



# *Lakeside Sermons*

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
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THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

## If Only We Knew Acts 3:1-10; Acts 4:1-12

If I had been living in Jerusalem in those days following the death and resurrection of Jesus, I would hope that I was in the crowd which witnessed firsthand the healing of this man at the gate of the temple rather than to be one of the priests who heard about it second hand when Peter and John were brought before the Council. I admit that I am a skeptic when it comes to “faith healers,” and I fear that I would have voted with the rest of the clergy to warn the two disciples not to be stirring up the crowds with all of their nonsense.

I am skeptical of faith healers for several reasons. One, I know of several individuals who, over the years, have been exposed as frauds. It also seems to me that the power of healing for many of these people begins to flow about the same time that the TV lights come on and the donation phones begin ringing. And I always wonder why someone who has been given the gift of healing relegates that blessing to crowd-filled auditoriums rather than visiting hospitals, nursing homes, homeless shelters, rehab facilities, recovery programs, and third world countries where good healthcare is not accessible. Why do the people who claim to be blessed with the gift of healing offer it to people like you and me instead of to folks who have run out of options? If I had been one of the priests who heard the story of Peter and John healing a man whom I had often seen begging at the gate, I am afraid I might not have believed it either.

Doorkeepers of institutions, communities, and traditions are often in an awkward position when a new idea arises. Like parents, teachers, politicians, and preachers, we want to guard what we know to be true, especially when those truths are challenged by another proposition which other people claim to be a greater truth.

How many people were skeptical when Columbus began sailing west to get to the Indies? He insisted that the world was round, but most people believed that it was flat and expected him to fall off the edge of the ocean.

Although Copernicus and others had proposed the idea centuries before, Galileo was censored and forced to recant his belief that the earth orbited the sun and was, therefore, not the center of the universe.

How many people were frightened by the newfangled invention known as the horseless carriage and believed it would never replace the horse and carriage? How many of us are skeptical of the driverless car?

Many people refused to believe that God would humiliate himself and take on human form. A lot of people thought it ludicrous that God could suffer and die as we do and rise again to new life.

Some honest skepticism might have been at work among the rulers and priestly authorities who looked at Peter and John with disbelief. After all, these men were simple fishermen. They had no rabbinical training. What did they know about calling on the power of God? The Sadducees rejected outright the notion of the resurrection of the dead under any circumstance. Other priests believed it might be possible, but they had never seen it and had only heard about it in connection with this troublemaker named Jesus who had been crucified and his body stolen to make it look like he had come back to life. The leaders of this council—Annas, his son-in-law Caiaphas, and a man named John who would succeed Caiaphas—were the elder statesmen in this priestly dynasty. They had to protect the authority of the priesthood. They could not allow their power to be usurped by a fantastical tale like a man being healed in the name of someone who had allegedly been raised from the dead. But the people who had been there believed what had happened—and there were thousands of them. All the priests could do was to intimidate Peter and John and threaten them if they should continue to speak heresy about this Jesus of Nazareth. Fortunately for you and me and the rest of the world, the disciples ignored the threats of prison and bodily harm and continued to preach about Jesus and the power of his resurrection.

Had I lived in post-resurrection Jerusalem, I fear that I might have been on the wrong side of the discussion about what God was doing in the world.

Imagine if the Jewish leaders had believed the witness of Peter and John and the rest of the followers of Jesus! Imagine if the priests and scribes, the Pharisees and even the Sadducees had seen Jesus, not as a threat to them and their power, but as the Messiah, the One who had come from God to fulfill the promises God had made throughout history. Imagine if they had believed Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God. How different the

world might be now! Imagine if we—you and I—paid attention, what might we see God doing in the world? If only we knew what God was doing around us and in us and through us, how might our lives be different?

At this time of year, it seems rather easy to see God at work in the world. Walk outside and we are greeted with a flourish of color and beauty as flowering plants blossom and greenery explodes all around us. We see this beauty and attribute it to God the Creator, and we are right.

God's movement in our lives, however, is not always as bold as colorful azalea bush or the healing of a man who was disabled. God is often more subtle, more nuanced in how the Spirit works in our lives. We have to pay attention to see God at work in our world.

We are obviously fortunate to have some of the best healthcare in the world. Every day in our hospitals, serious conditions are corrected, illnesses are cured, and healing takes place. Even when a complete cure is not possible, comfort care often enables us to live out our days without great physical distress.

I myself don't witness miraculous cures that take place with a proclamation of faith and a slap on the forehead. I do, however, see miraculous things happen when God acts through women and men who use their skill and compassion to take care of us.

We witness miracles when people who have no where else to go find their way to one of our shelters and begin to rediscover their self-worth and opportunities to rebuild their lives. It may take a long time to happen, but who can deny that God is at work when a woman is freed from an abusive and dangerous relationship and finds safety and self esteem again? Who would argue that God is at work when a man who has lost everything because of poor choices and perhaps addiction finds support and encouragement and hope for the future? God is working in the lives of people we see and may not notice.

God works in our community in a multitude of ways. Local ministries, non-profit programs, and volunteer projects bring the kingdom of God alive in many people's lives. Sometimes, God even works through projects that, on the surface, have nothing whatsoever to do with faith. Several of you were present last Friday when Jim Goodmon, CEO of Capital Broadcasting, spoke at the Down East Partnership for Children annual luncheon. The Partnership

itself is a wonderful example of how God inspires and motivates people to make life better for others. Mr. Goodman talked more about his passion for early childhood education and the well being of all children than he did about the good things that are going on at Rocky Mount Mills. I think, however, that the Mill project is a Godsend for our community. Mr. Goodman even commented that he had noticed a change in the mood of the community and sensed an increase in positivity about our hometown. I think God is at work.

Our friend Richard Joyner began a simple program through the Conetoe Missionary Baptist Church: teach young people how to plant a garden, share the produce with the community, sell some of the food to raise funds for college scholarships, and transform a community in every way. The Conetoe community is along way from being completely revitalized, but lives are changing and people are healthier and young people have hope for a future. In addition, Richard is often asked to travel throughout the nation to share his ideas and to encourage other groups to address basic needs in simple ways as an expression of faith that God is still at work in the world.

We see people from different backgrounds and places working together to make change in the world. We see movements to refute racism and sexism, people coming together to demand respect for one another and an end to personal abuse. We witness people, some very young, working hard to limit violence, if not bring an end to it. We see people crying out for answers to problems we have long ignored and, if we listen closely, we will hear the voice of Christ as well.

All we have to do is look around us, listen to what is happening, pay attention to both the cries for help and the sounds of response to know that God is at work in our lives in sometimes dramatic, often subtle, but always miraculous ways. The priestly rulers of Jerusalem weren't watching and listening. They were too busy protecting what they thought was the complete truth. What Jesus came to tell us, however, is that God's truth is always far more expansive than we can ever imagine.

What is it in our lives that needs the healing power of God?

What radical changes might God bring about for us?

What ways can God use us to do miraculous things in our community, in our church, in our families, in our lives?

Peter—who by the way often denied the ways in which God was working in the world through Jesus—finally got it right when he began looking and

listening and paying attention. His life is itself a testimony to the power of God to change us. He never claimed to be a faith healer. He never pretended to have power to heal the man at the gate or to change the course of life itself. Rather, he stated it clearly as he stood before the doorkeepers of the faith of Israel:

"Rulers of the people and elders, if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. This Jesus is 'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.' There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."  
Acts 4:8b-12

The same God who worked through Jesus to heal, forgive, accept, and redeem his people continues to work through us to bring salvation to every part of life. If only we knew . . . what a difference God could make through us!

April 22, 2018

## Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

If we were to take the time, O God, to consider all of the goodness you have so generously brought our way, the entire world would ring with the joy of grateful souls. Our song of thanksgiving would echo from the mountains to the valleys, from ocean to ocean and land to land. The whole earth would vibrate with the harmony of gratitude for so great has your goodness been toward us all.

Thank you, O God, for every reminder of your love, every act of your kindness, and every instance of your mercy. We deserve none of your grace, but we are the happy recipients of it. We are grateful for every good gift that comes our way.

Hardly a day goes by that we are not mindful of the care you provide us when we are ill or confused or distressed. We know that you are with us in the presence of dear friends, the comfort of family, and the inner assurance that you are near. For that reason, we continue to pray for your help in our lives. There are so many aspects of living that are beyond our control and we turn to you for help. Provide what we need to deal with our illnesses. Give us wisdom in making right choices and courage to do what is right. When the way forward appears to be blocked, open doors that will lead us to the right way. When we are uncertain about what we should do, offer us guidance and direction. When we do wrong, help us to turn life around, amend for our sins, and heal the hurts we have caused.

There are so many places in our world that feel joyless, O God. We pray that by the presence of your Spirit and the commitment of your people, those places will bask in the sunshine of your love and discover their own songs of hope and joy.

We continue to celebrate the resurrection of your Son, our Savior, and pray that our own lives will be energized as well. Help us to pay attention to the Spirit moving among us and open our lives so that your Spirit might work in and through us. Enable us to see and hear and feel you at work in our world, through Jesus Christ our risen Lord. Amen.