

Text: Acts 4.1-14
St Stephen's

April 5th, 2009
Easter Sunday

"The Beginning of Forever"

Bishop Tom Wright once said that 'Easter is **God's surprise party**, with surprise presents for everyone', and I like the description. What he is saying is true, of course, because **no one expected** what happened on that first Easter. **Everyone knew that Jesus was dead**. Everyone knew that **dead people stay dead**. No one expected him to rise from the dead, even though he had told them he would. Everyone was staggered, even frightened, when he did. It was **God's surprise party**.

The bible has a phrase for this kind of thing; it is called a **wonder and a sign**.

"...many wonders and signs were done through the apostles."

Acts 2:43

You know what a 'wonder' is. It is a stunning, astonishing event that no one expected. It is a **miracle**. A "supernatural intervention of God in human affairs..." 'Wow!', we say when a miracle happens. 'Wonderful!!!'

Modern people are **skeptical about miracles**. But the longer you live and the deeper you look at life, you find that there are whole sets of events that defy rational, naturalistic explanation, starting with

- the existence of life itself. 'Wow! Wonderful!!!'
- How about the reality of beauty.
- Or the life-changing power of love.
- Or the instinctive sense of transcendence.

Sometimes **life moments** that to others seem quite **natural**, seem to us like **miracles**.

- I remember when Becca said 'yes' to me. 'Wow!, Wonderful!!!'
- I remember when our children were born. 'Wow!, Wonderful!!!'

I could go on here, but I just want to push back for a moment at this pervasive cultural attitude that seems to assume that everything that exists is the **chance product of an accidental cosmic chemical stew**. It is not an adequate explanation of the data of life - not the

natural data, and not what we might call the supernatural data. It is **not honest** to life as we experience it.

One of the reasons God gives us 'wonders and signs' is to give us **hints of larger realities.**

You know what **a sign** is. A sign is **something that points beyond itself** to something greater. I was telling a friend **how to get to the Pittsburgh Airport.** "Just go across the bridge, take a right, go up the hill and look for the signs at the top." When they saw the sign, they wouldn't park their car there and look for the plane. Because **the sign to the airport is not the airport.** So you would see the sign, know that you were getting close, and keep driving. **Miracles** are like that; they **are signs to something beyond.** It is important to be able to **read the signs.**

The passage we heard from the book of Acts today tells of the healing of a man who was about 40 years old, and had been lame from birth. It happened in the weeks after the resurrection of Jesus, when Peter and John were still in Jerusalem. The **healing of this crippled man was a sign.** Peter said this sign **pointed** to something that **had happened** and to something that **was going to happen.** What had happened was...

The Resurrection of Jesus

"Do you want to know how he was healed? Let me clearly state to all of you that he was healed by the powerful name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, the man you crucified but whom God raised from the dead."

Acts 4:8-10

Peter says that **this healing came directly from Jesus,** the Jesus they had killed. He is saying that this same Jesus was **raised,** that he had seen him, and that he is **still doing** what he used to do. Finding lost people and healing broken people and forgiving guilty people and welcoming friendless people and making new people.

It's **quite a statement,** and it gets a lot of attention. And all the time

this lame man is standing right next to Peter and John, healed and whole. People flocked to hear this story.

I want you to note **the link** between these two miracles. It is sort of like Jesus' resurrection was an **earthquake**, and the healing of this lame man was one of the **aftershocks**. They were **connected**. And then Peter says, that is **not all that is connected**. There is **more coming...**

The Restoration of The Cosmos

For Jesus must remain in heaven until the time for the final restoration of all things, which God promised long ago...

Acts 3:21

Peter is saying that the **resurrection** of Jesus has **launched** something that he calls *'the final **restoration** of all things'*.

Let's **think about this phrase**, *'the final restoration of all things'* for a moment. The healing of the lame man was the **temporary restoration of one thing**. A man who had been crippled for 40 years, all his life, was given the ability to walk. Wow! Wonderful!! But it was a **measured, short-term** intervention. In due time, this man would get old and frail, and perhaps, probably, lose the ability to walk again.

But Peter says this limited, measured, short-term restoration **pointed** to *'the final restoration of all things'* – **that would be unlimited, permanent, and long-term**. Very long term.

The restoration of all things is coming. 'All things' is a large promise. *'All things'* includes... every frail body, every twisted thought, every broken relationship, every wounded heart, every shattered life. **Restored. Made new**. Every tear, wiped away. Every body will be made a resurrection body. Every sin will be forgiven and gone. Death itself will come to an end. That is a lot, but there is more.

'All things' includes every mountain, every molecule, every plant and every planet... it is the healing of **the entire cosmos**. *'The final restoration of all things... is coming*, Peter says. I wonder if we think

about this enough. I fear we don't.

Why is Peter so confident about this future? Well, because for one reason, and only one reason: Jesus has been raised. And **because God has raised him**, Peter says, we know that he is the **Lord of the Resurrection** and the **Lord of the Restoration**; the same person is the architect of them both. The resurrection of Jesus is the **beginning of forever**.

Now it **gets pretty edgy**. Peter says that the **great promise** – that some day, some wonderful day, God would step in and **fix this world**, is **tied to a particular person, a single life**. Launched and led by the very person you just crucified. Jesus.

Pretty edgy thing to say! **Then** we are told that... the religious authorities arrested them. They hauled them in front of their tribunal.

*They inquired, "By what power or by what name did you do this?"
They ...grilled them: "Who put you in charge here? What business do you have doing this?"*

Acts 4:3,7 (RSV & The Message)

They were asking, "**Do you have a license?** We don't remember giving you one!" Well, no, they didn't. But **someone else did**. And what the apostles said next just poured fuel on the fire...

This is the stone which was rejected by you builders, but which has become the head of the corner. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

Acts 4:11-12 (RSV)

"*Head of the corner*" is usually translated '**cornerstone**', and it's a term taken from ancient **architecture**. When people would put up a large building, the **most important part** of building was laying the cornerstone. It was exactly, carefully cut and shaped and laid, because the walls would take their **direction** from that stone and the building would put its **weight** upon that stone. If it was well cut and laid, the building could last centuries. If it was poorly laid or cut or cracked, the

building wouldn't last even a decade.

Peter is saying **everyone builds** in life. You build, I build. **The cornerstone of your life** is what you build upon, what bears your weight, what shapes your decisions, what gives you security and direction. Your cornerstone could be your family or your education. Some people make their **looks** their cornerstone (good luck on that one!), or their **wealth** (that's not working too well these days), or their **smarts** or their **accomplishments**.

What **infuriated** these leaders was that Peter and John said, "You've been building on the wrong cornerstone. And you've **rejected the real cornerstone**. And the building will come down if you build like that."

Say '**no other name**'... Say, '**only Jesus**'...

We don't like those phrases. We are **pluralistic** people who live in a **multi-cultural** world. We are people who like to keep our **options open** and our **commitments fluid**. The thought that the restoration of **all** things might come **only** through Jesus **offends** our sensibilities. We like to think there are **many pathways** up a mountain.

If you **want to clear a room** in the middle of a party, just get everyone quiet and **tell them that Jesus is the only way** to get saved. Just watch people move away! This seems offensive these days. It seemed offensive those days, too.

I want to tell you why we are so offended. For 95% of us, it is because we want to **keep ourselves in charge**. The primary reason most people believe in cultural pluralism is to **preserve individual autonomy**. It is because we believe that **we make the best cornerstone** of the building. It was an issue of **control in Peter's day – and it still is in ours**.

Here's the deal. **We make lousy cornerstones**. We are **cracked**. We buckle under the weight of the wall. We are **crooked**. When people line up on us, the wall doesn't go up straight. Autonomy doesn't work. We

are not up to the task. And that, too, is **a sign**. Can you see this sign, too?

So, **where do you find a cornerstone** that can bear the weight of your life?

Well, **look again at the signs**. That is what they are there for. And once you start looking, the **signs are everywhere**. There was **the crippled man, standing** next to them. There are **11 disciples** who bailed on Jesus, and the moment he appears he tells them *'Go tell my brothers to meet me in Galilee...'* *'My brothers...'* Sweet words, sweet signs.

They **did meet him in Galilee**, and from that moment on, these men and women **lived way beyond themselves**... Put on the spot and squeezed, they taught profoundly from the scriptures... they didn't buckle under pressure, they had lost their fear, they had joy and poise and character and courage that seemed to come from somewhere else.

From someone else. People commented on it,

"They had been with Jesus..."

And they still were. Because he is back from the dead. Fully alive.

How is the cornerstone of your life?

Is it strong enough for you?

Can it bear the weight of your life?

Does it point you in the right direction?

Does he bring the mending and mercy and forgiveness and healing that you so deeply need?

Have you yet found him so wise, so good, so strong, so alive - that you can trust him in every matter, yield to him in every circumstance?

Have you built on a foundation that can hold not only for today, but for tomorrow, for the years of this life, and also for the life to come?

He is able to bear that weight; he is the **Lord of the Resurrection, Lord of the Restoration**.

Prayer: On this day that we celebrate your resurrection, Lord Jesus... we pause for a moment to **think about our lives**. About how we build, about how well the foundation holds, in seasons of trial and hardship, in plenty or want. We take a moment to think about it.

Some of us here

There are many of us here, who have trusted ourselves more that we have trusted you. But maybe it isn't going so well, to be honest. Maybe the cracks are showing, and maybe we are not so hot at running our own lives. Maybe we need someone wiser and better and able to make things new, make things alive... (If that is you, would you whisper, "That's me, Lord"?)

We think also of our tomorrows, about the destiny of our lives. Some of us who have loved you for a long time aren't doing to well when we think about growing older and what lies ahead. Maybe, Lord, we have thought too much about this world. Maybe even loved this world too much. Forgive us, Lord. And thank you for what lies ahead, Lord. Plant that hope deep in our hearts.

Lord of the Resurrection, Lord of the Restoration.