



Sermon Growth Guide

January 23, 2022

Missing Pieces – We Believe

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Acts 3:11-16

Key Verse: Acts 3:16 “By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus’ name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see.”

Big Idea: Jesus calls us into a community—a family—so that what *each* of us believes becomes what we believe.



Foundations

When we first read this story looking for missing pieces, we wonder how this passage speaks to that issue. There are some commentators that see it as an occasion to chastise Peter for speaking so ungraciously to the people who are gathered, wondering what has happened. Those commentators miss the point.

The point is that there are people who have gathered as a community based in Jerusalem who are trying to make sense of recent events: the crucifixion, the resurrection, the ascension, the growing number who believe Jesus is the promised Messiah and now this miraculous healing. They are wondering together.

Together is a concept that we often miss in our individualistic culture. Even in our Christian discipleship, the focus is often on individual spiritual practices like prayer, Bible reading and bearing witness to others. These are not wrong but by themselves without a community supporting and nurturing the believer, they can often become duties rather than joys.

How are we to understand the role of the church in our personal lives? What does it mean when we say “each of us and all of us together” live out the faith?

Understanding God’s Word

In Acts 3:11–16, we see people coming together to make sense of the events in Jerusalem, especially since Easter and Pentecost have turned the city upside down. Peter addresses them and makes it clear that as a community, they participated in the crucifixion. He is stating what all of them have seen—together. He also states what they have just seen in the healing of the lame man—together.

All of them recognized the healed man. He was the one who had, all his life, been at the same place every day doing the same thing—begging for subsistence. They have come out of their homes, into the streets, forming a gathering of the curious—a community of those who want to know what to believe. The presence of the one who is healed creates a community and the healed man bears witness to the kind of fellowship that is created by the Spirit of God acting in the name of Jesus.

Applying God’s Word

What is your current understanding of the role the church plays in your life as a follower of Jesus?

Witnessing God’s Word

What we believe together determines how we will live together. The way in which our congregation loves one another and bears one another’s burdens bears witness to the nature of the gospel to those outside of our fellowship. In what specific ways do you see this happening?

Some years ago, my family and I were in the Outer Banks of North Carolina. We were walking out to a point on the shore where an enormous sandbar stretches out into the sea and the currents converge in a line of waves and chop. About 40 or 50 people were gathered on the beach looking out over the water. As we walked up, we couldn't see what everybody was looking at. But we knew they were looking at something. I even heard some "Oohs" and "Aahs" as I approached, but still didn't see anything out there. I sidled up next to one of them and asked. He said, "Look right out there." As soon as I did, I saw it. A shark, about 12 feet long, was splashing and rolling in the waves feasting on fish it had pushed to the sandbar. "Tiger shark," the man said. Yup. I never got in the water again. No, I did. But it took a day or two. I never would have spotted it on my own, to be honest. I don't think I would have seen it except for the crowd, the fellowship, of onlookers looking hard at it, directing their gaze and sharing what they saw.

The Christian life is not just about what I believe or what you believe, but what **We Believe**. What do we see together? There is so much I won't see until I look with you. There is so much you won't see until we look together. There is a Missing Piece when we think of faith and the Christian life as a solo pursuit. As we passed through this pandemic, it has become easy to see our Christian lives as individual things. "As long as I connect with Jesus personally, as long as I keep my reading and prayer time, as long as I get good content from the sermon podcast or catch up with the sermon on Tuesday, I'm good. I'm keeping my faith rolling." But then you start to feel a gap. There is a hole. A missing piece. What is it? It's not just community, not just human touch and contact, the things we talked about so far, it is something else. It is how you see the world—seeing the world together with other believers. C. S.

Lewis said, "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else." Even so, that can't be a solo exercise. We need the community of faith, the fellowship of believers, together directing our gaze to see what's what. A believer who believes alone will not believe much longer. If you want your faith to last, it isn't "I believe" but "We believe" that matters.

We pick up where Peter and John have just healed a lame man. He was able to get up and walk, to put his body to use in a new way, walking and jumping and praising God. This was a man that everybody knew had no ability to use his body this way. He was carried and put by the gate called Beautiful each and every day to beg. Now he is healed. The crowds formed and followed. "While the man held on to Peter and John, all the people were astonished and came running to them in the place called Solomon's Colonnade" (Acts 3:11). Crowds came running. Everybody likes to see the magic happen, and everybody likes to get close to the powerful people who seem to make it happen. But this power was not from Peter and John. "When Peter saw this, he said to them: 'Fellow Israelites, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk?'" (Acts 3:12). Why do you stare at us? Every pastor should ask the same. Every worship leader. Every healthy church. If you, world, city, people ... if you have seen something powerful happen, that power is not mine; it's God's. That mighty work, that surprising result, it's not me—it's Jesus. Jesus is at work in this place. That's why you see mighty things.

What Peter does next is fascinating. He starts to walk through all these events and experiences that they all have shared. There is nothing on this list that anyone missed, no hidden experiences or secret events or

clandestine meetings. It all happened to everybody. But did everybody see it? Did everybody understand it? It's what we see together that matters. In a way, Peter is demonstrating a leadership quality here, the leadership quality of truth-telling. I'm going to tell you the hard things, even when it hurts a bit. This stuff isn't easy to hear, is it? It must have caused the stomachs to drop out for most of the listeners in the crowd. "The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go" (Acts 3:13). "The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus." That's the theme. That's the thesis of everything Peter is going to say next. Let me put it into a frame for you: this is about Jesus and how His glory went on display. How did it happen? "You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go" (Acts 3:13).

Ever have one of those moments when you know you made a mistake, but it's when someone else tells you how it played out, that you really understand? You left the garage door open, so a bear tossed all the trash and wrecked our car and ate our skis. You left grass growing by the house, so a moose fell into the window well, got stuck in our basement and destroyed the ping pong table. True story. You left the stove on, the house burned down. I'm making light of it, but I suspect you have been there. You let this happen, now all this damage has settled in. Peter is a truth-teller here. They all remember it. They all remember shouting "Crucify him!" "You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you" (Acts 3:14). They all remember seeing Jesus whipped and beaten and marched off to Golgatha. They remember the moment He died and all the strange

events. But to hear it again from Peter's mouth, it all falls together and makes sense, and cuts deep. You killed the author of life. It bears saying, at least once clearly, that the "you" here includes you and me. It includes Peter. It includes all of us. Every time we rebelled against God's law and lifted up in open mutiny against God's ways, we caused the necessity of Christ's death. We participated in the betrayal. We sent Jesus to the cross.

That's the truth. The sobering, ugly, truth. "You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this" (Acts 3:15). We all saw it. We all saw Jesus on the cross. We all saw Him die. But did we all see the same thing? Do we see the same thing today? This death was not like any other death. This death was a cosmic moment. The author of life was swallowed by death. But! But God raised Him from the dead. The tomb is empty. The gravestone was tossed away and that body is there no more. Jesus rose again from the dead. They all saw it, but did they see the same thing? It's not just what you saw or what I saw, but can we say, "We saw?" Can we say we believe? Peter says, finally, "we are witnesses of this." There's how you saw it and there's how I saw it. But these are the experiences we had together, the events. Now we are responsible for these events, we are witnesses to these experiences. We have to say what we believe.

There was one more. Peter brings it all down to what they all just saw: the healing of the lame man by the gate called Beautiful. You all saw it! We learned last week that this guy was a known guy. He was at that gate every day. When he was healed, upright, walking and jumping around, "they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him" (Acts 3:10). Here is one more thing we saw.

But did we see the same thing? So Peter says, finally, “By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus’ name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see” (Acts 3:16). What can we all see?

Two people come to church. One sees an odd conglomeration of people gathered up in a religious space. A worship concert with some not bad music gets interrupted by a semi-inspiring, not so funny religious talk. Some people cry, but he can’t figure why. Money is gathered, information disbursed, and out the door they go. Another comes and sees the miracle of the ekklesia, the church, the gathering of the children of God. The Spirit of God is present; present in the power of the music, moving souls and opening hearts; present in the prayers that genuinely seem to be shaping the lives of the people and changing the posture of this movement in our city; present in the reading of the Word of God and the words the pastor stumbles over to try to bring the mysteries home. The Spirit of God moves in the hearts of those around him, and in him, and there are hot tears on cheeks. With ready resolve the people of God rise up again and move out into the darkened world, carrying the light of Christ like a candleflame in their hearts. What do you see?

There is “I believe,” and then there is “we believe.” A believer who believes alone will not believe much longer. We have two ancient creeds we affirm in our church, The Apostles’ Creed and The Nicene Creed. The Apostles’ Creed begins with “I believe.” The Nicene Creed starts, “We believe.” I think we like “I believe” better. We are independent thinkers. We are individualists. And what is more private and individual and personal than my religious convictions? I believe. I want to challenge you on that. A believer that believes alone will not believe for

long. Even though it says, “I believe,” the Apostles’ Creed was not one man’s personal manifesto to faith. It is not one woman’s conclusions after long spiritual exploration. The Apostles’ Creed emerged as a baptism liturgy. When new believers met Christ in the early church and became followers of Jesus, they started getting trained. They would go to Bible Study and come to worship and learn what it means to give a life over to Jesus. Eventually, the day came to be baptized. They stood before the church and the pastor asked, “Now, do you believe in God?” And they would say, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.” “Do you believe in Jesus Christ?” “I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried...etc.” “Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?” At each measure, it was not a question of what do you believe, but are you ready to enter into what we believe together? Not, “I believe.” “We believe.”

It is impossible to be a Christian alone. Are you trying to live by “I believe?” You will start to feel the gap, the missing piece. That old chasm will open up. In the New Testament, never does the word “church” refer to a building. Not once. Church is a people committed to walk together, see together, live life together. It takes commitment. Can’t I be a lone wolf? Sure, if you never want to eat again. Can’t I be a Christian without a church, a believer without a fellowship of believers? Sure, and a fish can be a fish out of water, for a minute. Why would you want to? A tree can be a tree ripped out of the soil, for a while. Why would you want to? Jesus calls us into community. As He called His disciples, called them into community—more of a family—and what *each* believed became *we* believe, what *each* saw, became *we* saw. Stand in the community of faith and say, “We believe.”