

May 8th, 2022

Acts 9:36-43 “Yeah, Right”

So a couple of weeks ago, Mary and I were up in Canyon Oaks walking our dog Oreo with a friend who has a Labra-doodle named Penny. We like to walk the dogs up there because it's one of the few neighborhoods in Chico that has hills where everybody can get a decent workout. There's a golf course that runs through Canyon Oaks too which is great I suppose, but you've really got to watch out for golf carts on the roads. They don't make a whole lot of noise. They just kind of pop up out of nowhere and sometimes it startles the dogs. And that's exactly what happened on our walk with the dogs a few weeks ago. We were walking along and this guy in a golf cart came speeding up behind us as we were about to start down the hill. He had this huge Golden Retriever that was sitting in the back seat which, on most golf carts, is facing toward the back of the golf cart. So the golf cart passes us and this big old Golden Retriever is being such a good dog. She's just sitting there minding her own business but then our knucklehead dogs start barking and pulling on their leashes. Well we just bought Oreo a new harness because his old one was digging into his chest, but we didn't have it cinched up enough so he bolted ahead and slipped right out of his harness. And Penny breaks away from our friends' grip and takes off like a rocket after this cart. So they're both tearing after this golf cart but this Golden

Retriever is completely unphased. She's just sitting there enjoying the view when all of a sudden Oreo jumps up on this moving vehicle and knocks a bag of golf clubs halfway off the cart but the bag doesn't hit the ground because it's still attached to the bag holder. But this guy's golf clubs start spilling out all over the ground. All of a sudden the guy stops his golf cart and he is *not* happy. That's when Penny caught up to the cart and jumped in. Finally the Golden Retriever starts reacting to the situation. But instead of getting out of the cart or trying to keep our dogs off the cart this dog jumps up into the driver's seat and leans on the steering wheel. Meanwhile Penny gets up in the front seat too and starts pushing down on the pedal. Then Oreo just sat down on the back seat and he's got that, "I'm going to get in trouble for this" look on his face. So here we are running after the cart trying not to step on this guy's golf clubs, but by this time the dogs have gone off road onto the golf course and they're spinning donuts on the green all the while singing "Born to Be Wild."

What? You don't believe me? Yeah, I wouldn't either. What a ridiculous story, right? And there's probably nothing I could say that would convince you that this had happened, even if it had. And that's fine because it didn't. But it's interesting that you couldn't bring yourself to believe this story about our dogs, yet when I stand up here and tell you that a guy was executed, buried, and came

back to life three days later you're okay with that. He is risen. (He is risen indeed). See? You're still with me and that makes me happy. But I want to talk about when we read stories in the Bible that are hard to believe because they seem to have little or no connection with anything we've ever experienced.

The story of Peter raising Tabitha from the dead is one that we struggle with. When it comes up in the lectionary, a lot of preachers ignore it because it seems so out of place. We're not sure what to do with it. We're okay with Jesus raising Lazarus or Jairus' daughter or the widow's son from the dead, but this is Peter we're talking about here. And to complicate matters, there doesn't seem to be much of a point to this very short story. Tabitha died. Peter was in the neighborhood, so the disciples in Joppa summoned him. He kicked everybody out of the room, knelt by her and said, "Get up." She got up and an undisclosed number of people believed in the Lord that day. End of story. Maybe subconsciously we shy away from this passage because it's hard for us to believe and we're not sure what the takeaway lesson is.

But ... I'm willing to tackle this scripture because I don't think plausibility is a good criteria on which to judge the value of things. We need to be careful about how we write things off too quickly just because we've never seen it happen ourselves. Lots of wonderful things happen that

have never happened before. Maybe God is doing a new thing and new things are oftentimes good. Maybe the importance of this passage is not just as a piece of history. Maybe it isn't even history, but it is true in some other way. And ... maybe this story isn't all about Peter. Maybe it's about Tabitha.

First of all, Tabitha is identified as a disciple. Fun fact for the day - This is the only time in scripture that the feminine form of the Greek word for "disciple" is used. That's not to say that other women weren't disciples because the gospels make that very clear. The women who were at the empty tomb were disciples but using the feminine form of this word tells me that Luke wants to make it crystal clear that she is a *disciple*. She is a tried-and-true follower of Jesus who has laid claim to the mission and ministry that Jesus called her to do there in Joppa. Tabitha was also a widow, which meant she was at a disadvantage in that culture since men were the breadwinners in most families. There was no social safety net in that time and place to take care of widows. But Tabitha was skilled at sewing garments and was a widow among widows which tells me her particular ministry as a disciple was caring for other widows.

Now there are also some odd things about this story that we have to address if we're going to fully understand what it's about. Notice that nobody asked Peter to raise

Tabitha from the dead. They just wanted him to be present. Maybe they didn't have any expectations of him at all other than being present for a makeshift memorial service where they could honor Tabitha by displaying the garments she made. When they called for Peter, the women had already washed Tabitha and prepared her body for burial. That doesn't sound like they were expecting some sort of miracle. It sounds more like they were just grieving. But then Peter does something that seems unexpected. And it almost seems like he does this on a whim too. He dismissed the other widows from the house, then he knelt down to pray and simply said, "Tabitha, get up." Not, "In the name of Jesus I command thee to be raised from the dead." No, just, "Get up." Have you ever considered that maybe this resurrection was unexpected? That maybe Tabitha was someone who Peter knew as a faithful disciple who he just wanted a moment alone with to grieve and pray? Maybe the Holy Spirit nudged him to say, "Tabitha get up." Maybe he just said it because sometimes we say things like that to deceased loved ones when no one else is around? The scripture isn't very clear although I imagine that the former is most likely. As I've said before, this book is all about the acts of the Holy Spirit. It's just something to think about.

Then there's the matter of what Peter did after Tabitha opened her eyes and sat up. He took her by the hand,

helped her up and “calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive.” That sounds like a “Hey, come see what God has done!” moment. And that, in my estimation, makes this an especially inspiring resurrection story. We’re in the fourth Sunday of Eastertide, and we’ve been talking about the difference that the Resurrected Christ makes in our lives, especially in how it relates to what we do as Christ’s followers. But here’s a case where a follower of Jesus is resurrected ... maybe unexpectedly ... which for me makes it even more special. Perhaps this story is a call for us to rethink life and death as we know it. Easter boldly proclaims that death is not the end, yet the Easter story is much more than just the resuscitation of a body.

Tabitha was transformed by the Gospel from a widow into a *Mathetria* which is that word I told you about earlier that literally means, “female disciple.” And because of this, she transformed her community of widows into one that “devoted good works and acts of charity” by making clothes for the most vulnerable and least powerful among them. When she died, her death was deeply felt by this community. They called in Peter who, led by the spirit, raised her. When he showed them that she was alive, maybe it wasn’t about her *resuscitation* but her *resurrection in them*. As they honor her good works and are transformed by her witness, she lives on in the love she shared, the clothes she made, and the lives she

changed. Peter showed her to be alive in the community. Death cannot erase this woman's legacy.

This story, for me, is an invitation to vulnerable grief that leads to miraculous healing. Back in Acts 2, we are shown the fruits of the Holy Spirit's work among the newly born church. Verse 42 says, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." I think Tabitha's story is just another of example of how to be the church even in the midst of grief and mourning. It begs the question, "Can we be vulnerable with one another? Can we be open with one another and hold one another up in common loss?"

In the story about Jesus raising Lazarus, there's a lot of finger-pointing and blaming. "Where were you, Jesus? If you'd been around, Lazarus wouldn't have died!" There was none of that here in Tabitha's story. The widows in this story didn't come up with crazy reasons why she died like, "Well, she must have had some hidden sin in her life and that's what caused her death." They didn't share pithy little platitudes like, "Well, God just needed another angel up in heaven!" No, they simply honored her life and mourned her loss. And in the midst of that, *they* found healing and *they* were *resurrected* too.

God is always doing new things. God is constantly bringing life from suffering and death. But it won't always be the way we want it. Christ promises us that death is not the final word, that Easter happens again and again as Christ breaks through the boundaries of our belief and creates life in new ways. That's what this table is about. We come here and remember a tragedy – the breaking of Christ – but here we also find the makings of resurrection. As you receive communion, you are receiving the life of Christ so that resurrection can take place in you. And it doesn't matter if your faith is weak or strong, Christ will be here, offering his life so that you may be freed from the power that death tries to hold over us. God is here giving you life. Wherever death tries to threaten you or tries to hold you captive, God is present saying, "Get up." He is risen.