

HEALED AND SAVED
The Fourth Sunday of Easter
The Rev. Dr. Charles D. Mayer
April 25, 2021

Listen again to these words from the Acts of the Apostles:

“... if we are questioned today ... and are asked how this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you ... that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth ... there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:9, 10, 12)

Peter, who has been arrested along with John, is responding here to questioning about healing a man lame from birth the day before. It is another in a steady stream of stories that we encounter in the book of Acts in which the Holy Spirit moves powerfully through the apostles to perform extraordinary things. Not only are there miracles of healing, but the apostles are led by the Spirit in all their speech-making, preaching, and teaching. So, in their doing and their speaking, the apostles are guided by the real, powerful indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

In his speech in today’s lesson, Peter plays with the range of the Greek term *sozo*, using it to mean both “healed” from sickness (Acts 4:9) and given “salvation” (Acts 4:12). (See Craig Keener, *Acts*, p. 195). Bodily health and eternal salvation, described with the same word, are both conferred by the powerful name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, through the Holy Spirit.

I’d like to take a little time this morning for a sidebar to look at what modern theology has done with the two uses of this word. When I was first learning pastoral care forty years ago, the double meaning of the word was often invoked to say that we didn’t need to trip up over the offensive idea of “salvation.” Since *sozo* – Peter’s word in today’s lesson – was used often throughout the New Testament to mean both healing and salvation, we modern students of the word could focus on the idea of wholeness. This concept kept the comfortable idea that it was God’s will for illness to be *healed*, while deemphasizing the difficult idea that it was God’s will for people to be *saved*. A modern worldview appropriated the word *sozo* for medical and psychological use, largely stripping it of its theological significance. “Wholeness” was in; “salvation” was out.

The Divinity School where I studied was pretty much the flagship institution of liberal Protestantism at the time and thoroughly promoted this “wholeness over salvation” theology. Yet I’ll always remember that even then, forty years ago, our Dean addressed our graduating class privately during Commencement Week and warned us about what he called the “pretty thin soup” of liberal theology. Religious ideas had been watered down to the point that they were stripped of their meanings. And in all of this, the idea of the power of God was lost. Our Dean worried that we newly-minted clergy were no longer really religious professionals, but social scientists in clerical collars.

End of sidebar. Suffice it to say that Biblical faith has made quite a comeback in recent years, as we in the Church have been reminded that watered-down religion has little to say to the sin and suffering of the world. A world in which police continue to shoot and kill people of color with shocking frequency; in which mass shootings have become almost daily events; in which many of those who can afford to are rushing back to pre-pandemic behaviors that are destroying the planet; in which the poor suffer more while elites escalate these destructive behaviors; a world like this needs the fulness of the Easter faith we find in the book of Acts. Our world needs to know that *sozo*

means everything Peter says it means: that God does indeed heal us and make us whole, *and* that experiencing the power of God in this way points us towards holiness and eternal life with God.

Remember that in the book of Acts the experience of being healed and saved always happens in community and leads to a new way of life in which the needs of all are met. So “being saved” is not a private experience preparing us to live forever with God. It is a transformation of life preparing us to live differently in a community of people who share in that transformation. This is what God is calling our Ossining Episcopal family to be. We are called to be a holy community living out God’s eternal purposes in the here and now, together.

Once again: we are called to be a holy community living out God’s eternal purposes in the here and now, together. So to be saved is, in fact, to be made whole, but not only in the sense of physical and mental wellness. To be saved is to be joined to a Spirit-led community that reflects God’s created order. That order is eternal: it has existed always and is unchanging. In our life together we have a wholeness that reflects the light and love of God to the world. And our love for the world sends us out, again and again, longing for justice and peace and well-being for all, never resting until all are included.

And finally, just a few more words about *never resting*. Our society, and our world, are involved in several long-term struggles the outcomes of which will shape the future for our young people – indeed, will determine whether there will even be a future for them. When there are victories in these struggles – and the verdict in Minneapolis this past week was a victory – it is important to celebrate them, but not to mistake them for opportunities to rest from our labors. Tragically, the awful reminders of this truth have continued even just since the verdict. So, these victories, when they come, must inspire us to work harder, to build on what has been accomplished and keep moving forward. May we share the light and love of God tirelessly, until the New Creation that God promises us has come fully into being.