

“Resurrection” - The Rev. Jennifer Adams
April 25, 2010 - Easter 4C

I want to focus in on the story from Acts this morning in part because this book plays such a prominent role throughout the Easter season. Every Sunday, in Easter, one of the lessons is from the Acts of the Apostles and that’s because this book takes us beyond the story of what’s in the gospels Jesus’ life and death and resurrection and into the disciples response to their learning and experience of the Christ. Acts is the story of the disciples working out the impact of resurrection, figuring out what to do with the good news; it’s the story of how Resurrection dramatically changed the hearts and the lives of the disciples and how they changed others lives by sharing and living the good news.

And the story we heard today is an amazing one. Remember that by the point this story happened, Jesus has not only risen but ascended and the disciples were on their own, sort of. The spirit had already come upon them (that happened in Chapter 2 of Acts and we’ll hear about in a few weeks). And the disciples had been gifted and sent forth. Sent to proclaim and to do the good news of Christ.

Now know that while they had seen a lot and experienced a lot, technically they hadn’t been given much training. There wasn’t a course on praying or preaching or even healing, no geographical analysis on which towns in the surrounding area might be most in need of what they had to offer. They just went in the direction of forth and did their best to trust that they had what they needed in order to do what needed to be done.

And so some of the disciples went to Joppa and learned that a woman named Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas (an unfortunate name if it had been given today – but not in ancient Greek). Dorcas had become ill and died. And judging by the little that we do know Dorcas was an extremely important person in their community. Not important because she held any sort of office or fame but because, “She was devoted to good works and to charity” the book says. So when Peter arrived on the scene there were many women gathered there, caring for the body, weeping and telling stories about their beloved friend. And so Peter, who knew that healing needed to happen and that he had been sent forth to do just that knelt down and prayed. Notice that before he did anything, he did that. Now we don’t know what he prayed and I have some thoughts about that. Maybe it was something like, “Dear God, why I have you put me here? I have no idea what to do and with all the stories floating around this town these people’s expectations are through the roof. I’m scared.” or “Remember that time, God, when I tried to walk on water and I sunk? Well, that memory is making me a little nervous right now. Help.” Or maybe Peter prayed something like, “I watched what you did with Lazarus, God and I saw what happened with Jairus’ daughter. You brought them back, how about some of that right here and right now.” Or maybe Peter prayed something like “Your will be done,” although knowing what we do know that wouldn’t have been very Peter -like.

When it comes right down to it, though it doesn’t really matter what he prayed. There doesn’t seem to be a magical formula to this healing stuff, which is maybe why the author of Acts didn’t include that detail for us to get stuck on. There was Peter kneeling and praying something. One

of my favorite lines of Anne Lamott's which you might have heard me quote before – Anne Lamott says that when it comes right down to it there are really only two prayers anyway, the one that says “Help me, God” and the one that says, “Thank you” and odds are good that Peter's prayer that moment when he was kneeling by the dead body of Dorcas was some version of the first.

Then, when Peter was done praying he turned to the body and spoke to the body and said, “Tabitha, get up.” And she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up which is probably when that second prayer of “Thank you” began to fill the room. And there was celebration and “many believed in the Lord,” Acts tells us. And that's about all it tells us. Peter stayed in Joppa with a certain, Simon and presumably Tabitha/Dorcas went back to doing good works and acts of charity with an amazing story to tell as she went along.

Now there's a lot here and we can't possibly hit it all this morning but I do want to highlight a couple of things.

The first is that this story tells us that Jesus not only told the disciples to go out and heal, he passed on to them the power to heal. And I want us to hear that. To feel that. To believe that. It wasn't only Peter that was given the gift of healing it was all of them, and all of us too. There are very few things that Jesus commands us to do but healing is one of those things: Forgive! Feed! Heal! And Love. About sums 'm up. And we've not only been sent forth with those things in mind, with those things to consider we've been sent forth with the power to do all of them. And doing healing is part of the response to resurrection.

But know also that healing doesn't always look like it did in this story. And I think that's one of the reasons we avoid it. I've knelt by bedsides and prayed my heart out and I've never had a dead person respond by opening their eyes. And that might only true of me, but I'm guessing not. There is mystery at work in the midst of this command to heal, there is mystery at work in the midst of all of those commands and while that may seem a little unfair, it's what makes it all holy and allows it to be beyond us too. If we could look at the body of a beloved one who had died, kneel down in prayer and invite them back to us we would. If we could touch every hurt, and pray and watch the wound immediately go away, we would. And we would all be without a doubt once and for all believers and we would all be flag waving, active, visible non-embarrassed-to-be-one healers. But sometimes, most times, all the times that I've been there anyway, those prayers don't get that kind of response. Often, the “help” we receive from the “help me” prayer doesn't look quite how we want it to look, doesn't look how we think it should look. BUT, and this is a big BUT I do believe that help comes and I do believe that healing happens because for every one Dorcas story there are hundreds and thousands of stories about mysterious sorts of hope that gets spread even in the midst of death. There are hundreds, thousands of stories and experiences about healings that don't include “the one who has died breathing on this earth again” but that do talk about those who are left on this earth breathing differently, loving differently, living differently, reconciling in moments that are offered them.

The often hard but also beautiful truth is that healing is more than simply reversing what the world has done. And resurrection is more than a woman who has died sitting up in bed and getting back to good works.

And it's that "more" is what we have been invited into and that forms the foundations of belief. And that kind of healing is what we have been commanded to do. The good news is that God always hears the "help me" prayer and God always responds. And together we can be the Body of Christ that is present to the need, whatever it happens to be and no matter what the outcome, in those experiences there promises to be the opportunity for a loud and strong, "Thank You, God." And maybe, just maybe that's what healing looks like after all. So go in the direction of forth and do it.

Amen.