



Resurrection  
Sermon by Pastor Sarah Rohde  
Bethlehem Lutheran Church, St. Charles  
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Last week, Pastor Paisley preached on the story from Acts 3, when Peter and John are on their way to pray, and they're stopped by a man who is lame, who's spent every day of his life laying just outside the temple gate. Their eyes meet, Peter has no money to give, but he gives the man what he does have, which is the love of Jesus. The kind of love that pays attention to people in pain, to people in need. And upon being seen, upon hearing Jesus' love spoken to and for him, the man stood up and walked. The man experienced his own resurrection, the gift of new life!

For this man, it had to have been the best gift he'd ever been given. The text says he stood up, his legs began to walk, and immediately he praised God.

For Peter and John, and all those who witnessed it, this moment was a sign of God's power at work, and particularly the way God moves not just in incredible miracles, but in the miracle that is any moment when we stop and pay attention and see a loved human being precisely in the people society tries to write off.

This public healing captured peoples' wonder and amazement. Well, some peoples...

Other people found this event to be troubling. Acts chapter 4, which is where we pick up the story today, begins with the leaders of the temple, the priests, and the Sadducees approaching Peter and John. Now each of these groups of people play a different role in Judaism, but basically they're all people

who have some level of authority and leadership when it comes to the religious life and tradition of the Jewish community – and, remember, at this time, everyone was Jewish, including Jesus' followers, so that's not what's causing the tension.

These religious leaders come to Peter and John, and they say to them that they are “much annoyed” because of what Peter and John are preaching and teaching, namely, the death and resurrection of Christ. After saying this to them, there's no time for discussion; they throw these two preachers behind bars and leave them to spend the night in jail. The next morning, they inquire of the preachers/inmates, asking them, “By what power do you do the things that you do?” And Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, says to them: “If you are going to question us because of the care we offered to a man who was sick, let it be known that it is only by the name of Jesus Christ, the man who you crucified, that he and any of us are saved.”

By what power do you do the things that you do?

One way to interpret the conflict that is emerging between leaders of this rather organic Spirit-movement and the official leaders of Israel is that it's about power. Peter and John and others who have been swept up by the power of the Holy Spirit are coming to understand power to be this surge of life and energy that comes from God, that's given to them so that they might be freed to live for something beyond themselves, that's given to them so that they might be participants with God in healing and transforming the world around them, including the church.

This very power moves them to notice the lame man by the temple gate, it moves them to preach a word that cuts to the heart of peoples' longings and

dreams, it moves them to create new communities where people truly share what they have so that all have enough. Bottom line – it moves them to be bold! They don't just go with what people expect, they don't just do what people assume religious people do; they, by the power of the Spirit, are bold in shaking things up, in allowing God to lead them to ventures they haven't before pursued, they're bold in telling the truth, even when it lands them in jail.

All of this is of course threatening to the religious authorities of the day. Peter and John are introducing some new ways of experiencing God, some new ways of understanding and embodying power, some new ways of being faithful. And for leaders who are used to having power given to them by virtue of their positions and titles, for leaders who are used to reinforcing religious laws and practices and having people go right along with them, this new movement is scary or, as they say to Peter and John, awfully annoying. It would be – it's disruptive and unsettling.

The rest of our passage, then, shows the religious elites going back and forth with Peter and John. They eventually let Peter and John out of jail, but they tell them that they must remain silent. No sharing that gospel message with anyone else. Peter and John, though, don't even pretend to accommodate that. They refuse to be quiet, saying there is no way they can keep living and not share about the love that animates their lives. Upon their release, they gather immediately with others in their community, and, together, they pray for continued boldness in following where the Spirit beckons.

Our circumstances today are quite different, on a number of levels, than this first-century world, but I found myself drawn to, and even dwelling in, this tension that's at the heart of today's passage. It's made me wonder about the ways we as

a congregation are called to be bold – bold in love, bold in what we say yes to and what we say no to, bold in how we share life together and how we serve the world around us. And, for as uncomfortable as it may be, I think a litmus test for boldness is that it causes a bit of tension. Living boldly might mean we're trying something really new to us, it might mean we're standing for something that's unpopular, it might mean we're resisting the expectations of the wider world, it might mean the things we try fail once and a while – and what I appreciate about this text is that it reminds us that, if it causes tension, it doesn't necessarily mean we're doing something wrong. It might just mean that we're daring to follow the bold, powerful Spirit of God, the Spirit that comes not to keep everything the same, but to keep God's people leaning in and turning toward possibilities we otherwise wouldn't see.

As we think about emerging from this pandemic, we are given a rare opportunity to consider again who we are called to be and what we are called to do as a congregation. Having to let go of so much of what we knew has given us a chance to take a collective big breath, to pause, and now we're given about as much of a blank slate as we will ever have. Now let me be clear - there are some things that are non-negotiables, that we as a Christian community will always do, and the book of Acts is a darn good place to start in giving us those foundations – fellowship, breaking bread, prayer, reading scripture, being generous, caring for neighbor. But this very same book of the Bible also shows us the way the Spirit shakes the church up when its traditions and patterns get stale or unnecessary. This is our time to wonder – what, in the name of Jesus Christ, do we boldly want to live into? What, in the name of Jesus Christ, are we most for, are we most passionate about, are we most equipped to offer to a world that needs all the

love and healing it can get. I think it's bold – and vital – to let these kinds of questions lead us, and see what God's bold and life-giving Spirit does with them.

So that's exactly what your leaders are up to right now. Over the past month, Pastor Paisley, Deacon Heather, and I have been doing a lot of listening to our community; we've been asking questions like the ones I just shared, trying to learn where you and other disciples are at, not just in terms of your experience of the pandemic and what you're comfortable with at this point, but also to learn what this past year has revealed about the deeper hungers and hopes that we all have for our church going forward. If you have thoughts to share and haven't had a chance to do so, please reach out to one of us. We're all ears at this point.

But I thought I'd share today some of what we're hearing...

Some of us are yearning deeply for a return to normal; for things to go back to how it was before, as much as is possible. Many are eager to see the building full again, to see people they miss again, to have options return for worship, for adult ed classes and music rehearsals, all those good things. Others have shared with us that they hope we won't just go back to how it was before. For some, that's covid-related; especially parents of young children who are not yet vaccinated are trying to figure out how to best re-engage with church.

But for others, the resistance to going back to what we knew comes out of awakenings that they've had over the past year. Our homebound members, for example, are hoping they won't be excluded as we resume more and more in-person opportunities; many of them have felt more connected to their church than ever before. Several families shared with us how the pandemic has made them take another look at the harried pace they were running at, and how they're trying to figure out now a way to be part of church (as well as other things) and

maintain the need for rest and quality time together. I think almost everyone we've spoken to admits that worshiping from the couch leaves out several important pieces of church, but many have also shared the way in which it gave them an experience of sabbath, it sparked conversations about faith in peoples' homes and marriages, it offered flexibility – you could spend Sunday morning out in nature, and then watch worship whenever you got back home, and heck you could stay in your PJS and sip coffee while fast-forwarding through the pieces you don't care for. There sure aren't any remotes when we gather for worship in-person.

So this is where we are. We're in a lot of different places, and that's okay. The goal here is not for all of us to get to the exact same place; the goal here is to be faithful, to be community to one another, even when we're in different places, and to be open to the Spirit's leading and the bold ideas She may bring our way. Leadership is taking all of this in, and we're going to be making decisions about what we're going to try for the fall by early August, and we covet your prayers. As we journey forward, my deepest prayer is that we journey together, that we keep trusting God, the power in our lives that makes a way even when the way is unclear. This is not the first time the church has been in the wilderness – I think I've reminded myself of that every week for the past 16 months. The one thing that has always been true, and remains true today, is that God will be right here with us, guiding our discernment, leading our next steps, forgiving us when we fail, and always opening our minds and hearts to new and bold possibilities for our life together.

That's enough to go on. Thanks be to God. Amen.

