

Acts 9:36-43
April 25, 2010

South Plains

Easter Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

By the time we get to the fourth Sunday in Easter, some of us may be having second thoughts about this business of the resurrection. The resurrection of the dead is the most attractive and the most unlikely doctrine in Christianity. After all, when you're dead, you're dead. We all know stories of people who have satisfied the standard to be judged clinically dead by the doctors, and then, for some reason they came back to life. The scientific explanation is that they were not really dead in the first place. "Dead" means you don't come back to life.

The poet Wendell Berry says we need to practice resurrection. Berry wants to call attention to the enemies of life in our world and encourage us to outfox them. He begins with a little sarcasm:

Love the quick profit, the annual raise,
vacation with pay. Want more
of everything ready-made. Be afraid
to know your neighbors and to die.
And you will have a window in your head.
Not even your future will be a mystery
any more. Your mind will be punched in a card
and shut away in a little drawer.
When they want you to buy something

they will call you. When they want you
to die for profit they will let you know.

So, friends, every day do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it.

Surely the disciple in Acts 9:36, Tabitha or Dorcas as she was known in Greek, is someone who deserved to be loved. She did all kinds of good things for other people, but perhaps she was best known as an outstanding member of the Joppa mission crofters. Like our mission crofters, Tabitha made all kinds of clothing for other people. Then, one day she became terminally ill. Her dying was something of a crisis for the church in Joppa, so when the folks there heard that Peter was nearby, they asked him to come without delay. He was staying about 10 miles away; so, it was a day or two before he arrived. And, in that time, Tabitha had died, the church laid out the body, washed it for burial, and gathered Tabitha's friends. Since they didn't have photographs of the deceased, they brought articles of clothing she had made for them, a kind of testament to her charity.

I would love to know what they expected of Peter. Maybe they wanted a prayer for comfort. Maybe they had hoped he would get there in time to heal this woman.

Maybe they hoped for even more. At any rate, when Peter arrived, he cleared the room, knelt down and prayed. Then he turned to that lifeless body all ready for the grave, and said, "Tabitha, get up." And, she did.

It's a little easier to practice the resurrection of Jesus at Easter because after all, Jesus was God. Tabitha, however, was an ordinary woman, a good woman, but no more special than the women we see everyday. She was not brought back to life because she had a new religion to establish, or even because the Joppa mission crofters needed a boost. God raised her from the dead for two reasons, maybe three.

The obvious thing that happened in Joppa, and I think the most ordinary result according to Acts, was that "many believed in the Lord." This event confirmed the faith of Christians and probably converted some who were on the fence. But Acts is chock full of miracles and it's overflowing with evidence that the church was growing by leaps and bounds.

I think the book of Acts includes this story for another reason. Bringing someone back from the dead was a primo miracle. Elijah did it once. Elisha did it. Jesus did it with Jairus' daughter and with Lazarus. Jesus may have raised others from the dead. When the disciples of John the Baptist ask him if he is "the one," he points out to them that "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to

them (Luke 7:22)." Raising the dead was not an ordinary miracle. It was exactly what you would expect at the transformation of history.

And, Jesus' own resurrection was unique. No one else was involved. He did not die of natural causes; he died because the Roman soldiers hung him on a cross to die and stabbed him in the side to make sure they did the job right. We celebrate Jesus' resurrection and not the others because God alone raised Jesus from the dead.

Now, when the Apostle Peter raises Tabitha from death to life, he continues the prophetic tradition in the line of Elijah, Elisha, and Jesus. But, all Peter's miracles are done as a disciple of Jesus Christ. The point of this miracle is that the church of Jesus Christ continues to manifest the incredible power of God. Think about that for a minute. The church, this group of people gathered not only in Joppa, but also gathered around you this morning, practices resurrection.

Or, I should say we have the power to practice resurrection. It's something of a choice we make. We can fall into line and practice the stultifying, mind-numbing ... Love for the quick profit, the annual raise, vacation with pay, always wanting more of everything ready-made. We can be afraid to know our neighbors, and live in fear of dying.

That's not a terrible existence. But if our days are consumed by materialism and the insatiable hunger for

more of everything; if fear of our neighbors controls our daily routine; and if we live in constant anxiety about dying, we will not have lived at all. I am fascinated by the insight that we want everything ready-made. It's not just clothing. We want to pull the strip that unseals a breakfast ready to eat. I washed my car the other day without getting out from under the steering wheel. And, we dream of highways and automobiles just around the corner that will robotically usher us safely down the interstate with no more effort than if we were riding on the train. But, in our own cars, we would have a ready-made mobile home, protected from any interaction with others.

Is this abundant life? The promise of the resurrection of the dead that we affirm in the Apostles Creed is more than an extension on a lifetime warranty. Resurrection power entered the world fulltime when Jesus arose from the grave on that first Easter. Abundant life, eternal life starts right now or it's nothing. Abundant living no longer lives under the shadow of guilt, wondering when God will make us pay for our crimes. Followers of Jesus are freed from that specter, liberated to move forward.

Life in the promise of the resurrection takes the risk of loving another, even when our love may not be returned. After all, we have received such an over-abundance of love that we have enough to give away. This love multiplies faster than we can let it go. Like a bird, if we hold it too tightly in our fist, we stifle it and it cannot grow. It cannot fly.

Of course, resurrection today does not mean we escape the limitations and contingencies of this world. Bad things still happen to good people. Tabitha did not live forever. Nor, did Lazarus. But, the life we enjoy in the light of Jesus' resurrection is not cramped and confined by our limitations. Our imagination is loosed. We have the freedom to picture more than what is here and now. We live into tomorrow.

Eternal life, resurrection life, can plan for the future with confidence. Wendell Berry, who is a farmer, says

Put your faith in the two inches of humus
that will build under the trees
every thousand years.

Last week was the fortieth anniversary of Earth Day. I'm glad we celebrate Earth Day so long as we can truly celebrate without feeling like we live under the Damocles sword of pollution and global warming and over population and all the other very real problems that threaten planet earth. We can care for our world energized by its blessings, and grateful for the stewardship God has given us as caretakers of nature. Every springtime, every Earth day is reason to praise God.

The church lives with Jesus' resurrection as both today's reality and tomorrow's promise. How it works is a mystery of grace, but it's not magic. It's the God-given defiance of sin and death. It's the freedom of faith, a

freedom that is more than obedience to the invisible hand of prosperity and the invisible hand of fear. The psalmist knows well the dangers of the real world. Yet, in the words of the paraphrase we sang earlier,

When I walk through the shades of death
Your presence is my stay;
One word of your supporting breath
Drives all my fears away.
Your hand in sight of all my foes,
Does still my table spread;
My cup with blessings overflows
Your oil anoints my head.

Every time we say those words, we practice resurrection. We celebrate the life eternal staring today, life in the fullness of God's grace.