

EVERYTHING WE NEED

Easter 4 – Cycle C: Acts 9:36-43

I love these snapshots of the early days of the church we receive in the readings from Acts during the seven weeks of the Easter season. Last Sunday, we learned something about the Christian community in Damascus as Saul experienced it after his mystical encounter with the Spirit of the Risen Christ. Today, we become aware of the congregation of Christians at Joppa, later called Jaffa, and today annexed and surrounded by the City of Tel Aviv.

What we learn from today's First Reading is that there was a viable Christian community in Joppa, and that a woman named Tabitha was a significant member of that community. She was, apparently, renowned for her good works and acts of charity. We know of her significance to the early church, because when she died, her friends did not hesitate to send two messengers to Peter in Lydda, approximately 15 kilometres away. The congregation in Joppa clearly wanted Peter to join them in their grief.

When Peter arrived at Tabitha's home later that day, we learn that Tabitha was, in all likelihood, a businesswoman who made clothing. The widows who have gathered to mourn Tabitha's death show Peter her handiwork – tunics and other clothing she had made. These spare bits of information act like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle for readers of Acts: we start to see a picture of Tabitha and the early church coming together before our eyes. Tabitha's charity towards those in need was possible because she was successful in business. Clearly, she was gifted in designing and making clothing, but she probably employed several of the widows who had kept vigil with her during her final illness. We know from many references in Scripture that widows became the poorest of the poor upon the death of their husbands; part of Tabitha's charity was, no doubt, providing these widows with a livelihood by employing them as seamstresses. It is possible that Tabitha herself was a widow who used her gifts and skills to counter becoming poor upon the death of her husband. And we can assume that the information Luke provides concerning Tabitha's Greek name "Dorcas" and the fact that she made tunics suggest that her clients included the occupying Roman citizens of Joppa.

And finally, the upper room of Tabitha's house may have been a safe meeting place for the Christians in Joppa – their church, in other words. My guess is that she had converted the first floor of her house into a shop and, like many business people even today, she lived in an apartment, so to speak, above her business.

In Luke's account, something astounding happens. As Jesus did when he went to the bedside of the Jairus's daughter, so Peter asks all who are in the upper room where Tabitha is laid out, to leave. Again like Jesus with Jairus's daughter, Peter begins to pray at her bedside, and then turns to Tabitha's body and says, "Tabitha, get up." Tabitha opens her eyes and, seeing Peter, she sits up. Then he gives her his hand, and she stands up, and he calls in the men and women who had gathered to mourn. Peter shows her to her friends as alive. Luke understates this miracle, writing, "This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord." Luke, it seems, is more interested in describing the growth of the early church than in reflecting on the theological implications of Peter's miracle. In Peter's bringing back Tabitha, Luke indicates that the mission of the church in Joppa was not interrupted. Her good works and charity would continue as marks of Christian community. The church continued to prosper and grow.

But in the raising of Tabitha, you and I cannot help noticing that Jesus' miraculous power has clearly been entrusted to Peter and the church. His raising Tabitha from the dead is an incredible sign of how fully present the Spirit of the Risen Christ was within and among the members of the apostolic church. Peter, especially, was able to continue the full ministry of Jesus. Martin Luther, in reading these accounts, saw it as the golden age of the church – something he desperately wished to recapture for Christians of the late 15th and early 16th centuries. He said to his followers as this short passage in Acts 9 says to us this morning, 'Look at our inheritance! The very power and presence of Christ in the church gives us everything we need to continue his ministry in a world that has lost the capacity to hope; that has lost the ability to see life beyond the confines of birth and death. Christ's resurrection power delivers the church's mandate to proclaim life as more than mere existence; to proclaim the good news of God's presence in a world that is so in love with itself it cannot even imagine life in the Spirit, let alone understand it.' As

church, we must, as we sang last Sunday in that wonderful hymn in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* "rise like Christ arisen". We must receive the gift of Jesus Christ as God's full and final Word for the saving of the world; as everything we need.

The bombing of the Boston Marathon this week and our response to the destruction and loss of life the bombs caused show us how far we have to go in proclaiming life in the Spirit. It was a shock for me to hear President Obama appropriate the word "terrorist" to interpret for Americans the meaning of the bombing. Terror and fear, it seems, bring us to ground faster than death itself. Was President Obama being manipulative by using the word "terrorist" or was he so personally shaken by what happened that it took him instantly back to September 11, 2001? We may not know for a long time, but the power of the word "terrorist" had no trouble finding home among the people of Boston. If ever there were a measure of the post-traumatic stress of the events of Al-Qaida's attacks on the twin towers of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, this week's events provided it.

What was not widely reported was that immediately following the explosions in Boston, nearby churches immediately opened their facilities to provide refuge, comfort, and first aid for people who were either injured or traumatized by what had just happened. In the midst of death, life. In the midst of fear, calm. In the midst of evil, goodness. "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; for you are with me...You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies...and my cup is running over."

At the heart and centre of the mission of the people of God in Christ Jesus is Jesus Christ and his resurrection from the dead. It forms us to be alive in the Spirit, even when death does its worst. It calls us, as it called Tabitha, to good works and charity. It calls us to counter all the conditions and all the powers that take away life from earth and all its creatures. It calls us to be as devout and as faithful as Peter – to pray and then to act.

In many ways, we are Tabitha. We have amazing gifts which benefit many people. And it may be that we don't recognize or understand how deeply we bless those around us. But our life, certainly as a church, can be threatened. Like Tabitha who, Luke tells us, became ill and died, we are at risk. We are always at risk because evil seeks the upper hand in our fallen world. The good news of the gospel is that the death we fear so much does not have the last word. The ministry of Christ was not confined to his life on earth. It could not be contained, his resurrection proclaims. And for us, as surely as for Tabitha in today's First Reading, that ministry holds all its power and promise. It has lost nothing!

And so, we open our churches to welcome the world for whom death is the ultimate value; we open our hearts to show that the power of love is greater than the power of evil; we open our lives to God that we may take our place beside Peter to raise up our fallen world, proclaim life in the midst of death, faith in the midst of doubt, love in the midst of neglect and abandonment. In Christ's resurrection we have received everything we need to do God's saving and redeeming work, to be Tabitha, to be Peter, to be Body of Christ given for the deep needs of the world.