

“Holy Work” April 29, 2007

Rev. Broadbent:

I have to admit. I giggle when I hear the name Dorcas. We used to call each other that in elementary school, right. A derivative of Dork. Well, those who were friends of Dorcas would have heard something totally different, for the Dorcas and the word, Tabitha, both mean gazelle. It is really the opposite connotation to the one that I first heard.

You probably can guess why this story is part of the Easter lectionary. It is the story of a person being raised from the dead, this time by Peter. Unless we are tempted to read this with too much literalism, we should remember that Bishop John Shelby Spong is coming next weekend; and he will disabuse us of any inclination to do so.

What do I mean? Well, what Spong says about the resurrection and other miracles is that they are not history. They do not describe events as they actually happened, rather they are interpretive. They are attempts to describe the Jesus experience. The attempt, given the limitations of our language, to describe the amazing, incredible, life-giving mystery that was found in Jesus' life and ministry.

This story is no different. There probably was not a literal raising of the dead, of a person, by Peter. But there is a very important and powerful message in this text for us that perhaps can only be told through an impossible story.

It is important to remember that Acts is Part Two of a larger work. Part One is what? The Gospel of Luke. We know that these two books were written by the same person, and so their placement in the New Testament is a little awkward, because the Gospel of John is in between them. But we do know that they are written by the same person for a lot of reasons. The most obvious is that in the opening paragraph of each, the writer addresses someone named Theophilus.

Theophilus probably was not a historical person. Consider the name and what it means – “Theo,” God; “philus,” lover. The writer of this book wrote his account to the one who loves God, and we are to read it in that same way.

There are wonderful details in this short passage. The first of which is that Tabitha and Dorcas both mean gazelle. We know that this person was devoted to good works and acts of charity, and she became ill and died. When they, her community, had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. Then they called on Peter.

As we read through this, we need to pay attention to the many parallels with stories that are in the Gospels that have to do with the raising of someone from the dead and back to life. Do you remember the story of Lazarus? Lazarus' friends and sisters came out to find Jesus and to say, “Do not delay.” But Jesus had this almost cavalier

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attitude. He kind of took his time, and he was too late. Lazarus had died by the time he had arrived.

The details are a little bit different here with Dorcas – and then they send for Peter. They send for him to come without delay. That is a very interesting parallel. Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs.

Now this next line, I think, is one of the more beautiful lines in the New Testament. “All the widows stood beside him, weeping, and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them.” These were not paid mourners, which was one part of the culture. You would pay folks to come and mourn so that it would become a public event, especially in the case where somebody was not very well known. It was not the case here with Dorcas. They were weeping, and you can imagine them holding these tear-stained garments that she had made that had now become precious to them. They smelled like her. They had the distinctive knit that she had done.

It makes me think of our prayer shawl ministry, which I know a lot of you have already thought of, which meets here weekly to pray and to knit together. How precious those people have become to each other, and how precious those prayer shawls have become to them and to babies and to others who have received one. Precious.

It is important that their widows – see, widows were particularly vulnerable in this culture. They did not have the prestige of their husbands, nor any more the financial support. So it is clear that this is a community of widows who have come together, and Dorcas is their leader. They have gathered together to create really a society of good works on behalf of others. And Dorcas is showing them the way and encouraging them to share with the wider community. Tell them they are missing a great sermon. Peter put all of them outside.

Earlier in Luke, there is a resurrection story, this time by Jesus. It is the girl, the daughter of the synagogue teacher. In that same story, Jesus puts everyone out of the room, except for a few select disciples. Then he says to the girl, “Child, get up.” This same account in the Book of Mark includes the Hebrew words, which are “taletha cum,” “Child, get up.” “Tabitha, cum, get up.” Do you see the parallels? It is really the same story, told again.

The point here is the resurrection power, God’s power, to raise Christ from the dead, to say, “No, death, you do not have the last word. There is one more that has been extended.” It did not stop then. It has been extended, and it has been given to the early church. And the early church, like Dorcas giving it to her followers, who then gave it to their followers, who have given it to their followers, who gave it to us.

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Whoa. The resurrection power, in our hands, in our midst, and let us not get caught up in wondering whether this is a literal story, because that is not the point. The point comes slightly later in verse 42. “That this became known throughout Japa, and many believed in the Lord.” That is the point of the story – that something happened, and many believed.

You know this was written by a man, right? Because, as I read it in that verse, the “this” that is becoming known is Peter’s work of resurrection. But I actually think that if you pull the male telling of the story out of it, the “this” that happened, were Dorcas acts of charity. That is the gift that had been given. How do we explain the wonder and the power of that gift? That even when Dorcas died, she lived on – in her works and in those who were gathered around her.

One of my favorite preachers is Barbara Brown Taylor. I feel like I know her intimately, so I call her BBT; but she would probably not like it if I called her BBT. She is an Episcopal priest, and she is a professor in Georgia. She wrote in a recent article that I read in the *Christian Century* that “perhaps we’re setting ourselves up for failure when we talk about the need to be Christ-like.” How many of you would say you are pretty close to being Christ-like? Okay, good.

Maybe we would be better off looking at the disciples and trying to be Peter-like or Dorcas-like, because these people, we understand, have limitations. They doubt; they fall short; they rebound for awhile. Their faith burns hot for awhile and then cools off. Like Dorcas despite all the good works, she still becomes ill and dies; and they weep. Maybe we would be better off being more Dorcas-like and walking in her footsteps.

This comes to mind on Teacher Appreciation Sunday, because Sunday School teachers, you are not expected to be in any way Christ-like. Disciple-like? Sure. The best you can.

I mentioned last week that I had spent the previous week in Saint Louis at a Stephen Ministry Training. As the conference opened, they started with an introduction on what is Stephen Ministry, which I know is still a live question for a lot of you. They opened the conversation by saying this: “What do Stephen ministers do? Stephen ministers show up.” That’s 90% of what Stephen ministers do. They show up. They are there.

I think we can apply that to our Children’s Ministry programs. What do Sunday School teachers do? They show up. I’ll bet you can remember one of your Sunday School teachers. If you went to Sunday School, you could probably think of one of them. Now try to think of an exact line that they told you. I cannot do it. I cannot think of a single thing they told me. But they showed up.

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When they were recruited, they probably went through the same kind of questioning that all of us go through when we are asked to do something like that. “Well, I’m not really qualified. I don’t really know the Bible very well. I don’t know what I’d say. Those kids have so many questions. What would I do?” Eventually, they would say, “Yeah”; and they showed up. Their presence there became the presence of Christ, in the form of a faithful, not perfect disciple.

As we move forward, in all the ministries of this church, may we realize that we have been passed on the power of resurrection, the power of new and renewed life. From Christ himself, yes, but always and only through human vessels. It is in their footsteps that we now walk.

Amen.