



April 25 2021
*Sermon Series: Places We Weren't
Expecting to Go*

A Return to the Temple Pastor Shelley Cunningham

Luke 24:50-53 (NRSV)

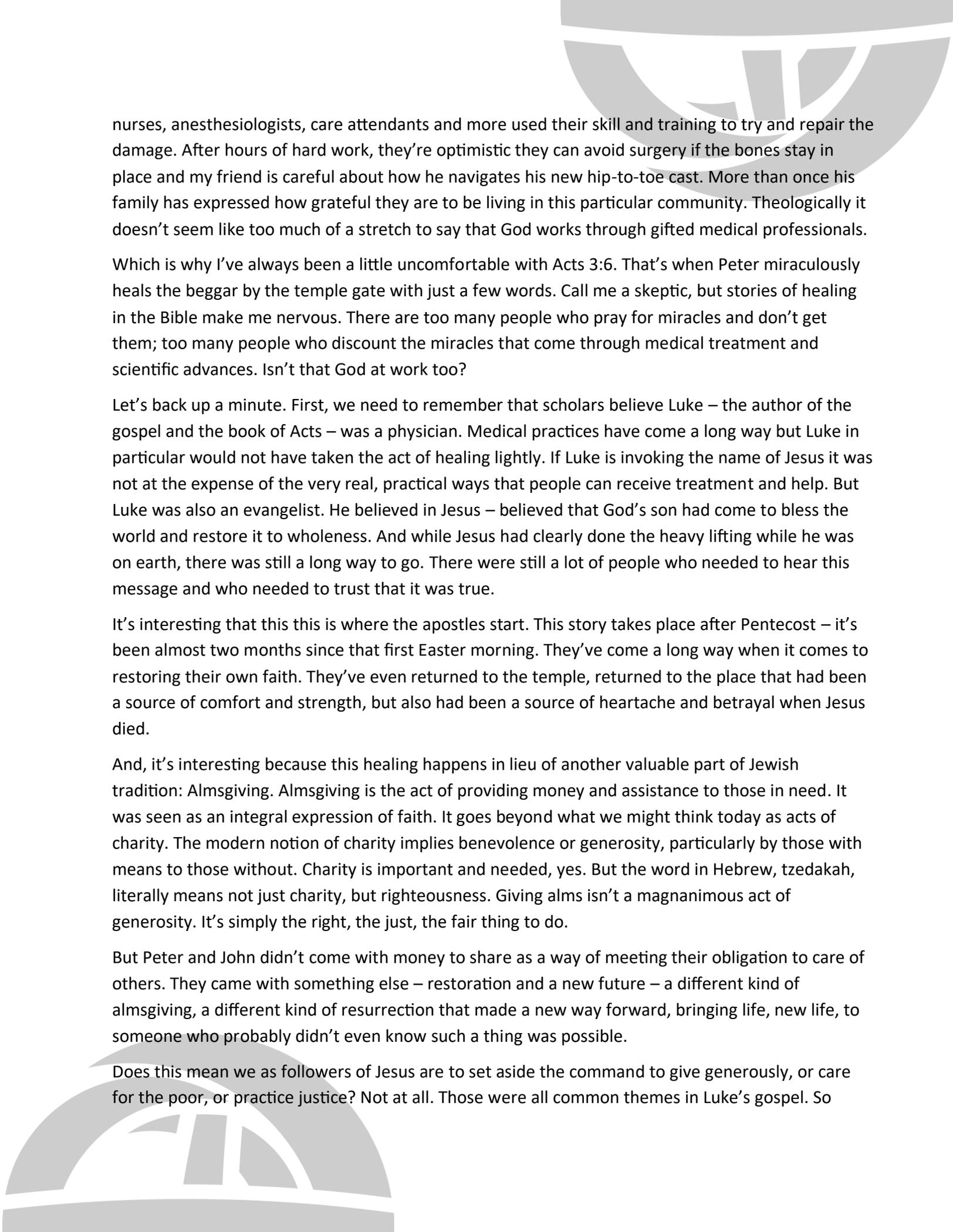
50 Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. 51 While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. 52 And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; 53 and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Acts 3:1-16 (NRSV)

1 One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, at three o'clock in the afternoon. 2 And a man lame from birth was being carried in. People would lay him daily at the gate of the temple called the Beautiful Gate so that he could ask for alms from those entering the temple. 3 When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked them for alms. 4 Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said, "Look at us." 5 And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. 6 But Peter said, "I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk." 7 And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. 8 Jumping up, he stood and began to walk, and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. 9 All the people saw him walking and praising God, 10 and they recognized him as the one who used to sit and ask for alms at the Beautiful Gate of the temple; and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

11 While he clung to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them in the portico called Solomon's Portico, utterly astonished. 12 When 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? 13 The 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. 14 But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, 15 and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. 16 And 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."

On Thursday a friend of mine broke his leg. He was playing baseball and slid at just the right angle (or at the wrong angle, I guess). Snap, both tibia and fibula, just above the ankle. The next 24 hours involved a couple of trips to the emergency room. A whole team of doctors, orthopedic specialists,



nurses, anesthesiologists, care attendants and more used their skill and training to try and repair the damage. After hours of hard work, they're optimistic they can avoid surgery if the bones stay in place and my friend is careful about how he navigates his new hip-to-toe cast. More than once his family has expressed how grateful they are to be living in this particular community. Theologically it doesn't seem like too much of a stretch to say that God works through gifted medical professionals. Which is why I've always been a little uncomfortable with Acts 3:6. That's when Peter miraculously heals the beggar by the temple gate with just a few words. Call me a skeptic, but stories of healing in the Bible make me nervous. There are too many people who pray for miracles and don't get them; too many people who discount the miracles that come through medical treatment and scientific advances. Isn't that God at work too?

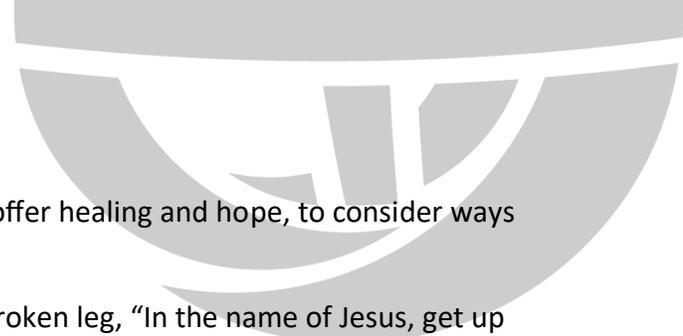
Let's back up a minute. First, we need to remember that scholars believe Luke – the author of the gospel and the book of Acts – was a physician. Medical practices have come a long way but Luke in particular would not have taken the act of healing lightly. If Luke is invoking the name of Jesus it was not at the expense of the very real, practical ways that people can receive treatment and help. But Luke was also an evangelist. He believed in Jesus – believed that God's son had come to bless the world and restore it to wholeness. And while Jesus had clearly done the heavy lifting while he was on earth, there was still a long way to go. There were still a lot of people who needed to hear this message and who needed to trust that it was true.

It's interesting that this is where the apostles start. This story takes place after Pentecost – it's been almost two months since that first Easter morning. They've come a long way when it comes to restoring their own faith. They've even returned to the temple, returned to the place that had been a source of comfort and strength, but also had been a source of heartache and betrayal when Jesus died.

And, it's interesting because this healing happens in lieu of another valuable part of Jewish tradition: Almsgiving. Almsgiving is the act of providing money and assistance to those in need. It was seen as an integral expression of faith. It goes beyond what we might think today as acts of charity. The modern notion of charity implies benevolence or generosity, particularly by those with means to those without. Charity is important and needed, yes. But the word in Hebrew, tzedakah, literally means not just charity, but righteousness. Giving alms isn't a magnanimous act of generosity. It's simply the right, the just, the fair thing to do.

But Peter and John didn't come with money to share as a way of meeting their obligation to care of others. They came with something else – restoration and a new future – a different kind of almsgiving, a different kind of resurrection that made a new way forward, bringing life, new life, to someone who probably didn't even know such a thing was possible.

Does this mean we as followers of Jesus are to set aside the command to give generously, or care for the poor, or practice justice? Not at all. Those were all common themes in Luke's gospel. So



perhaps this story is to call us to consider ways we might offer healing and hope, to consider ways we might point to Jesus.

It may never cross my mind to say to my friend with the broken leg, “In the name of Jesus, get up and walk.” That’s insensitive, impractical and downright impossible. But Jesus sure can use me to bring healing to my friend by bringing compassion, encouragement, and lots of chocolate chip cookies as he heals.

Keep in mind, it wasn’t just the words Peter shared that made the difference for the man at the gate.

After all, first, Peter and John see this man. They really see him. Instead of turning away or pretending they didn’t notice his withered feet and outstretched hand, they meet his eye. In that simple gesture, he matters. He has dignity.

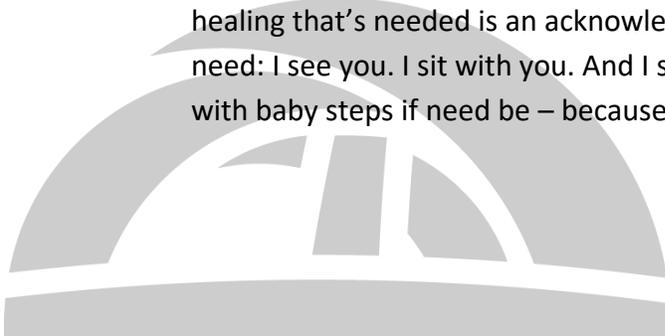
Then, they speak to him. Not a muttered, “sorry, can’t help.” No; they call to him and get his attention to make sure he knows they are fully present with him.

Finally, after sharing what they did have to offer – “in the name of Jesus, get up and walk!” — they give him a hand. They raise him up, literally. They pronounce healing in the name of Jesus but then they make the first move. His ability to walk doesn’t depend on his trusting them. They reach out their hands and pull him to his feet.

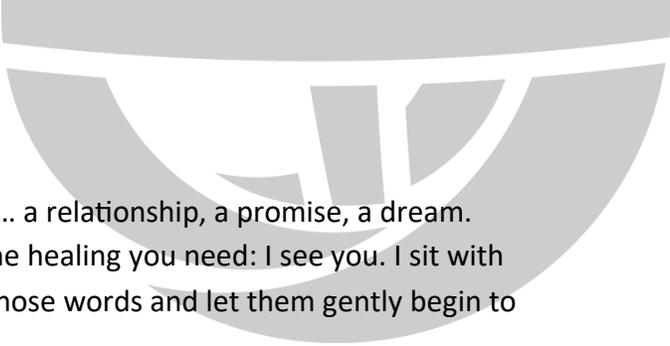
My friends, isn’t that what we are called to do? To actively participate in the healing of those in need? To see the real, beloved children of God all around us. To affirm their stories and to share their struggle. To set aside our self-interest and show them they matter. The miracle of healing begins when we are vulnerable and humble and let the love of Jesus flow through us in words and in action. Sometimes that’s all we’ve got. But with Jesus it is enough.

You see, at the heart of Peter’s proclamation – at the heart of Luke’s gospel and his continuation of the story in Acts – is the call for people – for all people – to trust that following Jesus can change lives. It changes lives because it reorients us from ourselves to our neighbor. It changes lives because it gives us a glimpse what should be, what can be, through the love of Christ.

If we are to live into the belief of *imago dei* – that all people are created in the image of God – then we need to participate and see the pain and suffering that exists around us, and we need to sit with those experiencing it. Just because we haven’t had their experience doesn’t mean their experience isn’t real. It doesn’t mean their experience doesn’t matter. It doesn’t mean we can’t help make it right.



You might be struggling to reengage with society after a year of anything-but-normal. Perhaps the healing that’s needed is an acknowledgement that it’s ok to take it slow. If this is the healing you need: I see you. I sit with you. And I say to you, In the name of Jesus Christ, step forward in faith – with baby steps if need be – because Christ walks with you.



You might be wrestling with something broken in your life ... a relationship, a promise, a dream. Perhaps the healing that's needed is an apology. If this is the healing you need: I see you. I sit with you. And I say to you, in the name of Jesus Christ, receive those words and let them gently begin to create a new way forward.

You might be pondering the events of the past week and wondering what you can do to help bridge the chasm that seems to exist between so many people in society. Perhaps the healing that's needed is an acknowledgement that you can do better. If this is the healing you need: I see you. I sit with you. And I say to you, In the name of Jesus Christ, lay down your defensiveness and humbly recommit yourself to the hard work of reparation and reconciliation.

Friends, we all have need of healing, and we all have need of Christ's healing love. But here's the thing. The healing that happens at the temple gate doesn't stop there. Not for the man – who suddenly is able to praise God in ways he never thought possible. Not for the apostles – who will soon find the courage and strength to share the gospel in lands far and wide. Not for us, those of us worshipping in the sanctuary and the extended community online – who have the chance to build bridges of understanding and peace and bring that healing to the world each and every day. We all need healing. But we all have been changed blessed and changed because of Jesus. In the name of the risen Christ, let the healing begin. Amen.

