



WORKING TOGETHER

MAY 2, 2021 | ACTS 9:36-43

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The book of Acts tells the story of the early days of the Christian church, and it's a compelling and dramatic story: full of big personalities, conflict and persecution, humour, grand speeches, mighty acts and epic moments where the power of the triune God moves through these fledgling churches to express the good news to the world around them. Everything that happens seems to have a weightiness to it, a significance, whether it's a dream or journey or a conversation. But stories of hugely successful growth in numbers, great speeches, miraculous healings, long and arduous journeys, Christians in and out of jail...they're fun and inspiring to read, but it's challenging to really translate it into our time and place, into our own experiences of being Christian in 21st century Canada. And there aren't very many small-scale, pastoral stories in Acts that we could connect with, stories that show us what life together was like within those young and scattered house churches that made up the early Christian community.

The part of Acts 9 that we read together today is one of those rare small stories: there's no mass conversion to Christianity afterwards, no great sermon; everything happens mostly indoors, where no outsider can see. But even this small story has an epic heart: a woman, Tabitha, who died is brought back to life by the apostle Peter. If we are looking for a story, an image of the early church to connect with, it's difficult to see how this one might be it.

What do you think about that, Peter swooping in, after all hope is lost, to raise Tabitha up, back to life? How does it make you feel?

Our immediate reaction would probably be, this is amazing; what an incredible thing for Peter to do, how uplifting and encouraging this must have been for the church that Tabitha belonged to. A dead disciple, brought back to life, to continue with her good works and generosity, joy and awe bringing their mourning to an abrupt and happy end.

One of the most faithful and important things a Christian can do is read Scripture with an eye to figuring out how these ancient, living words speak to us anew, today. When we read this story, we are happy for them: happy for Tabitha, and happy for the men and women of her church, happy for Peter, too; we are amazed at Christ's power poured out in that place, at that time.

But beyond that, it's difficult to see how this story might speak to us today; resurrection stories of ordinary men and women like Tabitha can be a bit tricky, for us. Our faith and our modern worldview come into conflict, and so does our experience: nowadays, we don't see people coming back from the dead, hours or days after the fact. This kind of Scripture story is inaccessible to us, maybe even a little uncomfortable, deep down; the good news seems to be Tabitha's resurrection, and we don't really see that kind of good news, these days. It's a struggle to relate to any part of this story, other than the grief and the frantic activity, and that's not really a happy image of any church.

But if that is the part of the story we can connect with, then we'd best start there. Let's talk about Tabitha and what we can see of her church.

Tabitha was one of the pillars of her church, beloved and respected by her community. She was one of the first women to be named "disciple" in the early church, and she lived her faith by ministering to the vulnerable in her church community. She was a talented seamstress with a generous heart, and financially well-off, with a house large enough to have an upper room; seeing how comfortable her sisters in Christ were in her home and knowing how much space she had, we can speculate that Tabitha's home might even have served as a meeting place for her church community.

There are other church members in this story, too; there were the other Joppa disciples, who decided that Peter ought to be sent for, the runners who swiftly travelled the 25 miles from Joppa to Lydda, where Peter was. And there are the widows who benefited from Tabitha's generosity in her life, who now weep and mourn at her death, showing Peter the clothing Tabitha had made for them.

A quick reading of this Scripture left us with the impression of a church in mourning, each person acting in ways that expressed, were driven by, their grief, waiting for Peter to come and save the day. But setting aside for now the miracle at the end, I think what we're really seeing here is love.

Every person in this story was the face of the good news to one another. Tabitha, with her generosity towards the most vulnerable, was a witness to Christ's healing ministry in her life. The other disciples make quick, good decisions, using their gift of leadership to guide their church well. The men showed hope and compassion when they ran to find Peter. The widows gathered around Tabitha's bedside become a living embodiment of Christ's own loving presence in their vigil. Even Peter, part of this church for only a matter of hours or days, prayed over Tabitha and inspired healing.

This image of an early church reveals to us a community of believers that love one another, that have always worked together, and are still working together in this difficult moment. Ordinary people, united through Jesus, from all walks of life – men and women, wealthy and vulnerable – each with a unique and necessary role in the unfolding of this incredible, awe-inspiring expression of the good news of Christ's life-giving and healing power. We see no bystanders here; every person in this church acts differently, according to their gifts and capabilities; but they act together, and we see them loving one another in ways that redeem.

Let's turn now to Peter, and the incredible miracle. Peter was, of course, one of Jesus' disciples and he'd become one of the important leaders of the early church. Raising up Tabitha was not Peter's first miracle; he'd healed other people from crippling or long-standing illnesses, but she was Peter's first and only recorded resurrecting miracle. Peter himself, we know, was not the power behind the miracle; Peter was always very clear that he was recognising Christ at work, invisibly building up his church, and that it was Jesus' own power to heal that drove these extraordinary acts. In this case, Peter spends some moments in prayer, and then acts as the Spirit leads him to, commanding Tabitha to get up and she does, alive once more.

Tabitha's raising up is the second of a pair of healing stories in Acts 9; the runners from Joppa actually fetch Peter from the site of a previous healing of a paralysed man to come and help her. These days, we think of healing in terms of receiving treatment or assistance when we're hurt or sick, with the goal of returning us to our former condition of health. We cut ourselves peeling potatoes, and we wash it, pat it dry, put on the polysporin and a band-aid, and repeat until new pink skin covers over the injury. We become ill and need surgery, and we go to the hospital, recover from it, and hope to feel better afterwards. We struggle with anxiety or depression, and we seek help from a therapist or doctor, and accompanied by them, we work toward mental well-being once more. The intent behind healing is to fix our problems and pains, and effective medical care is an amazing blessing that we enjoy these days.

But as Christians, our definition of healing needs to be broader than that. When Jesus healed, he healed the whole person – body, mind and heart – with the intention to restore us, not to how we were before, but closer to who, in Christ, we are meant to be.

When Jesus healed, he sought to raise us up toward new, abundant life in him. When Jesus' disciples continued that healing ministry as the early church was built, they were pointing to Jesus and that new, abundant, resurrection life that we find through him.

For all that someone who has died being raised up back to life may seem far outside of our experience as Christians today, this glimpse of an ordinary church in its earliest days is a wonderful witness to what redeeming love lived out together looks like. Tabitha's church loved one another in a way that redeemed, that pointed to Christ and made them a place where people could experience that redeeming love first hand...whether it's the widows Tabitha helped or Tabitha herself, the disciples, the men who ran to Lydda and back, or even Peter, whose prayer and faith opened the door for Jesus to perform this amazing miracle.

This brief story in Acts stands in eloquent counterpoint to the big, evangelical moments, the rapid growth, the great sermons. That is how the church exploded across the world, propelled out of a backwater Roman province across Asia Minor and the Middle East. But this, this small pastoral story, shows us a church growing in faith and in their capacity to love one another redemptively. That's where the two halves of this story come together, Tabitha's church and Peter's miracle: both express the good news of Christ risen and at work in our world, both are signs that point people to Jesus as the source of that life-restoring, redemptively-loving power.

For us today, as a Christian church in Sarnia, this story is both a challenge and an example. Not that we should be trying to recreate Peter's mighty miracles, necessary then to proclaim the good news. Instead, if you remember from last Sunday, this story is an example of loving one another in ways that redeem, helping us to see how we, too, can point to Jesus, how our church becomes a sign of his love and power and grace. That's how we can connect with the healing and resurrecting miracles in Acts; those big, awe-inspiring acts were how the church pointed to Christ's redeeming love-in-action in that time and place. The challenge for us is to prayerfully discover our own new, unique ways of expressing that same good news for our time and place today. Thanks be to God. Amen.