



Photo by Ken Treloar

[Acts 3:12-19](#), [Luke 24:36b-48](#)

Why do you wonder at this? Why are you frightened and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Both this morning's readings ask why. Why are we surprised at the way God works among us? Why do we doubt when miracles happen?

The first reading this morning from Acts is a short passage taken out of its context in a longer story. In the exciting, heady days of the early church, Peter and John were going up to the temple when they passed a disabled man being carried to the temple. He asked them for money.

Instead, Peter pulled him to his feet, and we are told that he went with them, "walking and jumping and praising God." You can imagine what a stir this caused, and so the passage we heard is Peter's mini-sermon to the gawkers. "Why do you wonder at this," he asks, "or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk?"

This week I talked with someone who was asking "Why?" He was asking why his beloved child was so sick. "Why is God punishing us?" This is a modern question which has developed both from the scientific method which looks for cause and seeks to explain what's happening as an answer to the question "why?" and from theology which makes us believe in an angry or at best an unhelpful God.

Back in the 18th century there was a revival in Britain and America. In Britain it led eventually to the formation of the Methodist church, here it was the beginning of the Evangelical movement which motivates people from many different churches. Jonathan Edwards was one of the famous American preachers and his most famous sermon was entitled, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Edwards was sure that unless his audience was convicted of their sin in a way which had a deep emotional impact, they would not turn from their wicked ways and in repentance turn to Christ. So most of his sermon focuses on the wickedness of humanity and the likelihood of their ending up in hell at any moment.

Apparently his sermon was very successful at a church in Connecticut which had previously been untouched by the Great Awakening. As he preached, Edwards was interrupted many times by people moaning and crying out, "What shall I do to be saved?"

Undoubtedly, Edwards was one of the great preachers of all time. His preaching and that of others such as John Wesley and George Whitefield had a deep impact on the minds and hearts of those who heard him, and of the developing American consciousness. His theme of an angry God who is ready at any moment to send us all to hell has become for many people part of how they think about God.

This week I read an interesting article about core muscles. We all know about core muscles – they're the ones that keep our torsos upright and when they are weak we sag and slouch and get

back ache. This article was distinguishing between the muscles we usually think of as core and **deep** core muscles. Apparently there are several deep core muscles which we don't usually exercise but which can make all the difference to everything.

I mention this, because I think the idea that we are as Edwards said, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Is a deep core muscle belief for many of us which we don't even know is there until those moments when the world is crumbling around us and we cry "Why?" "Why – what have I done wrong?"

So let's compare Peter's mini-sermon in Acts 3 with Edward's approach. I imagine that had Edwards been in the temple that morning he might have said something like, "Why are you surprised? Don't you know that the Jesus you in your wickedness put to death was the Son of God? You are such wicked sinners that God in God's great mercy raised him from the dead so you could have a second chance. There was already terrible wickedness in your hearts before you killed the Messiah and now it's even worse – you could die at any moment and go straight to hell. So cast yourselves on the mercy of God, repent and turn to God."

But that's not at all what Peter says, he doesn't talk about wickedness or hell. He talks about the God they worship glorifying Jesus. Yes, he blames his listeners for killing Jesus, but he says "And now, friends, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold..." They were an active part in God's work. And the power that they have just seen where the man who could not walk is now walking and jumping and praising God, that power is the result of the power of Jesus. Peter says, "the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you." And he ends with the call that echoes all the prophets, "Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out."

Nothing in there about punishment. Nothing about God being angry. Nothing even about God's wrath being why the disabled man was unable to walk from birth.

So let's spell it out and see if we can get the truth into the deep core muscles of our hearts. God is not angry with us. God has never been and does not intend to be angry with us.

So then, Why?

Why do things fall apart? Why does every good thing come to an end? Why do people we love leave, die or let us down?

In the gospel reading we heard about Jesus showing up among the disciples who were terrified and thought they were seeing a ghost. These resurrection appearances of Jesus must have been bittersweet. On the one hand, once they got over the fear, the disciples were filled with joy that the one who had died was raised and visiting with them, but on the other hand this wasn't how it used to be; Jesus wasn't with them in the same way and was talking about leaving again. They

had been following a normal flesh and blood Rabbi who ate and drank and slept with them; now they had a slippery not-ghost who would just show up and then as easily disappear again.

Part of our reality is that everything changes and as we get older it seems to change even more quickly. All of us are dealing with the realities of time passing. For some of us that means living with bodies and brains which don't work in the way they used to. For others it means new challenges in work and family life. For all of us it means changes in our faith community as new friends join us and others leave to have adventures elsewhere.

As you know, Donna and Rob are moving to Santa Rosa before the end of the month. For many of us, they have seemed an unmovable part of the church. Francis Rivinus will be ending his time as manager of the Abundance Shop very soon and we will be hiring a paid part-time manager for the first time. Bishop Mary has given her resignation, and Bishop Shannon Mallory who was our first bishop and important in the creation of this church has died. These are all big changes for us.

Why? Why can't everything just stay the same? Why do bad things happen, and for that matter, why do good things happen?

We want to make sense of life. We want there to be a reason why things happen the way they do. Our minds try to analyze and we spend an enormous amount of energy trying to understand. We think it helps us with our loss if we can keep the feelings at bay and work it all out.

But the reality is that time passes and change happens; life in this universe is full of joy and full of loss. I want to suggest to you that the way for us to have the greatest serenity and grace in our lives is by radical acceptance. Radical acceptance accepts that there are the good things and there are the bad things. Radical acceptance does not conjure up an angry God to explain the bad things, nor imagine that the good things are rewards for good behavior. Radical acceptance accepts all the feelings that we have; feelings of grief, of anger, of fear, of joy, of love.

Jesus himself stood among the disciples and said to them, "Peace be with you." Our knowledge of God's peace will increase to the extent that we are able to let go of our ideas about how life *Should* be and embrace what life is.

And for us, for those who are enrolled in the reign of God, life is full of resurrection appearances. At any moment God may reveal Godself to us. That disabled man never dreamt that he would ask someone for money and instead be totally healed and transformed. The disciples didn't imagine that Jesus would show up in their midst and explain the scriptures to them.

Most of our God moments are smaller. We may pass them off as co-incidences or just a passing feeling, but God is always bringing new life out of death. God is always bringing hope out of sorrow. God is always saying "Peace be with you."

Let us pray.

Holy One, give us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen