

Sermon
Apr. 15, 2018
Third Sunday in Easter
Based on Acts 3:12-19
We Have a Story to Tell

A few weeks back, I was listening to Chaplain Jim Meacham. He is the head of the chaplain corps for the Westerville Police Department. Chaplain Meacham was talking about his experiences of grieving with the Westerville community after the killing of Officers Joering and Morelli. As you probably know, this was the first time in the history of Westerville that a police officer was killed in the line of duty and Westerville lost two in one incident. Chaplain Meacham has served as a chaplain for the Westerville police department for I believe at least 30 years. In other words, he knew Officers Joering and Morelli and their families intimately. So he was grieving along with the rest of the police family.

Chaplain Meacham was talking to us about the funeral that was held for the officers at St. Paul's Roman Catholic Church. He was scheduled to speak last. And he said that by that time everything that needs to be said had already been said. He didn't have any notes. He wasn't sure what he was going to say. But up he went to stand before thousands to speak from the heart. And what he ended up saying was powerful and moving. It was just the right words. They were words of healing and of life. Later in the day, someone asked him if they could have a copy of his remarks. He said honestly he doesn't remember what he said. He told us it is his conviction that it was Jesus that did that, not him.

I know that explanation by Chaplain Meacham may come across as a little pious, like Jesus was talking through him. I guess people will say stuff like that, when they do something great, they will say, "That was all Jesus." Like some kind of false humility. But at other times, like when you get before a bunch of grieving people, and you also are grieving, and you don't know what you're going to say, and you just open your mouth and the right words come out...maybe that was Jesus

using an open mouth, and a yielded servant. Sometimes, when things work out and you don't know how it did, maybe it's o.k. to give credit to Jesus. Maybe there is no better explanation.

Everyone who saw what happened thought that Peter and John had healed that man who was unable to walk. This guy had been lame from birth. People knew him. He would be brought up to the Temple hoping to receive some money from good pious people as they came in and out of the Temple. It was just another day when the man saw Peter and John walking by. So he held out his hand hoping for a couple shekels. But Peter and John didn't have any. Instead, Peter said, "What I have I give you: in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk." He then grabbed the man's hand and helped him stand up. And sure enough, he was healed. He started walking. Then he started jumping up and down. And he praised God. And everyone was amazed at what had happened, what Peter and John had done for this man.

But Peter set them straight. He made it clear to the crowd that he and John didn't do this. Jesus did this, not them. He said to them, "Why are you staring at us, as if we had the power or piety to make this man walk? It wasn't us. It was someone else, a man that our God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, has honored and glorified, his servant, his *child*, Jesus. That's who did it." Peter goes on to say that it was the name of Jesus that healed this man. What a powerful name it is, the name of Jesus.

Peter goes so far as to say that the faith in the name of Jesus that made the healing power of the name effective, that faith itself came through or *by means of* Jesus. That faith that Peter and John possessed to use the name of Jesus was itself a gift from Jesus. It was not Peter and John's faith. It did not come from them. It had been given to them *by* Jesus *for* Jesus. In other words, they used the gift of faith given to them by Jesus *so that* Jesus could work a healing into that man's life. Peter and John just used what had been given them. It was all Jesus.

And that's really what it's all about in the end, isn't it? It's all about Jesus. I say that because of the conviction that Jesus is the Author or Source of life. God brought forth all that is, the very stuff of the universe, through Jesus. We find in Scripture the claim that the entire

universe is held together by Jesus. We live on a planet that bursts forth with life. This earth has systems and processes designed to perpetuate life. Some would say the earth itself is a living organism. It's all about life, the cycle of life, death, new life. And Jesus is the author.

And it was the Author of life that the people had murdered. This is the tragic irony that the one who came to usher in new life was killed, put to death by those who were in need of new life. And Peter makes it clear that the people he is speaking to are the ones who did this. They have culpability. But, let's not forget: where was Peter? Did he do anything to prevent the crowds from demanding that Jesus be crucified? He did not. All the disciples had run away and abandoned Jesus. But Peter took it one step further. He denied three times that he even knew Jesus. It was a betrayal. Peter, along with the rest of the disciples, were also to blame for Jesus' murder. The one who gets off the most, as Peter tells it, was Pilate, who wanted to let Jesus go. And honestly, he could have if he really wanted to. But in the end, everyone was responsible. No one was innocent. The only innocent person in this whole situation was Jesus and he was the victim.

So look what Jesus did through Peter and John. These very men who abandoned and betrayed Jesus are now the ones through whom Jesus is healing people. They have been given the gift of faith in the name of Jesus. They are the ones who bear witness to the resurrection of Jesus. They embody the grace of God, the God of second chances. Not only did God forgive them, for they did not know what they were doing, but God gave them faith. God gave them a testimony to share. God gave them a role to play in God's ongoing work of salvation. Amazing grace.

The big point I want to stress is this: Peter and John were not miracle workers. That's what everyone thought when they saw what happened to the man who had been crippled his whole life suddenly stand, walk, and leap. No, Peter told them that it is Jesus who is the miracle worker. It is the name of Jesus, faith in that name, that healed that man. It was all Jesus.

So what was Peter's and John's role? The only thing Peter identifies himself as is a witness. He said to the people that he and John are witnesses to these things. They are witnesses of who Jesus is,

witnesses of his death and resurrection, witnesses of the gift of faith given to them by God through Jesus, witnesses of the power of his name. They have a testimony to share. That's what they do. They tell their story, share their experiences of Jesus.

And so are we. We have a testimony to share. Of course, it is not the same as Peter's and John's. They had different experiences. The gift of faith given to them has a different character than what we have. It is certainly possible but highly unlikely that you or I could go to a person crippled from birth and say to that person, "In the name of Jesus rise up and walk." I'll admit it, I have faith in Jesus. But I don't have faith that I can use the name of Jesus to physically heal anyone. The character of my faith is not the same as the character of the faith given to Peter and John. My hunch is that the character of your faith is also not as theirs. It doesn't mean we don't have faith, or that we don't believe in miracles. But it is different. It is the faith that has been given to us. And it is proper for us to receive and be grateful for whatever faith God has seen fit to give us. Whatever experiences we have had of God, that is our testimony to speak. It won't be the same as Peter's and John's. But it is ours and we have the opportunity from time to time to share it.

So what is your testimony? Where do you see Jesus working miracles today?

One day, Judge Paul Herbert was holding court, when a woman was brought before him. She had been beaten up. Her eyes were hollow and lifeless. She was broken. He assumed she was a victim of domestic violence. But when he looked at her papers, it indicated that she was a defendant charged with prostitution. It struck Judge Herbert that it can be difficult to tell the difference between the two. In either case, whether it was domestic violence or prostitution, the woman was the victim.

This prompted Judge Herbert to do some research. He came to discover that of the approximately 1200 women arrested in Franklin County every year for prostitution, 92% are victims of human trafficking, and first trafficked for sex at a young age. Judge Herbert came to realize that these women are not criminals. They are victims.

So Judge Herbert began what he calls CATCH Court. CATCH stands for Changing Actions to Change Habits. It is a specialized docket

designed to provide a structured process of rehabilitation, resources, and support. Women who plead guilty to prostitution have the option to receive two years of probation and enter into an individually tailored treatment plan. These women find themselves in a family of survivors of sex trafficking that meets them where they are, loves them, holds them accountable, and speaks healing into their lives. When the process ends, and those who successfully complete the program graduate, they are given an opportunity to tell their story to the group of how their life has been transformed.

One participant said, “CATCH Court saved my life. It took that lightbulb moment for me to realize that my life was worth saving. I was dying in my addiction. Dying being out there on the streets. Tomorrow, I will have 20 months clean and I never imagined that my life could ever be this good. The hard work pays off. I can’t even imagine going back to the old me. I am a completely different person. I deserve this. - I am worthy of this.”

CATCH Court is not specifically a Christian ministry. The name of Jesus may or may not be spoken. The character of the gift of faith that Judge Herbert and the women who work through this process possess is different from what Peter and John had. But it is there. Jesus is at work. For the women whose lives are transformed through this program, miracles take place, there is the passing through death into new life. These women experience their own healing. And they have a testimony to share.

This is just one example of how Jesus, the source of life, is still active in the world, working healing and manifesting new life. I encourage you to look around. Open yourself to see what God is doing in the world. It may or may not be happening in the church. It may or may not have religious labels or spoken in Christianese. But God is still working through Jesus to bring healing and new life in this world. The gift of faith is still being distributed and used for the glory of God. These are the experiences that we are privileged to witness and perhaps to even experience for ourselves. These are the stories that need to be told.