

Unafraid to Weave

Psalm 23; Acts 9:36-43

Nan Adams preached this sermon April 25, 2010, Easter 4C, Trinity Presbyterian Church, Pensacola, FL.

Come with me to ancient Tel Aviv, or Joppa, to the first resurrection story following Christ's resurrection. Tabitha was a single, independent woman in a society where women were property, appendages of men, supported by fathers, brothers or husbands. And yet she is called a disciple. It is the only time where the feminine form of the Greek word for "disciple" is actually used in the New Testament. And further, her *discipling* is defined as being "devoted to good works and acts of charity." Most probably the widow of a tradesman (the most likely reason that she would have her own resources), she is a seamstress, making clothes for widows. She apparently did not sell the clothes in order to profit, and she did not send the clothes anonymously – she knew these women, many of whom were widows. Widows by definition are poor, on the bottom rung of society, without anyone to represent them or to protect them. These are the ones to whom Tabitha has given life. The text tells us precious little more about what else happened in Tabitha's life. The text, instead, tells us that this woman of Christian charity *died*.

The custom in Palestine, because of the intense heat, was to wash the body, a purification ritual, and to bury it by sundown. Tabitha's body, however, was washed, wrapped and laid in an upper room where the congregation mourned for her. Perhaps they delayed the burial when they heard that Peter, that most-renowned disciple of Christ, was nearby in Lydda. Two male disciples, the text says, were sent by this Christian community in Joppa to request his presence. Peter, you recall, had been present during three of Jesus' resurrection healings – Jairus' daughter, the widow's son, and Lazarus – and at the tomb following Jesus' own resurrection. Why couldn't they hope for as much?

When Peter arrived, he found the community of women surrounding Tabitha's body. The women were showing various garments that Tabitha had made for them. This is a small detail with great significance. In this culture, a piece of clothing was very valuable. It took immense effort to produce one garment: spinning by hand, weaving by hand, sewing by hand. The very poorest people might be lucky to have two or three garments at the most. Tabitha had provided clothing for her entire community.

"O, Peter, sir, look, she made this for me two winters ago when we had that long cold spell, and I could never get warm." "Just look at this fine needlework in this gown. Tabitha made it for my grandchild when she was baptized." "My son wore this tunic, day in and day out, until he literally split the side when he grew so. Then she made him a new one."

The stories flow on and on, the stories of spinning and weaving and sewing wrapped up in the spinnings and weavings and sewings of the women's lives. Tabitha had died and her life-giving work had died with her. Her death truly caused a crisis in the community. She had been such a life-giving presence that grief overwhelmed them. Now the most vulnerable ones have no one. They met Peter at the door, showing him their coats and garments, the ones Tabitha made, showing him what the life and death of Tabitha means for them. Peter sent them out of the room, he knelt and he prayed. He prayed to the God of resurrections and then he turned to the body and said, "Tabitha, get up!" She arose from the dead. He returned this sister of charity to the saints and widows who had prayed for her deliverance. They rejoiced; their faith was deepened. The story "became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord."

Now why – why would Luke include this story in the stories of Acts? Some think it's to give Peter more authority – some in fact have used this story to help defend the apostolic succession of male popes and religious leaders. But others think this story has more to say about the community of faith at Joppa than it does Peter. Renowned preacher and hymn writer Thomas Troeger wrote, "There is a point in the text where I become suspicious of Luke. Luke says that Peter sent all the women out of the room and then raised Tabitha to new life, as if Peter were the sole vessel of God's restoring power. I do not believe it. I believe the woman had already released the power of new life into the room, because when they touched those garments they touched more than a piece of cloth...they touched the fabric of their existence. They reclaimed their connection to this lovely, generous woman, who was connected to Jesus Christ, the risen Savior. When the woman brought out those stories, brought out the spinnings and weavings and sewings of their life together, the Risen Christ joined them, the Christ who had lived in this woman, the Christ by whose power Peter said, 'Tabitha, get up.'"¹

You see, these women were not afraid to be a part of each other's lives. They had overcome their fear and created a transforming community. Indeed, they had woven their lives together into such a strong fabric of life that, even in their grief and vulnerability, they were proclaiming the hope of the risen Christ. They stood together, using all the tools and spiritual resources available to them – weeping together, hoping together, and celebrating together.

Neither Dorcas (Tabitha) nor Peter will live forever – Peter will not come to raise her back again. This story is not told to emphasize the return of someone from the dead. It is instead "a story of a community honing all its spiritual strength and resources passionately upon life and wholeness,"² upon new life when all around seems dead and dark and desolate.

Our Psalm this morning emphasizes much of the same.

The twenty-third psalm does not offer us the pious hope that, if we are good people, life will be easy and pain-free. Instead, it points us to the journey that most often describes the human spiritual trajectory of life.

Look carefully at the psalm and notice that life started out pleasant and comfortable, symbolized by the lush, soft grass and cool water. Then something happened to shatter that comfort – a life-threatening illness, a betrayal or rejection by people around him, or perhaps the death of someone about whom he cared deeply. The psalmist "found himself in despair, the world grown dark and foreboding, empty of joy. It seemed that there was no point to his going on with his life. In his despair, he cried out to God, and a miracle happened. The miracle was not that the dead came back to life, or that health and wealth were restored. The miracle was that the psalmist found life worth living. God answered his prayer not by replacing what he had lost, but by taking him by the hand and guiding him through the 'valley of the shadow of death.' To his utter amazement, he who no longer believed that the sun was shining anywhere found himself standing in the sunlight again. The past had not changed, but the future suddenly seemed more inviting."³

Come with me now to present-day Guatemala. I traveled there in 1992 as part of my seminary education. There is an illegal settlement of 5,000 families at the edge of Guatemala City.

Actually this "settlement" is what separates the city from the incredibly large city refuse dump. At times it is hard to tell where the settlement ends and the refuse dump begins. The very poor who live here have been driven from their farm lands by drought, or by multi-national, corporation land seizure, or from lack of enough helpers to farm. The overwhelming majority of residents are women and children, the able-bodied men of the family having been murdered or "disappeared", leaving the most vulnerable to fend for themselves. They have come to the city seeking jobs or merely food. Finding meager or no employment, they have gathered in makeshift shacks, mostly cardboard, and share two water spigots, frequently cut off, in the center of this sprawling area as the only source of clean water. No electricity except that which is hijacked from nearby government wires. No sanitation system. Can you possibly imagine the bleakness of what I have described? Can you possibly look at that kind of squalor, that kind of existence from where we sit and see any more than hopeless, wretched, putrid death?

Look more closely. In this place, several of the Guatemalan women have gathered together, come forward at the risk of their own lives. They approached Presbyterian missionaries working in the area and cautiously asked them for *training*. Yes, training. These women dared to hope for a better life for themselves and for their children. They would continue to share and uphold one another in the basic needs of life, but could you, you missionaries of the Presbyterian Church (USA), could you possibly find a way to train us to cure our illnesses, to treat our rotting teeth?

Over a period of five years these women created a clinic where other poor women bring their children and infants to receive medical and dental care, and to learn about nutrition and hygiene. The "clinic" also offers training in basic job skills so that some become employable in the city and some start cottage businesses, like the one that produced the stole I am wearing. And though we may regret that the government of Guatemala pays them no attention, it is best for these people to remain anonymous. For the government is so threatened by the presence of health movements that as soon as it learns of such basic help it works to tear it down, to stop those who are providers. The morning we visited this area a new police station was being erected in the settlement so as to keep an eye on these developments.

The women I met that morning asked for our prayers and asked us specifically to tell their story so that the power of Jesus Christ might uphold them each hour in the days to come. They believed in the God of resurrection – the God who destroys death and creates new life – and they believed in the power of *telling* the resurrection story. That in the telling of that story, even more of God's power would be loosed on the world.

By Gods' grace and power, the hope and work of these women has continued. Recently I saw an article in one of our Presbyterian magazines that featured two Guatemalan women receiving their dental hygienist degrees – their schooling, travel, books and equipment provided for by our Presbyterian mission funds. I had no doubt that these women were fruits of ministry from that same clinic; I recognized the name. The women had named their clinic "Esperanza," which in Spanish means "hope."

Peter said, "Get up!" and nothing in the world has ever been quite the same. The significance of this story in the Book of Acts is confirmation that, indeed, the *disciples* have been granted

the same life-giving power of Jesus. Death will not have the final say. There is a power wild and loose, able to break the bonds of even the strongest hold of darkness, able to weave the most overwhelming fear into a community fabric of transforming strength.

Last week, someone stopped by my office for a chat. As is often the case in such situations, profound things are mentioned in passing. This person said they had been thinking and praying recently about “detachment with love” – that concept of setting boundaries within ones’ self about caring and helping and attempting to fix another person or at least fix the troubling situation surrounding the person. For without those boundaries, we often find ourselves completely caught up in the emotional chaos of another human being, neglecting our own emotional and physical health, and often, actually enabling that human being to continue on a self-destructive path.

How *does* one detach with love? For anyone who has struggled with such issues – loved ones who are addicts, for instance – there is no single, easy answer. If there was, surely we bright people would have figured it out by now! No, the person who stopped by for a chat said, “The turning point for me comes time and again when I wake up and realize that, whew, I can go on living now. That was really, really rough, but it didn’t kill me, it didn’t do me in. God was, and is with me, and I can go on living.”

I think that’s where our present hope lies. I think that’s what it means to believe that God is still in the business of weaving us together – of saving, raising, and empowering God’s children to live lives of new hope and new wholeness. We are not promised an easy or even a fair life in this world. We are promised to be held, to be guided through the “valley of the shadow of death,” and, most of all, that God is always working for good even in the most devastating, despairing, darkest situations of life. Therefore, let us be unafraid to weave our lives together, unafraid to weave our hope into seemingly hopeless situations, because, rest assured, God is already there, spinning and weaving and sewing hopelessness into hope. May our eyes be opened to witness this weaving and our hearts and minds ready to grab hold of the yarn. Amen.

NOTES

1. The Rev. Thomas H. Troeger preached this sermon “Resurrection Weavings” at Columbia Theological Seminary’s Colloquium, April 2000. Reprinted in *Journal for Preachers*, 24 no 3 Easter 2001, p 11-14, this quote from p. 13.
2. The Rev. Stephen D. Jones, “Homiletical Perspective” on Acts 9:36-43, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 2, Lent through Eastertide, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox) 2009, p. 431.
3. Rabbi Harold S. Kushner, *The Lord is My Shepherd: Healing Wisdom of the Twenty-Third Psalm*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf) 2003, p. 11-12