

Easter Keeps On Coming  
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Acts 9:36-43

Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. <sup>37</sup> At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs.

<sup>38</sup> Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, "Please come to us without delay." <sup>39</sup> So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them.

<sup>40</sup> Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, "Tabitha, get up." Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. <sup>41</sup> He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive.

<sup>42</sup> This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. <sup>43</sup> Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

**EASTER JUST KEEPS ON COMING**

This is the fourth Sunday of Easter.  
Easter just keeps on coming.

Now I know, the crowds have thinned out a bit since the first Sunday of Easter.

A lot of our winter visitors have gone back home to the lingering snow, wishing they were still in sunny Florida. Every year I try to tell them not to go home so soon.

But, Easter doesn't depend upon large crowds.  
Easter is about resurrection.  
Easter is about what God in Christ has done, and how that affects us today.

That message is just too big to be contained in one Sunday.

You may have noticed that the Easter paraments are still hanging from the pulpit and draped across the communion table. In fact this year we will have three more Sundays to celebrate Easter.

Like it or not, Easter just keeps on coming.

I like it.

We meet on Sunday, the first day of the week because Sunday is the day of resurrection.

Every worship service is, in its own way a witness, to the resurrection.

In a world filled with death we testify to the power of new life.  
In a world filled with despair we testify to a hope that is eternal.  
In a world filled with darkness we point to the light.

In the church, Easter just keeps on coming.

At every funeral I say the same thing, resurrection is about more than just the raising of Jesus from the dead.

It is about is eternal life for all God's people, and that life begins here and now.

## A WITNESS TO THE RESURRECTION

It's been many years since the death and resurrection of Jesus.  
Why do we still believe in resurrection?  
Because the Spirit of the risen Christ is still with us.

And the community of faith is a witness to the resurrection.

As followers of Jesus, the Spirit of God in Christ has come into our lives.

We are changed people because we have received this message of forgiveness and new life.

We will never be the same.

And that equips us to proclaim a hope that is eternal.

Today's lesson from the Book of Acts is an example of how the community faith keeps alive the hope of resurrection. Let's review what we've learned so far.

After the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, the disciples were filled with the Spirit of God.

This transformed timid disciples into bold evangelists of the faith.

They preached a message of repentance and forgiveness.

They baptized thousands in the name of Jesus.

And when they were interrogated by the religious authorities, the apostles said that they had no choice. They had to preach the gospel. They had to follow God instead of the rules of human beings.

Despite persecution and the scattering of the disciples the power of the gospel was not diminished.

In fact thousands were healed and many more joined the church. Many more people followed the way of Jesus all over the ancient world.

Even Paul, the great persecutor of the church was transformed into a proponent of the gospel by an encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. What could happen to top this?

Well, what about raising someone from the dead?

## AN EXAMPLE OF LOVE

There was a woman name Tabitha, and her Greek name, by the way, was Dorcas.

Perhaps we have her Aramaic and her Greek name because she was well known among both the Greek and the Jewish widows.

Tabitha or Dorcas was “devoted to good works and to charity.” No matter what name they used; everybody knew her and loved her.

She exemplified the love of God by the way she shared what she had with others.

Tabitha was an example of what drew people to the early church.

They were a community that shared.  
No one would go hungry in the Christian community.  
No one would be alone.

The early church measured their success by how well they took care of the least among them.

They remembered the great mandate that Jesus gave his disciples on Maundy (Mandate) Thursday.

Disciples of Jesus should love one another as Jesus had first loved them.

And Tabitha was one of the best at following the great commandment.

What do people remember when a person dies?  
They remember their good works and their acts of charity.

And they often bemoan the fact that this person is gone.

Tabitha’s good works certainly had an impact after she was gone. And I think that those who loved her refused to believe that her life was really over.

## UNUSUAL CIRCUMSTANCES

When she died they washed her body, but they did not anoint her body for burial.

Instead, they laid her body in an upper room.  
And they waited with her.

I wonder if there is some symbolism here.

After all, it was in an upper room that the disciples took the last supper.

Maybe Luke is signaling that this story is going to be unique. In another upper room something of significance is going to happen. What is it going to be?

The people who loved Tabitha did something else that was unusual. They sent two men to find Peter in a nearby town with an urgent message, "Please come to us without delay."

If Tabitha was already dead, what was the rush?  
But, the men went, and Peter went with them right away.

Apparently in the community formed by the resurrection, they thought anything was possible.

The ministry of Jesus was being continued in the ministry of the apostles.

The kingdom of God was coming to earth through the power of the Spirit.

And that meant resurrection power was loose in the world.

When the church is empowered by the Spirit of God in Christ, anything can happen.

## JARIUS' DAUGHTER

In fact, the details of this story remind me of another story in the gospel of Mark. (Mark 5:35-43)

In that story Jesus was on the way to heal the daughter of a man named Jarius.

But, they got word on the way that the little girl had died. The people said, "Don't trouble Jesus any more. She's dead. There's nothing that can be done."

But, Jesus wouldn't accept death as the final answer.

He told Jarius, "Don't be afraid. Have faith."

When Jesus and his disciples made it to the village the funeral was already in progress. Professional mourners wailed like banshees.

And Jesus said,  
“Stop wailing.  
The little girl is just sleeping.”

And they laughed at Jesus.

But, Jesus had the last laugh.  
He put everyone out of the room except the mother and the father of this little girl.

Then, Jesus took her by the hand and said, “Little girl, get up.”

And she got up and had breakfast.  
Apparently when Jesus was around, anything was possible.

In Mark’s gospel everyone is told to keep this story hush, hush.

## RAISED FROM THE DEAD

But, in today’s story from the book of Acts, just the opposite happens.

Bringing Tabitha back from the dead causes the gospel to spread like wildfire.

Here’s how it happened:

In the upper room, Peter doesn’t encounter professional mourners.  
He encounters widows who have been personally touched by the love and generosity of Tabitha.

The Bible tells us that the widows are wearing the clothes that Tabitha lovingly made them, and they are weeping.

Peter sends everyone out of the room, and sinks to his knees in prayer.

And then he turns toward the body and says, “Tabitha, get up.”

She opens her eyes.  
She sits up.  
And then Peter takes her hand and helps her up.

Peter presents a living Tabitha to all the folks who were waiting outside. In the words of the Psalmist, Sadness was turned into joy. Now there was a reason to dance instead of cry. (Psalm 30:11)

And people heard about this.  
It became known throughout Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord.

That's the purpose of miracles, to bring people to faith, not faith in miracles or the miracle worker, but faith in the Lord. Miracles are signposts, pointers to the fact that a new day is coming, a greater salvation is possible.

Miracles are important.  
They play a role in the salvation story.  
But, when people began to focus on the miracles themselves instead of the gospel, then miracles become a distraction.

## SIMON THE MAGICIAN

There's a good example of this in the eighth chapter of the book of Acts.

A man named Simon was a magician in Samaria.  
He amazed everybody with his tricks and lots of people listened to him.  
Some even thought he was from God.

But, then one of the apostles, Philip came into town, and the people turned to the gospel.  
Simon was so impressed by the miracles and the signs that he was baptized.

But, he really wasn't a believer.  
He just wanted to learn how to do miracles.  
For Simon, the magician, this was just a more potent form of magic.

And when Peter and John came to town and the Holy Spirit came upon many of the people, Simon said,

“I’d like some of that Holy Spirit.  
That’s where the power lies.  
How much does it cost?”

Peter didn’t mince words. He told Simon,  
“May your silver perish with you.  
You can’t buy God’s gift with money.”

(This is why I’m very skeptical of people who connect their “miracle crusade” with the collection of money. You can’t buy a miracle.)

Miracles are a gift from God that are designed to produce faith.

## THE LIMITATIONS OF MIRACLES

Miracles were used by Jesus and the apostles as a sign of the kingdom that comes.

They were symbols of grace.

They were a foretaste of salvation.

But, miracles were not the point; they were not ends in and of themselves. In fact when people began to put too much emphasis on the miraculous, the miracles ceased.

You may remember that whenever it became apparent to Jesus that people just wanted miracles and had no interest in his message, he quit doing the miracles.

In Jesus’ hometown of Nazareth he didn’t do many miracles because they lacked faith.

Jesus consistently refused to perform “signs” when the religious leaders demanded them.

In John’s gospel Jesus miraculously feeds 5,000 people supper with only five loaves and two fish. But, when they return the next day for breakfast, and try to make Jesus “king” by force, Jesus refuses to do another miracle.

He told them that they needed more than bread.  
They needed the bread of heaven.

They needed the message of the Kingdom, the Gospel.

So don't focus too much on the miraculous aspect of this story.

If you do you'll miss the whole point.

Tabitha was brought back from the dead, but if that was the end of the story, it would merely be a curious anomaly.

And one thing is sure.

Tabitha would face death again.

This miracle wasn't resurrection.

It was merely an extension of life.

It was amazing.

It was not salvation.

## RESURRECTION, MORE TO COME

Resurrection is about rising to die no more.

Resurrection is about eternal life.

And up to this point we have only one example of resurrection, Jesus.

But, this miracle of new life and the entire story of Scripture points to the fact that there is more to come. The Spirit of God in Christ is alive in the world, today. God himself is with us, today.

In a thoroughly secular world that rejects the miraculous and refuses to share, the Christian community, the people of the Way still insist that there is another path.

It is a path based upon forgiveness. It is a new way of life that promotes generosity and gracious living. It is a hope that is eternal.

For the people of God,

Hope does not die with persecution.

Hope does not die when people spread lies about us.

Hope does not even die with death itself.

Don't misunderstand.

The story of Tabitha is unusual.

It was an out of the ordinary miracle that bolstered faith in the early church. And this unusual miracle was not often repeated.

Most in the early Christian community did experience the death of the ones they loved.

And it upset them very much.

There's an example of this in Paul's letter to the church at Thessalonica.

In that letter he addressed those who "grieved as if they had no hope".

We know what he's talking about. Most of us have experienced sadness like this at one time or another.

Grief can be very powerful.

Grief can take away hope.

Grief can take over our lives.

But, Paul said,

"I want you to remember that we look at things differently.

We look forward to a time when death will be no more. Just as Jesus died and rose again so those that are dead in Christ will rise again also.

The trumpet of the Lord will sound and the dead in Christ will rise first. And then we will all be with the Lord forever."

This hope is captured in the words of a very familiar gospel hymn.

[We're going to end the sermon this morning with the choir singing that hymn, and I want you to join in on the chorus. But, first I want to read the words to that hymn because sometimes in the joy of the melody we miss how profound those words really are.]

"When the trumpet of the Lord shall sound, and time shall be no more,

And the morning breaks, eternal, bright and fair;  
When the saved of earth shall gather over on the other shore,  
And the roll is called up yonder, I'll be there.

On that bright and cloudless morning when the dead in Christ shall rise,  
And the glory of his resurrection share;  
When his chosen ones shall gather to their home beyond the skies,  
And the roll is called up yonder, I'll be there.

Let us labor for the Master from the dawn till setting sun,  
Let us talk of all his wondrous love and care;  
Then when all of life is over, and our work on earth is done,  
And the roll is called up yonder, I'll be there."

Paul told the church at Thessalonica,  
"Comfort one another with these words."  
Let's do that.

The power of the risen Lord is still loose in our world.  
And we are witnesses.  
Easter just keeps on coming.

Amen.