

Get Up
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(for service with HMC and UPCOB)

Acts 9:36-43
Psalm 23

It is good to worship together this morning, to pray and sing, to get to know each other better, to continue stretching and exercising these limbs of the body of Christ that are University Park Church of the Brethren and Hyattsville Mennonite Church.

This story from Acts is one I remember from my days in Sunday School. What an exciting account of a woman being brought back to life. If adults have a hard time with this, children sure don't. And this story still makes the Sunday School cut. I know I have seen my kids bring home a paper Tabitha that swivels up on her bed (on her safety tack) after Peter speaks to her. This story, and frankly many of the stories in Acts, is almost too fantastical for us. At a superficial level, this story seems only a few short steps away from Sleeping Beauty and Snow White. In this Easter season until Pentecost, the lectionary gives us different pictures of resurrection and new life. Thus the infrequently read story of Dorcas that we read today.

We are given two names for this woman. In Aramaic her name is Tabitha and in Greek it is Dorcas. Since Luke was writing to a community who would be familiar with the Greek he provides this helpful translation of her name. In Acts the characters have names. Often in the gospels those whom Jesus heals are anonymous, the man by the pool at Bethsaida, the Syrophonecian Woman... But in Acts everybody has a name, the women and the men. In this case, the names Dorcas and Tabitha seem to be used interchangeably but when Peter tells her to get up from her death bed he calls her Tabitha. This must have been the name she was called by those who loved her, those who wept outside the door of that upper room.

Tabitha was a disciple. A number of sources note that this is the only time in the New Testament the feminine form of the word disciple is used. I doubt that means she was the only woman disciple. Perhaps it means she was an early follower, or that she was held in such high esteem that she merited being called a disciple in the same term as men.

Like Jesus, Tabitha associated closely with those on the margins. We cannot tell whether or not she was a widow herself, or even how old she was. It is clear that her ministry was among the widows, women who had no one to provide for them financially or otherwise. We read that Tabitha was "devoted to good works and acts of charity."

After what appears to be a short illness, Tabitha dies. This rocks the community of women with whom she worked. What will they do without her? The local followers of Jesus know that Peter is close by, just over in Lydda, not more than 10 miles away. So the disciples send two men to fetch Peter. Peter must have known Tabitha or at least heard of her work with the widows. Surely he could tell from the urgency in the voices and mannerisms of the two couriers that this was a dire situation. Without delay he is on the road.

Back in Joppa, Tabitha has been washed by her faithful friends and laid out in a room. And then there is nothing to do but wait and weep. Surely Peter he will come.

When Peter arrives the widows take him immediately to the room where Tabitha is lying. The sobbing women surround him. They proudly show the work that Tabitha had made for them, to sell, to share with those in need. I imagine Tabitha as an experienced businesswoman who helped these women, who had nothing, start their own micro businesses. She taught them sewing, handwork, ways to start again after losing a husband and a place in society. In a sense, she restored **them** to new life. And now she was dead.

It must have gotten to be too much for Peter, the distraught women wailing. After a while Peter just sends everyone out of the room. He and the dead Tabitha are alone in the room. He kneels down and prays. Peter himself saw his mother-in-law healed by Jesus some time back. He knows that through the power of God and Jesus amazing things can happen. Peter does what he can; he kneels and prays. Perhaps he prays for quite a while and when he is done he turns back to the body laid out near him and speaks. "Tabitha, get up." At these simple words she opens her eyes, sits up and he helps her to her feet.

Then he calls to the still weeping widows and shows them that they can stop already. She is alive again. A story like this doesn't stay quiet for very long. Soon it was told all over the city and people came to believe in Jesus because of it. They didn't come to believe in Peter but in Jesus.

The story of Tabitha; this is all we get. She is never mentioned in the bible – by either name - again.

As Christians we often point to the uniqueness of Jesus' death and resurrection but this story reminds us that resurrection stories are found throughout the bible. In I Kings 17 (17-24) Elijah brings a boy back to life that "had no breath in him." A parallel story is recorded Elisha in II Kings 4 (32-37). A boy who had been dead is brought back to life after Elisha lies upon the child, performing what sounds like mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

Fairly early in his ministry Jesus raises Jairus' daughter who was dead. (Luke 8: 40-56) And later not too long before he himself died, Jesus raised Lazarus who had been in tomb 4 days.

The raising of the dead boys by Elijah and Elisha are part of a tradition showing that these are men of God. Similarly, the raising of Jairus' daughter and the raising of Lazarus and then Tabitha give us the shorthand clue that Jesus and Peter are men of God. They are in tune with God thus the power of God becomes apparent through them. That Jesus is raised without help from anyone but God helps us to see that he truly is a part of God.

While this story is included in Acts to provide hope, inspiration and proof of Peter discipleship it also raises questions. Why are *these* particular people raised from the dead? We never hear anything more about the individuals that come back to life, though some of them presumably have a lot of life to live. What further work did Tabitha do? In her raising many came to "believe in the Lord." Is that why she was raised? To make more believers? We just don't know. It is one of those cases when the story is more about the creator than the

creature. We are drawn to the astounding power of the divine, not the mundane life of the human.

Yet being human, I *am* drawn to the story of the ongoing life. I wonder why this amazing power isn't displayed every time someone dies. Peter got on his knees and prayed, possibly for hours. Do we not use the right position? Is there some trick here that we haven't learned or are our lives just too full to take the time to pray for healing and restoration?

When we read this story it feels so foreign and so familiar at the same time. If the miraculous resurrection seems strange the crowd of "weeping women" is all too recognizable. We see them in the news everyday. People in Congo, Zimbabwe, Iraq, Iran, Darfur, Colombia, Southeast DC, Prince George's County, Blacksburg, VA. Tears come also to our own faith communities, into our own families. We know the pain and grief of loss. We are worn out from weeping. We are weary from crying. Do we believe that any life at all can come out of this death?

Or are we falling into that trap of taking it all too literally? When Peter speaks to Tabitha he says, "Get up." What does it mean to get up after a death? This is the hardest part, getting back up, especially for the mourners. We just want to stay on our knees. We want to stay in tears. And we should, for a while. But after a time it is right to get up and piece life back together. Sometimes it takes a person of great faith to help us up, a Peter who calls out to us, reminds us that we can come back to the land of the living. That we can get up.

I was at a funeral this week for a single mom who left behind a 13-year-old daughter. Central in the service was a "discourse" on the life to come, on God's plan for each of us. It was not an invitation so much as a lecture on how we are all doing life wrong and this death was our wake up call, our second chance to get it right. These particular directives took all the weeping out of me but my tears were replaced with anger at the preacher and his reproachful theology. I didn't want to get up.

Two days ago my cousin's 6-½ month old son died, never having gone home from the hospital. How do we, who loved that baby in person and from afar, ever find the strength to stop crying and seek resurrection? We are so weighed down by our grief that it feels nearly impossible to get up. Do we even hear the call to rise?

Death is not always physical. Sometimes it is emotional. Sometimes it is spiritual. I have known people who were dead emotionally and spiritually. I wondered if they would ever have the strength to rise from the bed where friends and family had so carefully washed their hands of the dead. They had been told, "your life is over." But through some miracle, perhaps it was a "Peter" on his knees in prayer, they were called back to life, a life of contentment, even happiness. Yet we cannot be glib. The disasters that knock us to the floor, cannot be fixed with a simple word telling us to arise. It takes time, often a long time, and a lot of work until we can even hear that voice that calls to us.

What is it that can comfort us, call to us, when we are laid out on the deathbed, when we are weeping for one who is gone? Often it is a familiar voice like the one we heard this morning in Psalm 23. This psalm places us into the arms of a loving, strong keeper. In these arms we are known and loved and given the strength to get up again when it is time.

In the poetry of Psalm 23 we understand that we are the sheep and God is the shepherd – in the green pastures, by the still waters, on right paths, walking the dark valleys, fearing not with the rod and staff to guide and comfort. The Shepherd leads the way.

By the end of the psalm we are no longer sheep. “You prepare a table before me.” We are friends with God at table. God sits with us at the table, keeping us safe, anointing us with oil, and welcoming us with the overflowing cup of wine. We are called to get up from the meadow, to sit in the company of friends, in the company of God. At this table we receive the promise that God will be with us, until the end. We will live in Love’s house with God.

There are no easy answers to the sting of death,
no simple explanations to the elation in resurrection.
We see in Tabitha a woman who called widows out of death
even as she was called out of death herself by Peter.
In life and in death Tabitha’s life spoke of God’s power,
Of God’s love and faithfulness.

May our lives speak as loudly as Tabitha’s.