

IN JESUS' NAME
EASTER III – BLC – B. HULL SOMERS

Acts 3:12-19, 1 John 3:1-7, Luke 24:36-48

There once was a man who had been unable to walk since birth. He was born at a time before medical technology, physical therapy or wheel chairs. No building had handicap access and to make matters worse, the culture that he was raised in had the assumption that if someone had a health problem it was a punishment for something they had done wrong. He was really lucky that his parents did not leave him in the wilderness as a baby when they discovered his malady. So, not only was he unable to walk, but he had to deal with the judgment and indifference of his community, no legitimate way to support himself and a very bleak future.

Thankfully, he had good friends and a support system. His friends helped him. They carried him every day to the steps of the house of worship where the faithful would go to repent, pray and thank God. The man laid there and survived off whatever scraps the faithful were willing to throw his way. Until, at the end of each day, his friends brought him home once more.

His life went on this way with little variance until one day he encountered some men who were talking about Jesus.

This man had a lot of opportunities to people-watch as he laid at the temple steps. Folk generally treated him as if he were not there so he got to hear all kinds of dramas and gossip and banalities – everything from affairs to grocery lists. He had certainly heard all about Jesus the prophet who had been crucified at Golgotha. There was so much drama surrounding that guy that even after his death rumors were flying about how his tomb turned up empty with

ghost sightings and more. These men who talked about Jesus weren't just gossiping about him, though. It felt different. They were impassioned. There was fire in their eyes and compassion in their voices. The weirdest thing about these guys, though, was that they did not ignore him.

This man was really used to being ignored. He was accustomed to it. He was normally treated, at best as an ugly piece of furniture that sometimes got coins or half eaten figs thrown at him, at worst as invisible. He was certainly not used to a full-on stare. And when these men looked at him they did not look away. They saw something in him that he wasn't used to seeing reflected in anyone's eyes ever – his worth, his humanity, his belovedness. It was overwhelming, but that was not even the half of it. As their eyes bored into his soul – full of grace and love – the louder one, his name was Peter, said, "I have no money for you, but what I do have, I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk." With that, Peter reached out his hand to this man who had never walked in his entire life, and dumbfounded, he took that rough hand and was lifted to his feet. Feeling the solidity underneath him, the man jumped up; he looked down at what used to be withered feet and ankles to see strong, straight and true legs; then he joined the loud one – Peter – and his friend, John, to enter the temple on his own two healed and whole feet, filled with joy at the grace that he had received.

Everyone who witnessed was amazed and ran to hear the Good News that in Jesus, the entire world has been turned upside down and there is hope for us all.

This is a story of the church of Easter.

Only a few short weeks earlier, Peter and John were huddled with the other disciples – terrified and grieving. They had every door locked tight. The only thing more terrifying than the

religious authorities who had killed Jesus and were now out to get any memory of him eradicated from the public sphere was the horrifying rumors that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Because, remember, they had all run away on that Friday night. None of them had stayed and helped or fought or even offered support or witness other than John, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of Jesus and other unnamed women. Even though Jesus had taught forgiveness and love, there was no way that the disciples imagined that he would forgive them their betrayal. It was too deep, too bad, too selfish. They figured that no matter what, they were toast.

So they hid out behind closed doors and waited for what horrible thing came next.

What came next was that Jesus appeared to them – through the walls that they had erected to keep him, and anything else that could harm them, out. I think that if you could have taken the collective blood pressure in that room right then it would have been astronomical. They all winced and wondered how painful the lightning that would strike them all dead would be.

But through the blood pumping in their ears and their half closed eyes they heard Jesus say something surprising, “Peace be with you.” Wait, what?

Their fear and grief turned into awe and confusion, and they heard the Good News with their hearts – there is hope for us all. They were the very first to experience that God does not hold our worst days or our biggest failures against us but that – no matter what – we are beloved children of God. Full stop.

And it changed them.

It changed how they looked at themselves, and it changed the way they looked at others; it changed the way they felt about life and about death. They went from fear-filled to emboldened. Peter and John – when they went out and encountered the man who had been unable to walk since birth – were flexing that power in the name of Jesus. Taking what they knew from experience and allowing it to flow through them. They had likely never paid attention to beggars at the temple steps before. But that day, filled with the grace, forgiveness, love, and power of God, they couldn't help but see. God's love is a heat seeking missile to the most vulnerable and forgotten amongst us; we know that we are operating in the love of God when our hearts are pulled toward those who are most rejected, most hurting, and most dehumanized.

The love of God does not stop to ask questions; it is freely given in the name of Jesus.

Peter and John did not have the corner on this power. We also have access to that same love. God does not hold against us our worst days, biggest failures, or continual sin. God speaks to our hearts this morning and every moment, "Peace be with you." And if we can open our hearts to that free, amazing love and grace our eyes will become the eyes of Jesus. We will see ourselves and others unmasked and full of possibility for healing and hope.

May we see how God's love and peace can penetrate the walls of judgment and fear we have erected. Soweto poet Oswald Mtshali wrote this beautiful poem about the walls we erect. It reads, "Man is a great wall builder. The Berlin wall, the wailing wall of Jerusalem, but the wall most impregnable has a moat flowing with fright around his heart. A wall without windows for the spirit to breeze through. A wall without a door for love to walk in."

These walls of fear, sin and judgement keep us stuck. Thankfully, Jesus' love does not need a door. It breaks right in. So, how can we open our eyes and lives to the reality of the Risen Christ amongst us? How can we be more fully, an Easter church? Who is being ignored that we can see? Who is waiting to hear the Good News that there is hope for us all? Who needs to be told that they are a beloved child of God?

Do not wait, church. Rise up. Be the Easter people that Christ died and rose the third day for us to be. Live in God's love. See everyone with eyes full of grace and possibility. And extend your hand to those in need in the name of Jesus. For it is impossible to suppress the love of God in Christ Jesus – the Good news of extraordinary hope to all people. Amen.

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