

The Human Face of God

From the series Faith in Jesus: Trust in God...

Text: Acts 3: 14-15

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan

Eastertide III, April 25, 1993

Transcription of the spoken sermon

You...killed him who has led the way to life. But God raised him from the dead. Acts 3:14-15

We made a switch at Easter. We moved from the consideration of the faith *of* Jesus to a consideration of a faith *in* Jesus on the part of that early community that gathered around Jesus. The switch was a switch from examining how Jesus believed, which shaped how he lived, which caused his death, to an examination of how those around him who had been impacted by him, who had experienced the faith of Jesus, came to put faith in Jesus. The Christian movement, which only gradually differentiated itself from the Jewish community, is characterized by those who put faith in Jesus.

So with a little switch of the preposition from the faith *of* Jesus to faith *in* Jesus we move out of Lent and into Eastertide and try to get a handle on how that early community came to view Jesus as the unveiling of God. Jesus had been a faithful Jew. He lived within the context of the covenant of grace. He knew no God except the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And he had no intention to do anything but to speak to that covenant community and to speak to them of their God – of the nearness of their God, of the graciousness of their God – and to call them to trust in that God. He was a threatening figure. His destabilizing ways undercut the established shape of things: the temple and the priesthood, the political and religious structures. And because of this he was crucified.

It would have appeared that he was simply one more in that line of prophets that had characterized the history of Israel. A prophet would stand and speak for God and would bring upon himself the wrath, particularly of the leadership of the community, and would end up a martyr for the faith. Jesus himself spoke about that whole line of the prophets that had been killed by “Jerusalem.” So it might have appeared that Jesus was simply one more of those. He had made his proclamation. He had made his call. He had been obedient to God. And he was killed.

But there was something different this time. This time his followers became conscious of the fact that the one who had been crucified was alive. Not in some bodily form. Unfortunately in our Christian tradition, in order to affirm the reality of resurrection, sometimes we have spoken about the bodily resurrection, and there is not a bodily resurrection—that corpse laid in the tomb didn’t suddenly resuscitate and walk out of the tomb. Jesus is spoken of as “appearing.” When Paul lists the resurrection appearances, sometimes to an individual, sometimes to a group, he also includes the appearance to himself and we know that was a vision. The appearances of Jesus were the inward experiences of those who sensed that the crucified one was alive and present and powerful, but not in an ongoing historical bodily human existence. Rather, God had raised this one to another dimension of life or reality, but a dimension of life and reality that was able to be experienced as personally, powerfully present. Still active, still alive, still with them.

So those who had been with him throughout his life, who had understood gradually the faith of Jesus, came to believe that in him God had done some unusual thing. That God had vindicated the Way of Jesus. That God had authenticated this one as God’s servant. That God had said “yes” to Jesus’ faith and Jesus’ way, and Jesus’ call. So the followers around Jesus, and the experience of Jesus living in their midst, spiritually alive, began to put their faith *in* Jesus.

Now in the beginning those early witnesses had no sense of separating from the temple or from the Jewish community. For example, in the story I read a moment ago, Peter and John in the ninth hour, about 3 o’clock in the afternoon, are making their way to the temple to pray. They were good Jews. They were going to pray to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to the God of the Covenant, the God of covenant grace. They didn’t know any other faith. They went to the temple to pray and to praise God. They went there with a sense that this one who had been crucified was with them also.

They came to a cripple by the gate called “Beautiful,” who was placed there every day by friends so that he could beg for alms. Not a bad place to beg for alms, you see, people coming to church looking for a way to look as good as possible. So they flip him a coin, come in to the altar and feel a little bit justified. It was a pretty good place to pick up a nickel or a dime. This time Peter and John come by and he held out his hand and they say, “We don’t have silver and gold,” and he says, “Then you’re not worth much. Get out of the way so somebody can come.” That’s really the bottom line for this man. But Peter says to him, “Look at us,” catching his attention. “In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.” And the man stands up and walks, and he begins to leap and to praise God. He goes into the temple and the people see him as the one who had always been there, day after day. He was the lame, the cripple, the handicapped one leaping and praising God, and they were astounded.

This gives Peter an occasion to bear witness to what had just happened. So he says to them, “Why are you so amazed? Why do you wonder and stare at us as though through our power or our piety this man was made to walk? No,” Peter says, “The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus.”

You see Peter and John after Easter and after Pentecost in the presence of the Pentecost Spirit, and Peter says, “It is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is the God of Israel. It is the God whom you are all here to worship. It is this God who has healed this man.” But, notice, this God healed the cripple *in the name of Jesus*. Peter says to the Jewish leaders who later call him on the carpet for what he has done, “You rejected the holy and righteous one. You killed the author of life.” In the New English Bible, (I like the translation a little bit better) it says, “You killed him who has led the way to Light. You killed him who has led the way to Light, but God raised him up.” Now he says, “...by faith in his name.”

His name. The name stands for the person, for the reality, for the essence. The name equals the person in biblical thought. The name of God is the essence of God, the power of God, the person of God. And the name of Jesus is the person of Jesus. He says, “...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 perfect health in the presence of all of you. Now, this is rather interesting. Here in the immediate aftermath of the explosion of Good Friday and Easter the disciples are sorting out what in the world is happening. Jesus whom they loved was crucified. They think it’s all over. But it’s not over. They experience the presence of the crucified one, living! The crucified one then has been vindicated by God. God has said “yes” to this one, so this one was right. And this one is still with us now. Peter says a cripple is healed by the power of God through this one. What’s going on here? I don’t think they knew. I don’t think any of us could or can know exactly. But for Peter and John, representative of that early apostolic community, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Moses, the God of David, the God of covenant grace, the God of Sinai, the Creator – this God seems to be accessible or available through Jesus. Jesus becomes as it were, a handle on God.

How do you image God? Could you form a picture in your mind? Maybe it’s off the cover of an old Sunday School leaflet of your childhood. Were you ever in a group therapy session or a seminar where they had you lie on your back? I remember one instance where I had to lie on my back, breathe deeply, close my eyes and visualize a huge white screen, and then let images tumble. Maybe somebody was reading something and you had to let images tumble. The only thing I ever see on that white screen is a white-out. One time I saw whole flock of white doves. (Laughter) I never see anything. I don’t visualize very well. Some people visualize very well. But, how do you visualize God? How do you bring God near? How do you get in touch? I mean, God – God! The eternal God, God incomprehensible! Beyond our human ability to comprehend, apprehend. That God becomes for us available, even visible in the way of Jesus. Jesus becomes the

human face of God. God seems to draw near to us in Jesus. So Peter and John can say to this cripple, "In the name of Jesus, rise up and walk." But they are not claiming that the healing is the power of Jesus. Rather they say clearly that it is the power of God. It is not as though Jesus now comes as a secondary God or in competition with God, but Jesus becomes as it were, the conduit. Jesus becomes the mode of access. Jesus is the one who brings God near. Jesus is the one who draws us into the mystery that is God. Jesus becomes the medium for the experience of God.

There was no reason for a Christian Church at this point. For Peter and John, I think it would have been the farthest thing from their minds. If you had said they were going to be disciples of an eventual institution called a Christian Church over against the Jewish community of faith they would have denied it at that moment.

Those who study this thing tell us that probably this passage is the earliest attempt to give some kind of formulation to that relationship of Jesus to God. It is stated here that Jesus is not God. I think Jesus might have been very comfortable with Peter and John bringing the power of God to bear on that cripple through his name because Jesus represented God as a God who heals us: the God of the abandoned - the God full of compassion - the God who forgives us - the God whose power is available to us, so I think Jesus probably would have been comfortable with this. I am not so sure Jesus was comfortable with what eventuated down another few decades and down another couple of centuries where Jesus is elevated, and elevated and elevated until Jesus is God. In the early creeds of the Church, this human servant of God, Jesus, is continually elevated until he becomes God and becomes for Christians the primary focus of worship and prayer. I am not sure that that development would have been in accord with the intention of Jesus. There are enough evidences in the New Testament itself that Jesus intentionally deferred to his "Father," as he called God. Jesus never abrogated to himself the prerogatives of deity. Jesus was the servant. Jesus was the proclaimer. Jesus was the revealer. Jesus in his life showed the Way, spoke the Truth, offered the Light. But in the development within the Christian Church over the first four and a half centuries, the development moved from this kind of conception to a higher and higher and higher raising of Jesus to where (and this is in preparation for Trinity Sunday down the way a few weeks), where in popular conception we almost have three Gods.

I don't know if it's possible to hop back over those centuries and over those creedal formulations to get back to something like this, but sometimes I think we'd be better off if we could be right where Peter and John were at the Gate Beautiful. If we could say to the cripples, to the broken, to the outcast, to those who are lost, if we could say, "Look at me. In the name of Jesus, God's servant, stand up and walk." You see what Jesus made available was the presence and the healing power of God.

The healing power of God . . . how do we access that? How did Peter and John access that power? It still happens today. There are still healings today. Everybody can't do it, but some can do it. Some have the gift of healing. Some with the laying on of hands seem to communicate an energy that enlivens and makes whole. Perhaps they are people who believe and know that the whole world is pregnant with God's power and presence, God who can make us whole so we can live, begging outside at the gate but dancing and leaping and praising God.

Most of us are cripples. Most of us are dragging around so much baggage and garbage, and we hold tightly to our lives when someone needs to say to us, "In the name of Jesus, rise up and walk."

How are we healed today? In the name of Jesus, but now through the presence of those who follow in his footsteps. Reach over and take the hand of the person next to you. There, in that flesh, the way of Jesus and the presence of God continues to heal and make one another whole. If we could only divest ourselves of all of our protective layers, we might be more open to the power of God which surrounds us.

Feel that presence...and "In the name of Jesus, who showed us the power of God, rise up and walk." That's a God you can love.