

WHEN YOU LOOK, WHAT DO YOU SEE?

ACTS 3:1-16 / LUKE 24:36-49

By Kathleen Hartzel

I think this is a great practice for when the Pastor is unavailable. So first and foremost, thank you for this opportunity. I know I wouldn't be up here if I didn't feel the support of this congregation as a family, my brothers and sisters in Christ. I humbly offer my interpretation and reflection of today's scripture readings. I encourage you to look deeper for your own insights and hope you feel free to share your thoughts with me and each other.

As often happens when one reads scripture, something specific catches your attention. The title of the sermon gives you an indication of what jumped off the page at me as I read and reread the verses. But first, I wish to share with you a little something about myself that may give you understanding as to what inspired me and how I approached my writing. I have a habit that when I'm in a conversation or situation something may catch my attention and I make a mental connection to a memory of a movie, song, book, etc. I think many of you can relate to this. Sometimes, I'll share that connection with the folks in the conversation. Sometimes they get it and sometimes they don't. More often for me, it depends upon the age of the people. My point of references can go back a few years.

For this sermon, it started with the word **look** which is found in both readings. The word **look** made me think of two very popular phrases. I can see some of you may already know at least one of the phrases but I'll give you a hint, the two phrases I'm thinking of were both spoken in movies by the actor, Robert Deniro.

To show you how I made this connection, I'm going to dive into the Gospel reading first. When I read Luke's version of Christ's appearance to the disciples, the phrase "look at me," from the movie *Analyze This* came to mind. This was one of the movie's catch lines which had an important meaning to the relationships of the characters. Please indulge me for a few seconds as I ask for your participation. When I count to three, I want you to look at the person next to you, look directly into their eyes and intently say "Look at me." You'll both say the phrase at the same time and do it as if there attention is of utmost importance. Ready, one, two, three.

It's a little uncomfortable to look so intently at someone but this is what Christ is telling the Disciples to do when he appears to them. If we take a look at the scripture prior to this appearance, we know that Christ has already appeared to the two Disciples on the road to Emmaus. They excitedly share their experience and mention that Christ had appeared to Peter. Side-note: other than this mention, Christ's appearance to Peter is not described in any other Gospel. Yet, even after the two disciples had recognized Jesus in the breaking of the bread, even after excitedly sharing that Peter had seen Christ, Luke

emphasizes their excitement by writing the phrase “It is true!” with an exclamation point. Still, their eyes and minds seemed to have been closed again as they were terrified when Jesus “stood among them.” The two disciples were literally just with Jesus that day and now they mistake him for a ghost.

In the ancient world, ghosts or disembodied spirits were fearsome; often the source of chaos and destruction. In today’s culture, there are whole industries on looking for ghosts, T.V. shows and movies about ghosts, good ghosts, bad ghosts, cartoon ghosts. Think about how they are presented to us. Transparent, in the shadows, through veiled and dim lighting or in the dark. Because John’s Gospel mentions the doors were locked in the room where the disciples gathered, we too often get caught up in how Jesus got into the room, the mystical and supernatural appearance. We lose sight of why Jesus was there.

In last week’s sermon, Jon spoke of doubt. Today, the children are learning the story of doubting Thomas. Doubt to me feels like how I would see a ghost. Doubt puts things into the shadows, places a veil over what is real. It becomes a cloud around my faith. Yes, Jesus appearance is startling but after all that had happened, I wonder should it have been so startling to terrify them. It was because there was still fear, lack of understanding, and doubt. So Jesus forces the Disciples to **LOOK** at him. This now ties in the second part of the sermon title, to think about what you see.

Jesus strips away the idea of ghost so they will see him as a fully physical person. First, they can see his wounds and touch his hands and feet. Whoever or whatever the risen Jesus may be, he is the same **one who has been crucified**. Second, they see him eat.

Luke uses the Greek preposition *enōpion*, which literally means “before their eyes.” This may seem odd to us but for Luke’s audience, this would be solid proof that this was not a disembodied spirit. Because Jesus comfortably seeks and consumes a piece of fish, his followers see that he is something very different from a spirit. He is the real Jesus, the real man, yet, he is suddenly among them. Their reaction is to disbelieve but still feeling great joy. With this Jesus continues in order to build toward a richer understanding, a trust, and a belief in who Jesus is. In this story, not only are eyes that were previously closed suddenly opened but minds are opened as well.

Throughout Luke’s Gospel, belief and understanding for most folks don’t come all at once. I know this is true for me, understanding and belief don’t always fall in step, and I think it’s true for many folks. For Christians, we are asked to believe and we seek to understand. At every step, coming to faith and understanding is a gift from God through the Messiah, the risen Lord. Luke ends his Gospel with the disciples waiting for the “power from on high” to begin their lives of witnessing to the nations. Now Luke skillfully and purposely uses his ability to turn an ending into a beginning.¹

Thus begins the book of Acts. Literally, Luke’s sequel in his telling of Jesus ministry and how, through the power of the Holy Spirit, it becomes the disciple’s ministry. By the third chapter of Acts, the Holy Spirit has empowered Jesus followers to go out to the community. This is a Jewish community and as they share the Gospel many new

¹ Henrich, Sarah, “Between Text and Sermon” *Interpretation, a Journal of Bible and Theology*, Vol 68, 2014, Pgs. 431-434. Multiple excerpts from this article were referenced in the reflections on Luke 24:36-49.

believers see this news as the fulfillment of God's promises of the covenant given to Moses in the Old Testament. With this in mind, we see in chapter three that Peter and John continue the Jewish practice of going to temple at the traditional time of evening prayer.

Here we are introduced to a disabled man being carried to the gate of the temple and placed there so that he may beg for alms. To have the disabled or infirmed at the gate of the temple was not unusual and I'll share three reasons why this was considered acceptable. First, according to the rules of safeguarding the holiness of the temple, people with disabilities were separated and placed apart because they were considered impure and therefore forbidden to enter. Second, giving alms to the temple was an important part of the Jewish religion and giving a disabled person alms was considered praiseworthy. Third, begging was considered an acceptable way for the disabled to earn a living therefore; beggars found it profitable to be near the temple.

Luke gives us small details about one particular beggar. He is carried daily to the temple gate so he can ask for alms from those entering the temple. He has been lame from birth and please notice, he remains nameless. To the ancient world the name carried the authority and power of the person. The anonymity of the beggar emphasizes the hopelessness of his situation. He could do nothing to support himself except beg. So when the beggar ask Peter and John for alms, they respond not by simply dropping coins in his basket instead by looking intently at him saying, "Look at us!" Again, Luke emphasizes this statement with an exclamation point. The beggar looked up expecting to receive something. Peter and John were looking straight at him and here the second phrase

comes to mind. “Are you looking at me?” Sometimes when I read scripture, I do the spiritual discipline of putting myself in the story. If I change the attitude behind the phrase, I could see the beggar thinking this. “Are you looking at me? No one really looks at me.” They don’t actually acknowledge me. But Peter and John do acknowledge him. Not only do they acknowledge him, they perform the very first miracle recorded by Luke in the book of Acts.

In the name of Jesus Christ, he tells the man to walk. Peter takes him by the hand and helps him up. Again, if I’m in the story and I’m a temple attender, I might be thinking “oh my, are the looking at the beggar, are they touching him?” The man, lame from birth, jumps up, walks and praises God. They take him into the temple where the people are astonished. This first miracle is really four healing miracles in one. The first is emotional healing. The man expected to get money which would have been a temporary help but healing in Christ’s name is permanent, giving hope and strength to restart a life. The second is a social healing. Cured, the man enters the temple and joins the community. The people now see him differently. Third, there is the physical healing. The man can now act and do things differently. Fourth is the spiritual healing as described in verse 8. The healed man enters the temple, approaches the throne of God, and give thanks. He knows, by faith, it is God, not Peter that healed him.

Peter now confronts the people of the temple and boldly asks why are you so amazed? Why do you look at us? Peter explains that it was not by his own power but by the power of Jesus, whom they crucified, and was raised by God from the dead. Peter

openly declares his witness to Christ resurrection. At the heart of this story is that the wonders and miracles were done “in the name of Jesus.” Jesus encountered people with disabilities through his healing and miracles, because he preferred to spend time with the least rather than with those of wealth, influence, power or even those in the religious hierarchy. The book of Acts is a continuation of Jesus’ action through and by the power of the Holy Spirit. The healing miracles show how the excluded have been integrated into society by Jesus’ ministry.²

There is so much more to unpack in these scriptures and my focus on just the words look and see gave me more understanding of the sacrifice and resurrection than I thought possible. But, I still have a long way to go. The Holy Spirit is continuously renewing mine mind and yours, if you believe. Every experience in life is an opportunity to see Jesus in myself, in yourself, and in others. Every time I really focus and look, I see a chance to help, to show compassion, to be grateful and to praise to the risen Lord. It starts with intently looking so you see deeper than what is on the surface. When we look at Jesus, do we see deeper? Do we see the living Jesus, alive in us and in others? Do we look at Jesus as the risen Lord, or as a ghost? When you look, what do you see?

² Kamba, Micheline, “holistic Healing in Acts 3:1-10: A Transformative Church for All People,” *International Review of Missions*, 105 no 403, Nov 2016, P. 268-279. Multiple excerpts from this article were referenced in the reflections on Acts 3:1-16.