

ACTS 9:36-43 The raising of Tabitha

The story from the book of Acts this morning, of the raising of Tabitha from the dead, draws us into a situation that was actually very jarring for the members of the early church.

This was a community that was still fresh in its celebration of the resurrection of Christ from the dead; it was still high on the almost indescribable experience of the filling of the Holy Spirit, who was poured out at Pentecost.

The apostles, all ordinary, unremarkable people, through the Holy Spirit, were turning the known world upside down with signs and wonders, and with demonstrations of healing and power.

In the preceding couple of chapters, we are told the dramatic conversion stories of Saul and Ananias, and we hear of Saul's powerful preaching of Jesus the Messiah, and how the members of the early Christian community were blown away at the working of the Holy Spirit in Paul's life and ministry. Paul's story back then rivaled any TV drama with pursuit from the bad guys, arrest, imprisonment, escape - the lot. God's mighty power was at work.

As the Holy Spirit continued this work through the early apostles, the fledgeling church grew in number and renown as it lived in peace, enlivened by the fear of the Lord and empowered by the Spirit's encouraging presence.

In the few verses before today's reading, we find this little story:

Now as Peter went here and there among all the believers, he came down also to the saints living in Lydda. There he found a man named Aeneas, who had been bedridden for eight years, for he was paralyzed. Peter said to him, "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; get up and make your bed!" And immediately he got up.

And all the residents of Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord.

It was all heady stuff.

Then, in the midst of these uplifting accounts, comes this moving story of sorrow and loss. In the midst of comfort, success, and growth, here,

suddenly, is the painful reminder that the last enemy - death - still lingers and threatens this early Christian community's confidence and faith in the power and promise of Jesus' resurrection. As it still can today.

The vivid description and careful detail of this story describe a community's shock at a sudden death; it was unexpected in more ways than one, as at that time, the Christian community firmly believed that none of them would die; that they would still be alive when Jesus returned. The story goes on to describe the preparation for burial, the viewing and visitation of the mourners, all of which is perhaps uncomfortably familiar to many of us who have walked that same journey. I'm very conscious of Jane and her family here this morning, for whom this is only too real. (But there is comfort in this story also - so stay tuned)

Though this is only a brief passage, it's amazingly descriptive. We can't miss the deep sorrow and loss of those who cared and grieved for Tabitha; but neither can we miss the relief and joy of those same mourners as they experienced the transforming power of the resurrection from death to life. The story draws us into both empathy and hope.

Looking a little more closely at the passage, we find the way Luke tells this story is deliberate. Luke begins the story with the words, "Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity". This beginning actually lulls the reader into expecting another uplifting story of success. It's the same way Luke often begins such stories in his writing. But then, in the very next sentence, Tabitha has become ill and died. We are shocked by the suddenness. So in these opening two verses, Luke, in the very way he writes, literarily imitates the shocking reality of death in the midst of life.

We then read how, still numb, the community grasps for hope and cries out in desperation for Peter to come without delay, carefully strengthening their appeal by sending "two men" to carry their request. (Normally, they would have only sent a single messenger.)

Not sure what they were hoping for - perhaps they were simply reaching out to Peter, their spiritual father, as we might reach out to a parent in a time of crisis. Peter responds by coming right away, and when he gets there, he is ushered into the upstairs room. I'm sure we can picture it. At that moment, it

is a sanctuary of death and grief, with Tabitha, laid out and washed, ready for burial.

But the room was also a sanctuary of love. As Tabitha's friends gathered around Peter, they were eager, even in their weeping, to share their loss by showing him all the tunics and clothing Dorcas had made, which told of how loving and caring her life had been. They wanted to talk about her, express their love for her. Those brief sentences are very moving.

As Luke tells this story, he strikes a chord that will inevitably touch each and every believer. We will all lose someone we love, at some time or another. We will all experience the shock and numbness of grief, the emptiness of loss. So we will all relate to this story, and at some time will find ourselves walking that same path of sorrow. We will know the need to express our love for the person we've lost, sharing with those who listen to us.

But then as we continue, the story leads the reader from grief and loss, to hope and comfort.

As the story unfolds, we find another power present as Peter calmly ushers them out, kneels confidently in prayer, and then addresses the body with the command, "Tabitha, get up" (9:41). Again, Luke is intentional in his description here, as we are not only drawn into Tabitha's being raised from death, but are also reminded of the resurrection of Jesus from the grave, who conquers death once and for all.

Immediately, Tabitha opens her eyes and sits up, and Peter calls all the saints and widows and shows her to them, alive. - just as they have so recently showed Peter the clothing and remnants of Tabitha's acts of mercy that were reminders of her death (9:39).

It's then left to our imagination to fill in the joyful reunion that must have accompanied Tabitha's return to her community. What a celebration that would have been!

There are several bodily resurrections described in the New Testament: Aside from Jesus' own resurrection, which is a cosmic event, there is the raising of Lazarus from the dead by Jesus - Lazarus who was 3 days dead in the tomb; there is the raising of Jairus' daughter by Jesus, and the raising of the son of

the widow of Nain. -That's the story where Jesus and his disciples encountered a funeral procession coming the other way - the wrapped body on the pyre, on the shoulders of the mourners, widows wailing, flutes calling. Jesus touches the body and says, "Young man, get up!" And he does. (I bet they dropped him!) And Jesus restored the man to his mother.

Then by Jesus' followers, there is the raising of Eutychus, who fell from a third story window ledge and died, after he'd fallen asleep during Paul's sermon (let that be a warning to all :) , and we have today's story of the raising of Tabitha from the dead.

These stories are all recorded to underline and attest to the power of Jesus Christ over death; and to display God's compassion for the people he has made, and his desire that we be made whole. The stories are recorded to encourage us to have faith; to put our trust in Jesus, and to believe that death does not have the final word.

While this story speaks to us of the inevitability and often suddenness of physical death and of the power of Christ's resurrection, it can also speak to us in any and all circumstances of life.

Death is not the only eventuality that can plunge us into grief and despair. All around us, in every sphere of life, we can be touched by the effects of this fallen world in which we live.

There are natural and man made disasters that can affect literally thousands. On a personal level, relationships can fall apart, our health can fail, people can hurt or betray us, we can do the same to others, we can lose our financial independence, or our freedom. So many things can conspire to bring us down.

Jesus is not only victor over death; he is victor over those things in life that bring us down. Just as Jesus can raise the dead to life, so he can mend the broken, heal the sick, and redeem the lost. He may not restore things to the way we think they should be, he may not give us back what we have lost, but in him, we can be free and we can be at peace. Ultimately, all will be resolved, and like the thief on the cross, we too, will join Jesus in paradise - whatever that may be.

This story will not answer all our questions. But what it will do, is bring the clear and certain witness to the power of our Lord's resurrection, and to the good news that not only at times of death, but at other dark times, the Spirit of the risen Lord enters our world to bring life and healing and hope.

Let's pray.