life, he writes, bringing about a major human disruption by forming a community and making it beautiful, diverse and life-giving. In a world far too often preoccupied with self-interest, by the power of God, Jesus' followers are empowered toward compassion and care, wholeness and sharing. Jennings describes just how counter-cultural this Easter Power is intended to be, writing: "The prevailing fantasy of people is to have power over others, to claim the power of self-determination, to make a world bow to our will. This is the fantasy of nations and clans, peoples and corporations. But the Spirit of the Risen Christ offers God's own desire for people: of life together and of shared stories bound to a new destiny in God. This desire for people is not for their utility but for their glory, to draw them into the divine pleasure and joy."²

Jennings' observation reminds me of something Frederick Buechner once said quite succinctly: "You can survive on your own; you can grow strong on your own; you can prevail on your own; but you cannot become human on your own."³ When God endowed the followers of the Risen Christ with healing power, we see just how fully human we are meant to be.

Pulitzer Prize winning author, Tracy Kidder's new book *Rough Sleepers* tells the remarkable story of Dr. Jim O'Connell's mission to bring healing to Boston's large homeless population. A gifted working class kid, who set academic records in high school and at Notre Dame, O'Connell studied philosophy and religion at the University of Cambridge in the U.K, graduated from Harvard Medical School and completed a residency in internal medicine at Mass General. Before pursuing a fellowship at Sloan Kettering, he was asked to undertake a one year-long project to figure out how to provide medical care for the homeless and, frankly, to keep them from over-crowding Boston's hospital emergency rooms. Sometimes working a hundred hours a week,

² Willie James Jennings, *Acts: Belief series, a Theological Commentary*, p. 11.

³ Buechner quoted by Martin Marty, *The Christian Century*, 3/24/21, p. 3.

he recalls thinking, “Well, this is easier than residency!” When his one year was up, he deferred his fellowship again, and his bright shining promise of a distinguished medical career at Sloan Kettering turned into a life-long ministry of compassion, of healing individual persons but also the social fabric of one of our country’s great cities.

His whole medical career has operated out of the back of a roving medical van going to where his patients are home -- the streets, alleys, bridges and homeless shelters of Boston. Assuming a country doctor approach for an urban population, he treats patients with disease, drug and alcohol addiction, HIV, mental illness, and all manner of health problems. Many of them have had such bad healthcare experiences elsewhere they are fearful of any care at all. So Dr. Jim, as he is called, spends much of his care simply building relationships over time, making an entrée through the offer of a sandwich, a cup of hot chocolate, a coat.

He is frank about the complexities of homelessness saying to a group of well-heeled patrons at a fund-raiser: “This is a complicated problem. Homelessness is a prism held up to society, and what we see refracted are the weaknesses in not only our healthcare system, our public-health system, our housing system, but especially our welfare system, our educational system, and our legal and corrections system. if we are going to fix this problem, we have to work together to fix the weaknesses of all those sectors.”

His is a bleak assessment because homelessness is fed by income inequality, racism and a cascade of other related forces. But what now seventy-year-old Jim O’Connell continues to do is to reach out to others, to listen to them, and when healing to full health is not really viable “to stand with them in the darkness, if need be.”

Tracy Kidder describes watching Dr. Jim in downtown Boston with a familiar mix of longtime and newer homeless patients in doorways, leaning on streetlamps and mailboxes, writing: “He would approach them exuberantly, greeting old friends by name, offering a

hand to new prospects. Watching him, I was struck again by his manner: saying little, but actively listening, tilting slightly forward, his eyes attentive, a suggestion that he was about to break a smile. And rarely ending a conversation himself, but rather allowing almost all of them to talk for as long as they wanted, as if he had all the time in the world.”⁴

In light of our scripture Dr. Jim O’Connell has basically spent his career at the Beautiful Gate where Peter healed the man born lame. not just treating the poorest of the poor medically, of course, but doing what any one of us can do - treat all others -no matter station in life – with dignity, with respect, with compassion and a listening ear, and dare I say it? With the Easter power of resurrection.

Friends, we are called to share in the power of God to cross boundaries that divide human persons one from another, to welcome the outsider in, to heal the world. We are called sometimes simply to stand in the darkness with another and thereby find ourselves standing at the Beautiful Gate, empowered by the resurrection for doing the good work of God.

AMEN.

⁴ Tracy Kidder, “You Have to Learn to Listen: How a Doctor Cares for Boston’s Homeless,” The New York Times, 1/5/23.