

# "Rise up... and walk...!"

## A new way is winking

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**Acts 3:1-10**

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This morning I offer you a brief reflection. In the Christian faith community, we are still in this period of waiting – before the Pentecost. Waiting, in many faith communities, is an important and often fruitful spiritual discipline: it is a time of silence; it is a time of introspection, self-reflection, conviction, purification, and, sometimes, reorientation towards that which we lost along the way. It is a time in which we are confronted with our demons and exposed to the ways in which we surrendered to the seductions around us. It is a time of waiting – and hope.

In many ways Covid-19 and the lockdown is a time of waiting. For many it has been a time of frustrated waiting, or anxious waiting. Desperate loss of income, the desire to return to 'normal' and many other emotions and longings come to the fore. Yet, for creation, it gave a brief period of rest, from the normal human madness and abuse. For some, new rhythms, much healthier than what they were used to, set in. And around the globe people call for deep reflection saying: this time of waiting should prepare us to return, not to our normal lives, but to new ways of living with each other and creation, for the sake of equality and protecting the earth. Covid-19 is a deep and resounding wake-up call – but, would humanity dare to listen! Even as religious groups insist, against sane conviction, to go back to services with high risk of spreading infection, wanting to go back to normal, as the temple-goers did in Acts 3, after they crucified Jesus.

In Acts 3:1-10 there is a beautiful scene that reminds me of our temporary shelters. It says there was a man, lame with a disability, *all his life*, at the Beautiful Gate. But what struck me is that the text says: "Every day he was carried to the gate to beg for money from the people who were going into the Temple".

He must have been a familiar sight, for years. He became part of the urban landscape. There was the temple, there was the gate, and there was this man. It became so normal that nobody seems to have blinked an eye anymore. After all, there were many like him, scattered all over the city. It made me think of our cities and the cities and towns of South Africa. We have become so accustomed to homelessness; even in our centres and outreach programmes, we have become used to certain people coming day by day, for many years. We have become less self-critical to ask: is the problem with us and our programme, quick to say the problem must be with him who does not want to change. We have become so

accustomed to more than 2400 informal settlements around our country where women and children are unsafe, toilets few and far between and clean water a luxury for only some.

“Every day he was carried to the gate to be for money...”. What are the things we do to perpetuate the deep dependency of men and women like this one? How do we enable their perpetual exclusion, because, for him, that spot at the gate was as far as he was allowed? He would never see the inside of the temple. That was for the religious one, the pure, the ones who crucified Christ.

Covid-19, and God’s Spirit, must help to disturb us so deeply that we will not accept the inevitability of homelessness and informal settlements and perpetual inequality no longer.

And then the man himself, upon seeing Peter and John going into the temple, begged them to give him something. Among those who for years have been disenfranchised and often from childhood made to believe they are less worthy, because they could not ever have what the media sold, until racism, and classism and sexism and powerlessness all became so entrenched and internalized, that even those who are poor themselves, start to believe the lie about them. This man also became accustomed to being carried to the gate every day, to beg. He knew little else. He saw little else. He did not even see his surroundings. His face down-cast; his shame too much to bear in this honour-society; his indignity cloaked around him (verses 1-3).

But Peter and John looked at him and said: “Look at us!” (verse 4). This was an important moment of transformation. “Look at us!”. By this they did not insist on their importance, but on his. “You are worthy! Look at us!”. “We want to see you; to look you in the eyes; to recognize your beauty and humanity and dignity. Look at us!”

The shelters in which you are, have become such places. They disrupted the status quo of your neighbourhoods, your churches, your communities. They shouted out, not loudly and arrogantly, but humbly and through bold deeds of service, saying: another world is possible. Another way is possible. We can indeed invite the poor and stranger and beggar, and, instead of it becoming the end of the world, it might just be the beginning of a new world. Where those of us with more resources and those with less, look each other in the eye for a change, and say, “I recognize you”. “I recognize your humanity”. Maybe, on second thought, Peter and John also wanted that. We have become so deeply segregated – that poor and rich and black and white and men and women have forgotten to look each other in the eye, not with vengeance or pity or lust or resentment or hatred, but with acknowledgment, of the sacredness of the other. “Look at us!”

And then it happened, Peter saying, we do not have gold or silver to give you. We ourselves are simple followers of this new way. But this I have to share with you – in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth: Rise up, and walk!” (verse 6).

And he got up, and first slowly, step by step, maybe anxiously, and then with a firmer foot, he started to walk around. And the next moment he jumped, and praised God. And entered the temple with them (verse 7-8).

The real miracle might not have been the physical one that made him rise up even. That too. But perhaps the deeper miracle is that this man in this quick moment recovered his life! His shame now cloaked with dignity. His inhumanity transformed into joy. His lament became a song of praise. The ways in which they gossiped about him, pitying him, now transformed into him becoming witness of the resurrection power of Christ.

Your shelters are space where broken people like us all, those who are homeless and those who seek to serve those homeless, together, humble ourselves and say: "Look at us". And as we look at each other, as we offer our compassion and brokenness to each other, the Spirit will rise us up, as has happened these past two months.

Rejoice and see what God has done among you.

Those in the temple saw it all and it says, "they were all surprised and amazed at what happened to him" (verse 10).

But Peter asked them, "Why are you so surprised?". You, who handed over Jesus to be crucified, now act surprised? You, who are religious in the temple, worshipping God, now act surprised? (verse 11).

"You killed the one who leads to life, but God raised him from death – and we are witnesses to this. It was the power of his name that gave strength to this lame man" (verse 15-16).

We just cannot return to how it was before. We cannot return to place where we kill Christ and the poor and the earth coming to us in Christ. We have to see what you have witnessed and participated in over the past two months, as the interruption of God's kindness, smiling upon every woman and man and child, living and serving at almost 20 shelters across the city. Saying: "Look at me!" "Rise up and walk!" "Don't go back anymore!" "A new way is winking – see, and go there!"

### ***Prayer***

Lord, help us see.

As you rise us up collectively

May we walk together in this new way

May we look each other in the eye

And see your sacred presence there

May we look at our rivers and mountains and forests and seas

And you see your sacred presence there

May we look at our city, and its geography and scars

And you see your sacred presence there

And may we then, emboldened by your Spirit,

Walk on new paths, so that the living dead can rise up,

Those shamed can jump with joy,  
And the earth can breathe again!

*Amen*