

“Tabitha, Get Up”
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Bruton Parish Church, Williamsburg, VA
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Acts 9:36-43, John 10:22-30

Tabitha’s story from the Acts of the Apostles is very short. We learn little about her except that she’s a female disciple, is known for her good works and charity to the poor, and seems to be quite the clothing designer, having made tunics and other garments for the Joppa widows. We also learn that she gets sick and dies. The other disciples send for Peter who has just healed a lame man in a nearby town, and he comes, kneels down and prays, and tells her to, “Get up!” She does.

It’s an amazing story. Just last week we heard about Peter getting a do-over after his triple denial of Jesus. He certainly makes the most of it! Not only has his transformed life made him a channel for God to use to heal other people, but now he’s a channel for resurrection. Pretty powerful stuff.

All week I’ve felt drawn to this story. Usually on Good Shepherd Sunday I preach about the Good Shepherd. But this time, Tabitha’s story has captured my attention. To tell you the truth, it may be because there are a couple of people who have died in the past week who I’d like to nominate for resurrection.

On Tuesday, I received a text from my brother telling me that my niece and nephew were safe and on lock down, that there had been a shooting at a school in their county, and that he would keep me posted. The story had not yet traveled to the newsfeed on my phone, so it wasn’t until later that I learned that two students were the ones with the guns, and that they had killed one student and injured eight others.

The student who died was named Kendrick, one of the first to attack his classmate when he saw the gun, allowing some of the other students to get to safety. His

friends say that Kendrick was the best of them, funny, smart, kind to others. A good guy, lost too soon. None of those kids will ever be the same – whether they were physically injured or whether they carry the equally damaging scars of trauma. The same scars so many children in our country bear. A mother grieves her lost son this Mother’s Day along with the rest of his family and friends.

I’d like Peter to kneel down and pray and tell Kendrick to “get up” and live.

And then there’s Rachel Held Evans who died last Saturday. She was a Christian blogger and writer. The Women’s Theological Book Group read her book *A Year of Biblical Womanhood* a couple of years ago, and we’re planning to read her latest book in the fall.

Rachel has written honestly and humorously about her faith journey from the sure certainty of the evangelical church of her childhood, to her struggles with doubts and questions, to finding her way to the Episcopal Church. Her voice has been a powerful and hopeful one for many people who have struggled in their own spiritual journey.

I had been praying since I heard that Rachel was in the ICU in a medically induced coma due to seizures caused by an allergic reaction to medication given to treat an infection. She was only 37 and leaves behind a one-year-old and a three-year-old.

It seems strange to grieve for someone I’ve never met, and yet I am grieving the loss of Rachel Held Evans – the books we won’t get to read, the wisdom and stories that she won’t get to share. But more than my own loss, I grieve that her children and husband and parents have lost her.

So many people around the world were praying for Rachel – she, too, was one of the good ones. It seems so random and unfair. Like Tabitha.

Why couldn't someone show up to raise Rachel from the dead?

Some of you may be asking the same question about a loved one. Why did he have to die? Why didn't God didn't cure her? Why didn't I get a miracle? Why? Why? Why?

Unfortunately, we don't often get to know why. Bad things happen to good people. People we love die unexpectedly. We don't know the reason. The longer I live, the more I believe that my search for the answer to why is less useful than keeping an eye out for the redemption that faith tells me will come. Even if we learn the reasons that some of these things occur, we still can't go back to change the outcome. We can, however, acknowledge our losses and grieve. We can look for the ways that God will redeem. We can work to make things different in the future. We can practice resurrection.

The community surrounding Tabitha grieves her loss. They also send for Peter, having heard that he's in the healing business. There is a hope, an expectation that something can be done. But the grieving comes first. We live in a society that is uncomfortable with death and grief, and so we try to move people through it quickly. Whether it's the loss of a loved one or a relationship, an ability or independence, a job or a dream, we need time to weep, to rage, to question. We supporters need to cultivate the ability to sit with others in their pain, to bear witness, not to advise or fix, so that the grief can be experienced, gone through, not pushed down, so that healing may come. Mourning the loss of the old makes way for the birth of the new. I do believe that God redeems everything, in God's own time not ours, and in that time it's okay for us to grieve.

Once we have given space for grief, then we can begin to look for God's redemption, for the new thing that may be waiting to begin. For Tabitha it was literally new life in the flesh, returning to her active life of good works.

For us it probably won't look like someone coming and bodily raising up a loved one who has died. It may look like a window opening where a door has closed. It may look like someone coming to *us* and saying, "Get up," calling us to action to make a different future. Maybe we're called to work to change laws or to start a foundation in honor of a loved one or to learn something new. Maybe we raise people up by carrying on their legacy through poem or story or song. There are many, many ways to practice resurrection.

If we expect new life, if we expect redemption, we will find it easier to see when it arrives. God is always doing a new thing, *and* it doesn't always look like what we expected. Jesus raised from the dead still didn't look like the Messiah they had been expecting. A good shepherd, not a king. But a good shepherd who laid down his life for us and who walks with us whether we're on the mountaintop or in the valley of the shadow of death, whether we're having an ordinary day or whether we're in the midst of crisis or loss, whether we're following close behind him or whether he's seeking us out when we've wandered away.

So on this day, if you are celebrating, may God shield you in your joy. And on this day, if you are grieving or struggling in any way, may you feel the Good Shepherd walking close beside you, giving you the space you need, offering comfort and strength, healing and hope, and calling you ever so gently to get up and receive new life.