

Sermon Fourth Sunday of Easter Year C Acts 9:36-43, 4.25.10

During the Easter Season the first readings which is usually comes from the Hebrew Scripture, are replaced with readings from the Acts of the Apostles. We do so because these are stories about the earliest followers of Jesus and how they respond to their faith in the post-resurrection period. In taking the time to read these stories, we can learn something about those early disciples and more importantly we can learn something about ourselves.

In the story today from Acts we hear of the death of a woman who was a Christ-follower named Tabitha (Dorcas) in Greek. We don't know a lot about her. We know she became ill and died. We also know she is loved by a group of widows who are gathered and mourn her death. We don't know if she's a Jewish woman who was given a Greek name or a Gentile who was given a Hebrew name. We know she has died and she associated with widows. These are two small details, but they are enough to tell us something important about her.

It is important for us to remember how widows were viewed during the time when this text was written. Widows were people on the margins of the community. Like lepers they lived on the edges of society. They existed outside of the traditional male-headed households. Their livelihood was often at risk unless they had children who could provide for them. They relied often on hand outs and charity. However, in this story a group of widows banded together in an

alternative community and loved Dorcas. We hear how they showed Peter the garments and clothing that she made for them. Whoever Dorcas was she was concerned about these widows and her death was a huge blow to the community.

This concept of widows as living on the margins might seem somewhat foreign for us today, unless we remember that less than 100 years ago there were no social safety nets for widows that we have today. Churches used to run homes established for widows who faced impoverishment. While widows are less on the margins of our contemporary society as they used to be we do not need to look far for those who currently reside on the margins of society. We need only scratch the surface to see how we continue to despise those that live in the shadows of our society and face stigmatization and prejudice. We still look down on those unable to “pull themselves up” out of poverty, we look askance at single parents, unwed mothers, the homeless, those receiving state assistance to live, those with disabilities, the elderly, gays or lesbians, those with HIV or AIDS, or immigrants. We don’t have to look far to see that many people in our culture are relegated to the margins of our society.

So, what can we learn from Dorcas. Whoever she was she was someone who became one in solidarity with the widows—with those on the margins. Her faith compelled her to enter into relationship with these women who were vulnerable to and on the edges of society. And, we

learn that her death dealt a blow to this community of women. She was gone and they grieved her death.

More often than not what gets attention in this story is that Peter resuscitates her and she is alive again. That part of the story sure fits nicely and neatly into this season of resurrection, but to miss the first part of this story is to miss something important. Dorcas, someone who was loved by her community, who cared for her community, *who “was devoted to good works and acts of charity”*, died and left a gaping hole in the community and they grieved her death.

As theologian Angela Bauer writes in regard to our own time, “we must also acknowledge the outrage that some of these “raising-of-the-dead” passages provoke among those who have prayed over deathbeds, only to see breathing stop and heartbeat cease. We must not overlook or minimize the painful and inevitable reality of death. Tabitha/Dorcas did die.” It’s easy to brush aside the death in favor of the resuscitation, but I don’t believe that’s the point of the story.

We must guard against the temptation to read passages like **Acts 9** as a miracle of life without death. To focus only on the resuscitation without recognizing the reality of the death can be alienating for those facing life threatening illness or death. One may become so focused on one's hope for a miraculous healing that one ends up silencing or abandoning those who may be facing death. The Christ-following community in Joppa does not do that. This community understands

that the real miracle is resurrection—that life extends beyond death. While I don't mean to minimize Peter's role in resuscitating Dorcas, the Easter Season is about resurrection—that in spite of very real death we live with Christ beyond the grave. This is why at funerals we say, "all of us go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia. Deaths and losses must be grieved rather than denied or explained away. The real miracle is what happens after we die—the promise of resurrection.

So, to summarize what can we take from the story of the death of Tabitha/Dorcas? I believe there are two major themes. First, Dorcas enters fully into the lives of a marginalized community. She shared her gifts with an alternative community of widows who banded together. She was willing to go to care for, identify with, and establish solidarity with those that the larger society relegated to the margins. This is our call today. We are to look to the margins, to identify with the sufferings of those who have been shoved to the edges of our society and use our gifts for their well-being. In short, we are called to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Secondly, we are to acknowledge the real miraculous healing that comes to those at death—the promise of resurrection. Dorcas truly died and was grieved by this community. We must weep with those who weep and acknowledge the reality or more importantly the necessity of death in order for the real miracle to occur—the miracle of returning to God the source of our being and

being united with Christ for all eternity. Alleluia Christ is Risen. The Lord is Risen Indeed.
Alleluia. And, so shall we be.