



Roanoke, Virginia

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“Seeing Good”

Acts 17:22-31

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Most of the New Testament scripture passages assigned for the weeks following Easter deal with, as Joy J. Moore puts it, “responses to the rumors of the resurrection.”¹

Our passage is only a snippet of a larger narrative that spans all of chapter 3 and a bit of chapter 4. Although we will read only a few verses, we will look at aspects of the entire story. So, before I read our selected passage, I want to set the scene.

One day, after the Festival of Pentecost, Peter and John went to the temple to pray. They were devout Jews and that is what devout Jews did. On that day sitting at the temple gate, they came across a man who had been crippled since birth. This man was at the temple entrance every day. He had nothing. Well, that’s not entirely true. He had a reputation, I would assume. A reputation that caused people to carry him to the gate every single day so he could beg for money. We don’t know who those people were—if they were family or just compassionate citizens who happened to lend a daily helping hand—but whatever the case, the man was known by all those who passed through that temple gate.

And this man spotted Peter and John as they approached the gate and issued his routine request. They exchanged intimate gazes, and then Peter gave him what he had. No, it was not money. It was something far greater. Peter healed him. And then helped the man to his feet.

¹ Podcast by *Working Preacher*, “Sermon Brainwave 960: Third Sunday of Easter” by Karoline Lewis, Joy J. Moore, and Matt Skinner.



The man first walked, then jumped for joy in praise to God. They entered the temple together to everyone's surprise, as an astonished crowd formed around them.

And Peter used this opportunity to preach. Reading from Acts 3:12-21, let us listen in on Peter's sermon to this astonished crowd, and let us listen for God's word.

¹²When 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? ¹³The 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. ¹⁴But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, ¹⁵and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. ¹⁶And 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. ¹⁷"And now, friends, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. ¹⁸In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer. ¹⁹Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, ²⁰so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah appointed for you, that is, Jesus, ²¹who must remain in heaven until the time of universal restoration that God announced long ago through his holy prophets."

There are a couple of movies that, when they come on TV, I cannot not watch them. Do you have movies like that? Well, one of the movies for me is Titanic. There's just something about it... I don't know. The other movie is Avatar, the original. Maybe I'm just a big James Cameron fan. Anyway, Avatar is a science-fiction movie about a paraplegic Marine, Jake Sully, who is deployed to the moon Pandora on a unique mission. His mission is to infiltrate the Na'vi people and learn their ways—or at least gain their trust. Yet, after Neytiri (the tribal princess) saves his life, Jake finds himself drawn to the Na'vi way of life. He becomes torn between following his orders and protecting the world he feels is his new home among the Na'vi people.

One of my favorite scenes is when Neytiri is teaching Jake the ways of the Na'vi people, or she is trying at least. He catches on quickly to the more dangerous aspects of Na'vi life, like hunting and flying, but struggles with the nuanced subtleties. The philosophy of the Na'vi is unity, oneness with everything—with each other, with the land, the animals, and even with their ancestors. It is a unity of compassion toward everything, which is very different from the values Jake knows from Earth. While learning the language, Jake just can't seem to get the greeting "I see you." "I see you" goes beyond the physical. "To see" is to look into the heart and soul of the other, and this concept



is central to Na’vi philosophy. It is to open the mind and heart to the present and embrace the world as if encountering it for the first time. It is to see and feel and understand yourself as a connected entity to the other, a connected part to the whole. I see you – I see your heart – I see your soul – I see you in connection with everything else.

Standing in front of the man born crippled, Peter and John “looked intently at him” and Peter said, “Look at us!” And the man “fixed his attention on them.”

This was not a passing glance. This was a stare down, a stare down in the most intimate and vulnerable way. I wonder, however, if Peter and John ever passed by this man before as they entered the temple to pray. Chapter 2 tells us that “day by day...they spent much time together in the temple.”

I wonder how many people on a daily basis would walk right past him and not notice or ever look down, let alone see him. Well, people know he is there and who he is because they recognized him after he was healed. But they must have just seen him as the beggar at the gate.

I bet they never turned to truly see him. To see who he is as a connected part of their life.

The world is full of those who sit at the gates, those who are passed by and overlooked, those who only get what is left over. And all too often the world doesn’t see them and walks right past them.

Who do we overlook?

Who don’t you notice at the gates as you go about your day?

I wonder what it would look like if we had eyes to see, to look intently at those at the gates of our world, at one another even, and see our connectedness?

Well I can assure you there would be healing. There would be restoration. Whether it be relational or cultural, physical, emotional, or psychological, to see and be seen is one of the first steps in the process of healing.

Well, at least on this occasion, Peter and John see the man. And the man sees them. And through the power of Jesus’ name, the man is healed. Once inside the temple, the people now have eyes to see. They are amazed.

But there is another “seeing” that is to be lifted up. Peter not only sees the man who sits at the gate, he also sees those in the crowd, those who are astonished at what just happened. He sees them, in their connectedness through the God of their ancestors, and seeks healing for them too. We must be cautious here not to read into Peter’s remarks as a condemnation of the Jewish people. Peter is a Jew speaking to a Jewish crowd; this is an insider’s sermon. I mean, have we forgotten what happened not too long ago on that fateful night when Peter was asked about his relationship with Jesus? That night his fireside chat was interrupted by a cock’s crow.



What Peter did is condemn the systems of oppression and hate that put Jesus on the cross; these are the same systems that kept the man born crippled outside the temple at the gate. At least until he was healed.

I believe Peter sympathized with this group. And Peter, pastorally acknowledges ignorance was at play and issues a call to repent and believe because there is more to come. One only needs to see the man they knew as a crippled beggar standing before them to see what is to come: divine restoration being revealed. The man standing before them was restored to life, in every aspect of his life.

He was healed physically—a man once crippled now stands, walks, and leaps.

He was healed relationally—a beggar once on the outside is ushered into the temple by hand and is included.

He was healed spiritually—a repetitive request for change is replaced with shouts of praises, God for all to hear!

The man is an example of the restorative power that brings about healing to the world. Resurrection is not a only-once Easter event.

The power of God's love and grace that brought forth life from death, is still refreshing and restoring and resurrecting life to perfection.

Peter says repent, for refreshment comes from the Lord's presence, and restoration upon Christ's return. It is a universal restoration of all things, restoring God's hoped for unity of all creation.

And it begins with our ability to see. Not physically see. But to truly see. To see our connection through the great story of the love of God made known in Jesus Christ, that calls each of us a beloved child of God.

It is with great joy that today we host over 20 of our partners for the first ever Mission Fair.

Each one of our many Mission Partners has eyes to see. They each noticed something and saw a need in our community, so they have responded.

Whether it be after-school programming to keep our youth on the right path or providing housing to families that are home-insecure, our mission partners looked intently and saw someone in need.

Whether it is the aging community who feel isolated and alone or the young of our community who just want and need to feel loved, they are now seen and cared for through an outpouring of compassion.

Whether it is the challenges of food accessibility or the challenges of housing accessibility, no one should remain at the gates and go hungry.



Whether it is offering families of inmates a chance to video their loved ones incarcerated or restoring confidence, dignity, and hope to former incarcerated women, through God's redeeming love in Christ, the captives are set free.

Whether it is a physical or mental limitation or an emotional and cognitive delay, no one should be excluded based on their ability or personal limitations; the lame will leap like a deer and the mute will shout for joy.

Just like Peter, our Mission Partners have taken those they serve by the hand to raise them up. And by the power we have in the name of Jesus Christ, it is our hope that they too may leap with joy and praise God in their healing and restoration.

That is the other part of seeing. To see God's divine hand at work in and through us. Peter turns the attention of the crowd away from the man and directs it rightly toward God:

“You look at us as if it were by our power or piety that this man now walks. No! Do you not see what is happening. The God of our ancestors was at work in Jesus, who was handed over and killed, and whom God still raised from the dead. The story is not over. It is by faith in his name that this man has been restored. So, repent, and you will find refreshment, because one day all things will be restored!” (my adaptation)

God is doing and continues to do astonishing things in and through you, in and through Second Presbyterian Church, in and through all our Mission Partners. Yet we point not to our accomplishments but to God, for it is not us but the gift of the Spirit that gives us the power to proclaim Christ's healing to the world.

Jesus being raised from death to life is an eternal promise that God will turn all our human crucifixions into resurrection. Could God's love really be that great, that expansive, and that inclusive?

It may be hard to believe at times. But I know it to be true.

I have seen it. I do see it.

In the name of Jesus Christ, the Author and Restorer of Life.

Amen.

