

Easter 4C
Peace, Seattle
April 17, 2016
Acts 9:36-43, John 10:22-30

RAISING TABITHA

As ministries go, it was less visible than many—coming alongside widows whose lives had been all but snatched away when their husbands had died.

Amid the layers of grief was one persistent question: What happens to me now?

Women with an adult son or brother-in-law had reason to hope they would have a roof over their heads; but for others, widowhood would be synonymous with poverty.

It was these widows in particular that Tabitha—or Dorcas, she was known by both names—was called to serve.

Peter, whose mother-in-law had joined his household after her husband's death, mulled this over as up the narrow stairs he went, and into the upper room where Tabitha's body lay.

To a person they were there—the women she'd befriended through her ministry of caring: holding the clothing she'd made for them, lifting up the emblems of her craft which—she reminded them—pointed beyond her to the love and care of the One who had given each of them life.

It was her constant refrain, her mantra:

“Dear sister,” she would say, “a loving God knit you together in your mother's womb. Never forget. Only a caring Creator with skilled fingers could do that. God brought you to completion, breathed life into you; so take heart—the Holy One will not abandon you!”

How many times had she repeated these words; consoling a new widow with her unflappable faith; fitting her for the future with clothes tailored with precision and practical flair?

As Peter arrived, grief as thick as the winter wool tunics she'd sewn, hung heavy in the air.

In a culture that marginalized women Tabitha's ministry had given these widows a place to belong. The culture had rendered them virtually invisible. But they were not invisible to Tabitha. She not only saw them, she sought them out; and she embraced them.

Recognizing their vulnerability, she established a ministry in Joppa that catered specifically to the needs of widows and they loved her deeply for it. But now she, too, had been taken from them.

Peter had been summoned, and now, in a scene that reminds us of Elijah praying over the widow's son¹ and Jesus raising Jairus' daughter², Peter kneels beside Tabitha.

**Then, calling her by name, he commands her to rise...AND SHE DOES!
God gives her back to them.**

What is this story about? It's a miracle story, for sure, which Luke has collected and included here because of its raw power.

¹ 1 Kings 17:17-24

² Luke 8:40f

But it's also a story about people, like Tabitha & Peter, subverting the usual order of things through the power of the risen Christ.

Because Christ lives, the story tells us, the future is radically open—so much so that death itself has been put on notice.

This is a pattern we see erupting again and again in the book of ACTS where the Spirit is constantly pushing the boundaries, forcing Jesus' followers to wonder just how far the God who raised Jesus will push and prod them to share good news beyond any reasonable limits.³

In chapter 8 we saw Philip finding himself tutoring the Ethiopian eunuch, and finally baptizing him. And last week we saw Saul converted from a passionately violent man to an ambassador of reconciliation. Next week we'll hear how the Spirit goaded Peter to cross the boundary separating Jew and Gentile.

But today...today we watch as LIFE with a capital "L" moves through Peter to raise up a disciple whose ministry many people would not have deemed worthy of attention at all.

MY SHEEP HEAR MY VOICE. I KNOW THEM, AND THEY FOLLOW ME, says the Good Shepherd. AND NO ONE, NO ONE WILL SNATCH THEM OUT OF MY HAND.

A story like this one, of how God's agents wrench life from death is not something so trivial that it can be explained.⁴

Such a story, says William Willimon,

can only be told and heard, asserted, and inserted into life as it is thrust into the flow of ACTS... The story proclaims that our history is not closed; that there is someone, some subversive reality there for the widows of this world...

Every time a little story like this is faithfully told by the church, concludes Willimon, the social system of paralysis and death is rendered null and void. The church proclaims the gospel's prophetic word **RISE!** And nothing is ever quite the same.⁵

This morning, sisters and brothers, indeed, every time we gather here, we are invited to put our trust in the God who dares to author such a story as this; and who dares us to pattern our ministries and our community life in the same relentlessly expansive way.

Yesterday a dozen or so of us from Peace joined a few dozen others at Longfellow Creek to work on projects that impact the Duwamish River watershed. Our task was to clear a specific invasive species out of a section of forest—the dreaded Himalayan blackberries.

We had plenty of large pruners along, but we didn't use them as much as we used long, narrow bladed "wolverine" shovels. Because our goal was not to simply clip and remove the vines so that the forest looked better (for a spell). Our goal was to dig those Himalayans out by the roots so that the native species would have a chance to re-establish themselves.

³ Eric Barreto, writing in Working Preacher: http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1625

⁴ W. Willimon, ACTS, p. 85

⁵ Ibid. p.86

So we dug and we tugged and we bent and we pulled, and in our relentlessness we accomplished far more than our crew boss imagined could be done. And you know what else? We had fun! Because we were doing it together...God's work...Our hands.

The question is: Can this community we're part of together be as relentless in opening our doors and arms to others as we were with getting to the roots of those blackberries?

And are we willing to be equally relentless about leaving the safety of the church's walls to reach out to the broken of the world with words and deeds of life and grace?

I hope the answer is YES because that's where the Spirit is going. That's where the Good Shepherd is heading, and if we want to follow him, then that's where we need to be going too.

Yesterday while we were pulling out blackberries, Pope Francis was bringing 3 Syrian Muslim families to Italy aboard his plane after an emotional visit to the Greek Island of Lesbos, which has become a first port of refuge for many who are fleeing Syria.

IT'S A DROP OF WATER IN THE SEA, Francis said of his gesture, BUT AFTER THIS DROP, THE SEA WILL NEVER BE THE SAME.⁶

⁶ *The Seattle Times*, April 17, 2016, page 1A.