

*Resurrection Witness: Moving with the Spirit*

Acts 16: 6-15 John 5: 1-9

What moves us tends to be familiar, even instinctive.

I remember 20 years ago when Ray and I were taking karate lessons together. There would be the usual work outs and practices, but about once a week it would include sparring. We had plastic padded pieces that included gloves, foot and shin covers, a chest cover, and a head piece that covered the top and sides of the head – a helmet. You needed this gear sometimes.

There were a bunch of us dads who were crossing the threshold of middle age and we would typically get paired up. We went through the moves in a rather lackadaisical fashion. Compared to all the pee-wees around us, we were like dancing bears. We didn't pose much of a threat to anyone, more likely to damage ourselves that we'd try to be too ambitious.

One day, there was an odd number of us old guys. I was without a sparring partner and I thought, "Awesome, I can just watch." But the instructor would have none of that. He became my sparring partner. He was moderately aggressive, but seemed to realize that he was matched with Ferdinand the Cow. I wasn't doing well, and he kept chattering at me to do better. He was about a foot shorter than me, but he was a some-number-degree black belt, and I was Ferdinand the Cow with a green belt or something not at all black.

Except, I had this one move which was rather surprising. Taking advantage of my height and long legs, I could do this really quick head kick. I'd keep my hands up in front, keep my eyes focused on my sparring partner, keeping my body still, giving no hint of what I was doing, and then I'd whip my leg from behind and swipe my foot at my partner's head.

My teacher started in again with, "C'mon, Bruce. Show me what you've got. You can do better than that." So I did my move, hands up in front, looking at him straight on, keeping my body still, giving no hint of what I was doing, and I whip my foot right in front of his face. I could have popped him in the head, but I never did, not with him or anyone else.

But instinct took over for him. This look of utter shock momentarily flashed on his face as my foot whizzed by his eyes, and then – wham! – his foot swings like a flash and pounds the side of my padded head. My head is ringing; the padding may have prevented damage, but I really felt that kick. Then he realizes he has just clobbered Ferdinand the Cow, as if he was a serious competitor. He starts apologizing up and down, saying that instinct simply took over. He reacted as his body had been trained to react to such a threat.

In karate and other physical endeavors, the training is designed to generate a muscle memory, so that when you do this, you can do that, or when you turn this, you twist that. The idea is that your muscles will be trained to respond in a certain way when working through a particular routine. The same thing happens in physical therapy. They give you seemingly stupid tasks to do repetitively because your muscles are in a new place or configuration, have experienced some trauma, have atrophied or lost their ability, or for whatever reason need to have muscle memory re-trained to do the things that seem so simple and basic. This helps to ensure the muscles are responsive once again and the threat of re-injury is lessened.

Our minds work in a similar way. Neural pathways and connections are developed that enable our functional connection between body and mind, and the ability of correlate and categorize that leads to connectivity between subjects. Children have these connections snapping like popcorn as they develop. Older adults see some of these connections narrow and atrophy, leading to common memory lapses that we all experience, and in progressively worse cases to dementia and Alzheimers. New neural pathways *can* be developed, but it is much, much harder past a certain age. It should be no surprise that most senior citizens struggle with complex new technology, with changing social values, and with the movement of your favorite jelly from the third shelf to the second shelf in the supermarket. Thanks, Publix!

We've been over this story of the disabled man at the healing pool of Bethesda in John's gospel several times already. Archaeologists have found a pool in Jerusalem with five porticos that fits the description here, but there is no record from the ancients beyond this reference here in John 5.

The man in question has been disabled for 38 years. Essentially, it seems he cannot walk. Even if he was born an "invalid," he is getting on in years. Life expectancy for someone desperately poor *and* disabled is quite short. He's old.

As the man will tell Jesus, it's believed that when the water in the pool is "stirred" or troubled, or shaken up, then it can provide healing. But only while it's in an agitated state.

Jesus comes along and sees this disabled guy. I like the bulletin cover by Carl Bloch because it shows the man barely visible inside a crude shelter. There is no mention in John 5 of any shelter, but it squares with the account. Clearly the man is totally and completely focused on getting his healing from this pool, even to the extent that he would likely have set up his home there. Unlike the little fellow who is just sitting there to the right in Bloch's painting, this guy calls attention to himself because he seems to actually live there.

Jesus sees this mess and asks him a simple question: *Do you **want** to get well?* Pathetically, the man explains how he can't seem to get in the water in time when the water is stirred up. No one will help him. Someone gets in ahead of him. He has all of the excuses, and no other answer for his life. His response to Jesus' question is hardly an answer at all. His muscle memory takes him to and fro, from the shade to the pool. He

professes his powerlessness to do anything, and complains that he's thwarted. What had become his instinctive pattern of movement over decades has enslaved him.

Jesus snaps at him: *Get up! Pick up your mat and walk!* And the man does just that. Unlike in other healing stories, there is no faith statement by the man, no profession of faith in God or in Jesus, not even an acknowledgement afterward that Jesus is someone special, or that his own faith has been restored, or anything! This pathetic, useless fool of a man says nothing and does nothing to warrant healing, before or after, and yet Jesus heals him. Grace in the Kingdom.

John isn't finished. He adds in our last verse that this occurred on the Sabbath. It turns out that the sinful offense is performed by the healed man who, contrary to the prohibition of labor on the Sabbath, has picked up his mat and carried it. You could almost hear him: 'Well, thanks, Jesus! I may be healed, but now I'm in trouble. Before I got healed, I was never in trouble.'

You can see how this sets up an occasion for Jesus to explain himself as simply reflecting the will of his Father and the Father's desire for love and life among all.

"The Jews" who complain about this activity share a kinship with the man who sought healing from the pool. They're moved by the **performance of the letter** of the Torah-Law, **not** by acts of love, grace, and life-giving within the Torah-Law. There is a different spirit at work with Jesus. The movement of this spirit takes us to new places.

In Acts, we pick up the travels of the apostle Paul and his group moving through the region that today is Turkey. They have been thwarted on their journey by all kinds of unnamed obstacles. The writer blames (or credits) the Holy Spirit, or the Spirit of Jesus for their issues. You can follow along on the nifty map in your bulletin. You can see the middle region where Galatia and Phrygia are located. They wanted to go to Asia, along the west coast, but couldn't. They headed into Mysia with the idea of going into Bithynia and Pontus on the coast of the Black Sea, but couldn't. So they went into Mysia instead, ending up on the coast at Troas.

Like any travelers, they had plans and had certain reasonable expectations along the way. Like the experience of many travelers, unforeseen variables wreaked havoc with their plans, again attributable to the Holy Spirit. We recognize how the Pauline group moved according to their own plans, unless compelled by the Holy Spirit to redirect and adapt to new situations.

Once they arrive at Troas on the coast, things get really interesting. Paul is in a quandary at Troas about what to do next?

Paul has a dream or vision at night of a man summoning him to cross the Aegean Sea and come into Europe at Macedonia. Now, Europe had not been on their itinerary. As Paul concluded that God indeed wanted them off their own map and onto God's, to follow the Spirit as the Spirit had been forcing them.

They make the crossing and end up traveling to Philippi. On the Sabbath in this Roman city, they do not head for the synagogue. Surely, a metropolis like Philippi has a synagogue, even though the Jewish population in Macedonia was relatively small. But Paul is led by the Spirit now who is deciding his movement.

They end up at the river where they find a gathering of women. These are Gentile women – non-Jews – who are God-fearers, Gentiles who attend Jewish services and worship there – apart from the Jews, of course. And, of course, a group of women cannot hold any kind of service of their own, not only because they're Gentile but because they're women. Only men count in establishing a *minyan*, the minimum number needed to have a service, comprised **only** of males who have come of age, i.e. even young teenagers. A mother's teen son may be counted in a *minyan*, but not the mother. Awkward.

Paul meets Lydia, a merchant in purple cloth. In other words, she does high end fashion since only rich people would wear purple. We also learn that Lydia has a "household." So, Lydia has a bunch of servants working for her, possibly owning slaves. Lydia has deep pockets. She really likes Paul's teaching about Jesus, accepts the Lord, and gets baptized – she *and* the members of her household. She even puts up Paul and his people at her house.

The Spirit moves Paul to reach out quite unconventionally to a Gentile woman who is in charge of a household. That moves her and her whole household to become baptized followers of Jesus and she becomes a key sponsor for Paul's ministry work. It was the movement of the Spirit that brought this dynamic change in Paul's ministry and new direction for an otherwise very successful Gentile or pagan woman.

Our resurrection witness means moving with the Spirit of God leading the way. Absent the Spirit of God, and we can quickly find ourselves enslaved to old patterns like the hapless man at the healing pool, or like the scrupulous folks who denounced the man for carrying his mat on the Sabbath, ignoring what blessing God had done before them.

Moving with the Spirit means healing for us, too; the blind can behold a new vision, the deaf can hear God's Word anew, and the lame can step forward into faithfulness and service in ministry that brings them to new places, new experiences, and new relationships that can transform all things in a new creation of blessing. May we approach the time of Pentecost, training ourselves to sense the movement of the Spirit, and with a personal attitude that is willing to be led into areas we had not considered before, the places where the Spirit leads us in resurrection witness.