

New Vitality
Acts 9.32-43
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Easter 4C

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In the first half of Easter we've heard stories of uncertainty, caution, hesitancy. Friends and followers of Jesus are slowly processing what resurrection means both in their relationship with Jesus and in the actions of their daily lives. The story this morning moves forward now with boldness as the apostles are taking on the work of Jesus with absolute confidence. Chronologically, today's text skips past Ascension and Pentecost to a lesser-known story of resurrection.

At this point in the Acts of the Apostles, Jesus is no longer bodily with them. The Holy Spirit is present to them and working among them, through them, as the Jesus movement grows. First 3000 people convert then 5000 people convert, and those who follow devote themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. The writer of Luke-Acts wants to be certain the listening community knows, "The followers of Christ in the early church are continuing the ministry of Christ. The Kingdom of God continues to come to earth through the power of the Holy Spirit!"¹

Peter is part of a movement with thousands of followers, and he and the other apostles teach and heal exactly as Jesus did; so much so that they are arrested and interrogated for their actions. There's no sense of caution after we read of this intense interrogation. They do not scatter and hide in fear. As the pressure turns to these faith leaders, they commit themselves even more fully to teaching and ministering as Jesus did. The Luke-Acts writer tells us the Spirit of God was alive and pulsing through them as they united in their work. The whole group was of one heart and soul, shared all things in common, and expanded their work by healing the sick who came to them from far away. This work drew same attention that Jesus drew, and they were arrested and questioned again. Their actions now earned a cautionary flogging followed by release with the clear instruction not to continue teaching in the name of Jesus. Instead, they determine there is so much work to be done that the number of disciples officially must increase, and they name seven new leaders.

¹ <http://www.aplainaccount.org/#!Acts-93643/bhul0/570c0fb90cf21d11795750c1>

As the book continues, we're told of Stephen's arrest and execution and the leader Saul who looked on with approval. Miraculously, that same Saul has a dramatic conversion experience and becomes one of the loudest, most convincing apostles of them all. In rapid fire succession, the opening chapters of Acts tell us of this growing, dangerous, captivating Way and the men who are leading the charge. Until we get to Tabitha's house. At Tabitha's house we see there are Ways within the Way.

Peter is busy and pulled in many directions. Stephen has been killed. Thousands are looking to Peter for leadership. The movement is growing, new life is breaking out all around, and the apostles have many demands on them every day. Peter is going here and there, arrives in Lydda, heals Aeneas just exactly like Jesus would have done, and every single person in that town and the next one over comes to believe in the Jesus Way. His work is good work. He is actively drawing people toward a new understanding of who God is and how God moves.

And in the midst of all of this, the call comes for Peter to go to Joppa immediately. The newly minted apostle Paul has left with Barnabas for Tarsus, and Peter gets the call to go to Joppa. These are city names from an old, old story when God wanted to send a new word to people who had forgotten God's ways. We are supposed to remember the times when God has moved before and anticipate that God is moving again. Even in the life of a man who is doing very good work, there is a better life and better way available to him. Life upon life. Abundant life. That is what waits for him in this next upper room.

Peter gets the call to go to Tabitha's house. She's a woman of importance to all kinds of people and is called by both Greek and Hebrew names. She's a disciple—an actual named, female disciple—with great influence through the works of her hands and her home. She cares for widows, and they are doing their very best to care for her in the immediacy of her death. They have washed her body so as to possibly keep her alive—there is historical evidence that supports a first century belief that “if there were any recoverable life in a person on death's bed, then warm water would revive the body.”² Perhaps the widows have taken turns pouring water over her with great care in hopes they might buy some time until Peter arrives.

They laid her in an upper room but did not yet prepared her body for burial. Now that Peter has arrived, they surround him and weep and show him everything Tabitha made for them. The great love she had for them was evident in the work of her hands. She gave them home and survival and a second chance in a culture that didn't value their

² *Beautiful Things Happen*, p. 105

lives. This woman was subversive and reordering the standards of this world in the stitching of garments and in her acts of love.

Now think about how many words I have just spoken to get us to this point. All of that is weighing on Peter's shoulders. The loss of Jesus, the gift of the Spirit, the thousands of followers, the arrests and interrogations, the increasing apostles, the execution, the conversion, the growing geographical influence of Jesus' message, and the very real demands on Peter's energy, time, body, and giftedness. He stands there, with the sounds of grief echoing against the walls of that room, looking onto the body of a woman whose ministry defied the government and the religious order and the way society said things should be. **And every eye fell on him to DO SOMETHING at once.**

To determine what comes next, he gets quiet. He sends everyone out and silences the space. In the quiet of that upper room with just Tabitha's still body beside him, Peter begins to pray. He does what Jesus taught him to do: Find a quiet place, make a quiet place, get yourself to a quiet place. Be still and listen. And in becoming still and listening for the voice of God, Peter discerns what comes next. And what comes next is his call to literally follow in the words and way of Jesus. *Talitha cumi...* do you remember those words? Jesus took her by the hand and said, "Talitha cumi...little girl get up," and Jairus' daughter opened her eyes. Peter remembered, and in remembering he knew what would happen even before he spoke. He took Tabitha by the hand and said, "Tabitha, get up." She opened her eyes and sat up. The news spread quickly, and many more came to believe in the goodness of God.

And Peter decided to hold that sacred resting pace. Peter doesn't rush off. He stays in that place for a while. He doesn't just get still, perform a miracle, and then return to the hectic pace. He stays put in that place for some time.

It's a wild story. Just like the 153 fish from last week's gospel, the temptation is for us to lean so heavily on myth and metaphor that we no longer hear the good news for us today. **The lame walk, the dead rise, the world is transformed.**

We stand with Peter. We have denied Jesus and professed our love for him. We have committed ourselves to his way and then wandered off the path again. We have become so distracted that we don't discern at all what comes next in our lives. Peter is busy doing really good things in the name of Jesus, and yet he is drawn into this story of weeping widows and the disciple Tabitha in a way that seems to knock him off his feet. He is moved—compelled—maybe surprised by the impact Tabitha has with her life. Peter still needs to be invited back into the story of God.

Will Willimon writes, “It is not Peter who turns our history inside out but the story, the story which proclaims that our history is not closed and that there is someone, some subversive reality, there for the widows of this world.”³

I wonder what we are missing in our lives. I wonder what we are missing as a church. When we are busy with so many tasks and demands—that pace of life can fuel us and even trick us into thinking we’re choosing the best things because our calendars are so full and the calls and emails never stop. **But maybe God wants to surprise us with a better thing**, and we have to make space to be quiet before we can be surprised. Like Peter, let’s get still. Let’s pause the noise and the busyness and the demands that distract us. And when we do this with named intention—prayer, meditation, focused listening—scripture tells us that the Spirit of God will move, and resurrection will continue to happen in ways we least expect.

Deanna Hayden writes, “There are so many good, necessary things needing our time and energy. Who has the ability to put away all the distractions? But that is sometimes the most important thing we can do: put them all outside, kneel down and pray. What do we need to put outside? How will we make space to do the work of prayer, to pay attention to the nurturing of our soul?”

Apparently, Peter had decided he couldn’t do it on his own. He also realized he needed to put away the distractions. Because of this, the resurrecting power of Christ was seen and glory was given to God. Perhaps this is what it means to see the resurrection power of God at work in our lives. Souls can be remade; relationships can be transformed. The power of God—the Kingdom of God—isn’t meant to be accomplished through showy miracles or entertaining worship. It is accomplished through our willingness to move beyond the distractions of accomplishment and self-sufficiency. It is accomplished when we will make space to do the work of prayer and then allow God to raise new life in us. That is the resurrection power of God. That is a life resurrected.”⁴

The ones connected to the great story of God are not willing to stay within the limits put on them by the power structures around them. Peter, Saul, Stephen, Aeneas, the widows, Tabitha; they’re all acting outside of the scripts handed to them by their religious institutions, their culture, the political structures over them. They may forget sometimes, but they remind each other. They may think they’ve figured out how big

³ Will Willimon, *Interpretation: Acts*, pp. 85-86

⁴ <http://www.textweek.com/mkjnacts/acts9b.htm>

God's plans are, but they get surprised again and again. The story they are moving into offers them life upon life, and that same life is available to us today. Will Willimon believes in the power of story, saying, "Every time a couple of little stories like these are faithfully told by the church, the social system of paralysis and death is rendered null and void. The church comes out and speaks the evangelical and prophetic 'Rise!' and nothing is ever quite the same."⁵

I sense we are in a point in the church's history when we are standing in a crowded room with all kinds of demands and pressures echoing around us. There is much good work to be done. We are busy with many of the right things. We are holding up the garments of God's grace and saying, "See! Remember? This happened to me!" But we churches are also distracted pouring warm water over a dead body in hopes our sheer wills might keep her alive. That's what Abraham Heschel surely meant in saying, "Religion declined not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid. When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit; when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion, its message becomes meaningless."

Well we don't want that now, do we? We don't give our lives to dull habit and meaningless heirlooms. No, we give our lives to the great hope in the story which proclaims that our history is not closed and that there is someone, some subversive reality, there for the widows of this world and the loneliness of our hearts and the deeply held hunch that we are being drawn together for a purpose greater than we can imagine. We give our footsteps to the path of Christ Jesus. We whisper prayers and listen for the voice of God. And we hold a space for the movement of the Holy Spirit that just might lead us all to resurrection. Amen.

⁵ Willimon, p. 86