

“Now What?”
Acts 5:12-16
The Third Sunday of Easter
April 14, 2024
Rev. Anita Peebles, Seattle First Baptist Church

Scripture Acts 5:12-16

Now, many signs and wonders were done among the people through the apostles; they were all together in the Portico of Solomon. None of the others dared to join them, but the people extolled them. Yet more believers were added to Christ, a multitude of both women and men. So much so that they even carried the sick into the streets, and laid them on cots and mats, so that Peter’s shadow might overshadow some of them as he passed. Multitudes would also gather from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all made well.

In the weeks after Easter, we often hear stories about the appearances of the resurrected Christ to his disciples. First, as Pastor Leigh talked about last week, the appearance of Jesus, scars and all, to Thomas, who had lots of questions about what had just happened to his friend. Then, we often hear the story about Jesus’ appearing to the two men on the road to Emmaus, walking and talking with them. Or we may hear about Jesus’ making breakfast on the beach for the fishers of men. All of these stories of the resurrected Christ showing up out of the blue make the resurrection real for those who followed him, in first-century Galilee and here, today.

We need those stories of resurrection, especially as joy and grief mingle together in our daily lives, as the death-dealing powers of domination threaten to overwhelm our world again and again, as politics and social media and the news cycle and our relationships and so many more things surround us in chaos! We need those stories of resurrection to remind us that love continues after death, that life flourishes in even the most unexpected places, and that the Holy one accompanies us always because Jesus knows both the enclosure of the tomb and the grace of the garden.

As we’ve talked about over the past couple weeks, resurrection is not just a one-time event. Wendell Berry’s encouragement to “practice resurrection” reminds me of this, that we must choose to engage resurrection each day. Resurrection is an ongoing, changing, transforming, re-making process affecting our hearts and minds and spirits.

Just ask Peter.

Yes, Peter. We find ourselves in the book of Acts today, usually reserved for post-Pentecost lessons, but today part of those resurrection appearances. And Peter is a prime example of resurrection himself.

Now, you know I love Peter. He is so fabulously and devastatingly human, and for me, he makes discipleship real. We last saw Peter on the last night of Jesus' life. After Jesus had been betrayed and arrested and was taken away to be crucified, the gospels tell us that Peter sat in the courtyard warming himself by a fire and trying to keep a low profile. Perhaps he was trying to get as close to Jesus as he could but still minimize the risk for himself, after all, who knew what the Romans would do to anyone they found who associated with Jesus. As he sat at the fire, someone recognized him as a Galilean, and upon questioning him about his identity, Peter denied Jesus three times. We last saw Peter at the lowest low, as his beloved friend was sentenced to death and he didn't have the guts to say, "Yes, he is my friend and I love him."

But now? Now, in this scripture from Acts 5, we see Peter at the height of his ministry. He and the other disciples have been endowed with the power of healing, which previously only Jesus' had possessed. In fact, the healing is so needed and so popular that crowds of people are being brought to the part of the Jerusalem temple complex called "Solomon's Porch" just to try to be in Peter's *shadow*! That's how powerful he is, that people just want to be in his shadow, and they believe that will heal them!

Peter has experienced resurrection. Not just in his proximity to Jesus and his up-close-and-personal witnessing of his death and new life, but in Peter's own life. Peter had been down in the depths, had lost his integrity and self-respect...and then, Peter had gained a new life of his own. He lived his faith openly and served his God and spread good news to all those who were hurting and downtrodden through his healing ministry.

In the chaos of the weeks and months after Jesus' resurrection, the disciples continued Jesus' ministry. Knowing that the Roman Empire was surely watching them closely, those rabble-rousers who had been associated with the heretic called a King, the disciples continued to minister. Knowing the religious establishment of 1st-century Judaism was probably watching them closely, wondering what this breakaway sect would do next, the disciples continued to minister. Knowing that the people in Galilee and Judea and beyond were confounded by the claims of this small band of outcasts stepping into their power, the disciples continued to minister.

Knowing that the message of God's love and peace through justice was too important to let go because of intimidation, the disciples continued to draw crowds of people to be healed, physically, spiritually, relationally or systemically.

And so, in the book of Acts, though it is not our normal scripture for this season of Eastertide, resurrection is all over the place.

Resurrection in healing ministry. Resurrection in Peter. Resurrection in the hopeful yearning just to be in the presence of one who knew Jesus, even just his shadow.

Can you imagine the rollercoaster of emotions the disciples had been on? The highs of beautiful teachings and feeding thousands of people, the lows of political threats and assassination and capital punishment, the surprise twists of a friend's betrayal and a scarred body raised to life again. Perhaps those experiences created empathy for the oppressed people they worked with,

people experiencing the uncertainty of living under Empire, the tenuousness of worshipping anything other than the Roman pantheon of gods, the financial insecurity of unbridled taxation, the deep longing for deliverance into religious and political and economic justice and freedom.

And for us today, we too are experiencing the rollercoaster of emotions that comes with living daily on this planet. We watch wars unfold, people die of starvation, colonizing powers doing irreparable damage to indigenous communities. We watch as people we love fall ill and die, as people move away, as children grow into adults and as our elders grow older, as mental illness takes beloveds in firm grip, as people pull themselves out of cycles of addiction and abuse. Our bodies change, our minds change, our hearts change, our spirituality changes.

And yet, resurrection continues.

In our Thursday Zoom Bible study, we talked about the different ways people think about and experience resurrection and healing. We named that we might think of resurrection and healing as the same sometimes, as relationships heal into newness or as hearts heal by accepting a new reality. We named those places where we feel the power of healing are at the bedsides of loved ones, holding hands in a comforting touch, being present with someone who needs you to see the whole of who they are. And resurrection places are cemeteries, time around a table with children, moments when you gain understanding, moments when you are reassured that you are loved.

“Presence” has a lot to do with healing and with resurrection, we found in our conversation.

I think Peter and the apostles knew that, as they greeted the crowds in Solomon’s Porch. Some folks desired healing so much that they only wanted to be close enough to Peter for his shadow to pass over them. This is reminiscent of the woman with the 12-year flow of blood who reached out in her longing and touched the hem of Jesus’ robe, claiming healing after years of physical pain and social isolation. I imagine Peter’s shadow was like shade in the desert, momentary shelter from the beating sun.

I am reminded of an Irish proverb I learned from the poet Padraig O’Tuoma, “It is in the shelter of each other that the people live.”

I think we know, beloveds, what it is to be acquainted with the chaos, uncertainty, and tumult of the world so intimately, that we sometimes feel desperate for just the shadow of resurrection. Sometimes we each have been struggling to keep our heads above water, paddling our little feet frantically to keep going, and we just want a moment of relief. Sometimes as we open the newspaper or scroll social media or pick up the phone, we can think “now what? How could this situation possibly get any heavier? How could more heartbreak be piled on right now?”

And so when Peter passes by, we are one among the number who, with desperate hope and faithful yearning, bring our mats into the streets and into the courtyard, stretching out our bodies and spirits so that we might just barely find some healing.

Dear ones, in whose presence do you find that calm, centering, momentary relief? Where do you feel the spaciousness to stretch out in the shade? When do you make time to enter the shadow of resurrection and adjust your eyes so that you can see the newness around you?

While I was in seminary, at times I would get overwhelmed with the schoolwork, with my part-time job, with my pastoral internship, and I would seek the shadow of resurrection...in the church kitchen making Wednesday night dinner, on the couch in my pastor's office, in the garden growing cucumbers behind my house, tending my chickens with their wicked personalities, and porch-sitting with dear friends, just being quiet together.

Sometimes it is enough to answer that desperate "now what?" in tumultuous times by seeking even just the shadow of resurrection.

I leave you with these words by Jan Richardson:

The Healing That Comes: A Blessing

I know how long
you have been waiting
for your story to take
a different turn,
how far
you have gone in search
of what will mend you
and make you whole.

I bear no remedy,
no cure,
no miracle
for the easing
of your pain.

But I know
the medicine
that lives in a story
that has been
broken open.

I know
the healing that comes
in ceasing
to hide ourselves away
with fingers clutched
around the fragments
we think are
none but ours.

See how they fit together,
these shards
we have been carrying—

how in their meeting
they make a way
we could not
find alone.

—Jan Richardson