

An Easter Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

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Acts 3

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In Luke's gospel, which tells the story of Jesus, and in Luke's book of Acts, which tells the story of the first generation of followers of Jesus, there is no real attempt to search out deep, theological, metaphysical meaning of the crucifixion. There is no substitutionary atonement, in which Christ is understood as a sacrifice for our sin. There is no cosmic victory over Satan, in which Christ is our champion. There is no lifting up Christ's death as the exemplification of God's true love. Unlike Paul's letters for example, which at points go to great lengths to cast the cross in universal, metaphysical, theological terms, for Luke, in the gospel and again in Acts, the cross is a very human scandal.

God sent his Son Jesus to earth and one afternoon you killed him. YOU killed him. It's hard news.

The cross is a tragic human 'no' to God's anointed one by those He came to save, the ultimate tragedy of unrequited love—a dramatic, powerful 'no' to God.

When confronted by God's messiah, humanity got together—religion and politics, church and state—and formed an unholy alliance to do what humanity often does to beauty and truth—kills it.

This human 'no' that Luke tells about happened at a time and place in history. You and I obviously weren't physically there. It's not our time and it's not our place. But we are still liable. We are still culpable. We are still damned by our 'no,' our violence, our rejection, our failure, our sin. That's the leap that Luke pushes us to make. He doesn't spiritualize the cross. He universalizes it. Peter addresses the crowd around him in Acts 3: "You did this," he says. Now, they weren't the ones holding the spear that pierced his side. They didn't swing the hammer that drove the nails. They didn't fashion the crown of thorns for his head. But the way Luke understands history is to understand that all of humanity was together swinging the hammer, twisting the thorns, thrusting the spear, and hurling the insults. In this sense, the crowd was all there. In this sense, you and I were there, too. As part of the human family, each of us WAS there. We did it even if we didn't know better. Peter tells the crowd gathered around him, a crowd we stand in, "You did this."

And adds, "I know you acted in ignorance as did your rulers." This is a very kind face-saving suggestion Peter makes. Of course, we acted in ignorance. If we had known who Jesus was, we would have never done such a thing.

One of the first little churches I preached in was in eastern North Carolina. Jenny and I arrived a few minutes before the service began, and I was ushered quickly back with the deacons to pray and go over the service. Jenny found a seat in the center aisle in a pew about four rows back. A lady sat on the far end of the row, but didn't come over to greet the strange visitor on her row. So Jenny sat alone. A few people trickled in the

service, but when I arrived she was still seated alone. Of course, many people were. It wasn't like a famous preacher was in the house that night.

So I preached my heart out and at one point noted that Jenny was with me . . . and she said, "If I had known who you were, I would have said something to you."

Jesus, if we had just known who you were, we wouldn't have driven nails through your hands. We wouldn't have rejected, mocked, denied. We promise.

If the statistics are right about YouTube viewership, over 80 million people have tuned in to watch a British lady stand on a stage in front of a theater full of skeptical patrons and a panel of judges. You've seen this lady? In a setting where the young and telegenic are the obvious winners, in her flower print dress, clunky shoes, and birds-nest hair, her moment of fame looked like it would last but a few embarrassing moments. She would be the court jester trotted out for our amusement and then retired to endless loops of painful mockery. She said she wanted to sing and they laughed; she said she'd like to be famous and they catcalled. How could someone who looked like that have anything to offer? She was marmish, never been kissed, painfully out of style. In the estimation of the trained gatekeepers of pop culture, she was the lady downstairs with 10 cats who bangs on the ceiling, your floor, with a broom handle and scolds you to keep it down up there with your music and partying. You watched this unfold, didn't you? The judges scowled. The audience rolled their eyes.

And then the music began and she sang. And you remember the goose bumps on your arms when you first heard her. But even better than the pleasure of hearing a surprisingly talented singer is the smug assurance of sitting on your living room sofa, judging not just her, but her live audience as well, saying to yourself, "I would have never mocked her. I would have believed in her. I wouldn't have been cruel. Look at that those people looking at her and that smug Simon—she showed them."

If I had been there, I wouldn't have mocked.

If I had been there, I would have believed.

If I had been there, I wouldn't have crucified? Oh really?

There is a reason why being a Christian is not about giving testimony about what you would have done had you been there. We don't make Christians by eliciting empty promises about what you would have done in the hypothetical situation that you were a first-century resident of Jerusalem. The Judgment of God is that all are sinners and fall short of the glory of God. We are all guilty. We are all to blame. Fortunately and graciously, God has responded to humanity's action and nature with His own actions and by His own nature. To violence and crucifixion, God responds with forgiveness and resurrection. The human 'no' is only and could only be overcome by the 'yes' of the resurrection. Being a follower of Jesus then is to be witness to God's powerful action in response to human rejection, even my own rejection of Christ.

It seems that the only way to be a Christian is through repentance. It's the only door. It's the only hope. Peter tells the crowd, "Repent therefore and turn again that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord."

As the crowd collects around this crippled man now leaping around and jumping and praising God, they stand in awe. They knew this man. He was there everyday at the gate, asking for money. Now's he's jumping around, and it appears that these two men that he's hugging—Peter and John—get the credit for this.

“Why are you staring at us as if we did this?” Peter asks. We didn't do this. It was the power and presence of Jesus Christ, remember him? The Author of Life, the Holy One, the Righteous One—the one you, YOU condemned to death. You might want to rethink that one. I know you didn't really know what you were doing. None of us did. But go back in scripture and look. God said it would happen like this. And it has. And so now, what are you going to do about it? How about repent?

The thing about this story is that all of the characters in Acts 3 are broken, and we can identify with that. One of the reasons the British lady's story touched so many people is that the song she sang was not just a mindless pop song with a catchy beat. It seemed personally confessional and poignant. When she sang, “I dreamed my life would be so different from this hell I'm living,” she was singing the song of people everywhere. The lame man is broken in his body. Peter's shameful denial of Jesus is well known. John and his brother had been arguing about who was greatest in the kingdom. And the crowd is liable for the crucifixion. Everyone in the story has been or is broken. None of them have made it through life unscathed. And that seems like a true story.

Perhaps this nameless man's sudden remarkable transformation from lifelong cripple and beggar to human jumping jack is a sign of the transformation awaiting all people in Christ. Peter's transformation is no less dramatic. He went from denying failure to the shepherd of Jesus' lambs. John went from scolded braggart to writer of a gospel.

These men were evidence that transformation is possible. Tulips are planted as onion-looking bulbs, but spring turns them into beautiful cups. A hidden talent vaults a person into stardom. A new experience changes the way you parent your kids, changes your major, deepens a friendship. But on the matter of transformation, resurrection stands alone.

The resurrection is God's answer ‘yes’ to life and you and me and every person who was or would have been there at the cross. To every person who dreams that their true selves could be unleashed from the prison of the empty passions of their false selves. As we move toward the communion table, we come empty-handed. See Lord, no hammers, no thorns, no nails, no spears. But also no self-assured pride that in another time and place we wouldn't have rejected you or your people. We know the depths of our own fallenness and need for your grace. We come empty-handed, with nothing but a great need in our souls to have peace with one another, with ourselves, and with you. If we bring anything, we bring faith that here we'll find it.

As we receive the sign of our salvation in Christ, we might hear God's whisper, “I knew it was you all along. I have always known you, and I wouldn't change a thing.”