

Easter 3, April 18, 2021 (Lk 24:36b-48; Acts 3:12-19; 1 Jn 3:1-7) SERMON (Acts 3:1-10)

Greetings, friends. I am Anna, wife of Jethro, the man you heard of in your Bible reading a few moments ago—and from your children!—the man who went **walking and leaping and praising God** in the temple courts.

What happened that day was truly a miracle—and, although you may not realize it now, Jethro’s story is also *your* story. Let me try to explain. . . .

My husband was born with crooked legs, so crooked he could never even hobble. He was blessed to be in a family that loved and cherished him for the beautiful soul he had. Before his birth, our parents had spoken of a union between our two families. Because my parents, too, were loving and caring, Jethro and I were permitted to marry when he was of age.

What a wonderful man he was! His joy was always in the Lord, and his greatest sorrow was that he could never enter the temple. You see, anyone who had a bodily defect was considered unclean and was barred forever from that holy place of worship.

After his parents died, my father and brother would carry Jethro to the Beautiful Gate every day to beg for alms. We chose that Gate because so many crowds entered the temple mount that way.

If they were on their way to worship, they were often generous with almsgiving. And if they were on their way home, sometimes they’d give away the last of their temple currency instead of going back to the money-changers.

This was our daily routine for many years. Jethro was always in good spirits, always so thankful to God for the alms he received—enough to keep our family fed and clothed. In the early years after our children were raised, I’d go with him when he was carried there. But as the years went on, I grew bitter. It hurt me to see the scorn he was treated with by some people.

Then one day I heard words I couldn’t forgive. A man actually spat at him and said, “You sinner! God has punished you with lameness, and you dare to beg at the gate of God’s house!” After that I couldn’t bear to accompany them. I stayed home, filled with resentment and anger.

Jethro learned to recognize many of the people going through the Beautiful Gate. He knew which ones were likely to toss him a coin out of guilt, and which were sincere in their well-wishing, even if they had no money.

So it was a great surprise to him just a few days after Pentecost when two familiar men stopped at the place where he was laid every day. Usually these two would nod and smile and bless him as they passed by on their way to prayer in the temple. On the rare occasion when they had a spare coin, they would reach out to him and place it in his outstretched palm.

On this particular day, my husband held out his hand as usual. But that was the last “usual” thing of his entire life! Instead of passing by, the two men stopped to speak with him. Peter, the one was called—he bent over Jethro and said to him,

**Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk!** He reached for one of Jethro’s hands, and his friend John took the other, and together they pulled him to his feet. My husband, who had never stood in all his forty years, placed his feet flat on the ground and stood there with straight legs!

Peter and John had to hold on to him for a few moments while he began to feel his legs in this new position. Jethro stared at them in wonder, and then he began to *laugh*. He laughed so hard he stumbled forward, and then his other foot followed, and he took his very first step!

It wasn’t long before the three of them, Jethro in the middle, walked through the Beautiful Gate into the temple court. And it wasn’t long after that before my dear husband was not only *walking*, but also *leaping and praising God* in a loud voice!

His behavior drew the attention of everyone in the area, and suddenly one man said, *Hey, isn’t that the lame beggar who sits at the Beautiful Gate every day? What’s he doing here?*

John later reported what someone else was saying: *He’s not lame. He must have been shamming all these years, the lazy bum.*

But at that moment Peter began to speak. (It was always Peter; he was the spokesman for the whole group of disciples—the beloved followers of Jesus we soon came to know so well.)

Peter began to remind the gathered crowd about *Jesus*, who had turned out to really be the Son of God, whom God had raised from the dead. Right after the Passover the Roman soldiers had crucified Jesus, between two criminals on a hill outside Jerusalem.

They did it because some of the Jewish religious leaders had it in for Jesus; they thought he threatened their authority. But Jesus was only trying to help people understand what God really wanted of them.

God wasn't after nit-picking observance of the laws of Moses—all 613 of them. God desired only faithful worship, and lives that reflected the love and mercy of God.

Peter didn't mince words that day! He called Jesus "God's servant" and told the people bluntly, **You handed him over to be killed—you disowned him before Pilate. . . . You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked for the release of a murderer. You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead!**

**We are witnesses of this. And by faith in the name of Jesus, this man you see and know was made strong. It's the name of Jesus and the faith that comes through him that has given complete healing to this man, as you can all see.**

Of course, I wasn't there for this tirade. I was sulking at home. But when my husband walked home that day, bringing along Peter and John, they reported all these words, and I've never forgotten them.

Peter went on, speaking to the crowd gathered there: **Now, brothers, I know you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. But this is how God fulfilled what he'd foretold through all the prophets, saying his Christ would suffer.**

It felt like Peter's final words were meant for me: **Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, and times of refreshing may come from the Lord.**

After the others left that day, Jethro and I *walked* together for the first time. I confessed to him, as I had often before, that I blamed God first for the cruelty of other people toward him, and I'd even begun blaming God for his lameness.

In sorrow I told my beloved husband that I now yearned for God's forgiveness, but I knew that could never be. How could God forgive one who'd been so angry at him?

And Jethro *laughed!* He *laughed* at me! And he said, *Dearest wife, don't you remember Peter's words to the crowd that **killed Jesus?** He said, **Repent and turn to God, so your sins may be wiped out!***

*Dearest Anna, he said, if God can forgive those who **killed his Son**, how could he not forgive **you**, when you repent from your heart?*

And then *I* laughed! From pure joy, from release of bitterness and pain and shame, *I laughed!*

And that's why I've come here today to share my story with you. As I said earlier, Jethro's story is *your* story, as it was mine. God's forgiveness is for *you*, as well as for me, and for all those who crucified our precious Lord.

My prayer for you today is that all of you may, like my husband, **go walking and leaping and praising God** in everything you do, for the rest of your lives. For Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed; alleluia!**