

## RESURRECTION POWER

Acts 9:36-43

April 25, 2010

In another church, on another day, a pastor was speaking about heaven and the eternal bliss and the joy that are awaiting each person on the “other side.” He paused for effect and asked, “How many of you here are ready to go to heaven?” Everyone in the congregation raised their hands except for an eight year old boy sitting on the front pew. The minister asked, “Don’t you want to go to heaven, Son?”

The boy replied, “Yes, but I thought you were making up a load to go right **NOW!**”(Anonymous. “Timing is Everything.” James Hewett, ed., Illustrations Unlimited. Tyndale Press. 1988. pg. 174.

If we are honest with ourselves, most of us, if we were asked today, are not ready to be on a load to go right now.

Notice I didn’t say all of us. On a visit last year with Nita Hampel, one of our centenarians in the church, she said very clearly that she wished the Lord would come and take her sooner rather than later. Though she’s still fairly healthy, and will probably be around a few more years, if St. Peter were taking reservations for the next load up—Nita would raise her hand to be included.

But she’s an exception to the rule. Most of us look forward to the fullness of life that yet awaits us, much like that of the eight year old boy in the story.

I wonder if Tabitha was ready to go or not.

Tabitha—how many of you knew that Tabitha was a biblical name? If you grew up in my generation, when you heard the name “Tabitha,” you would have pictured the cute little daughter of Samantha and Darren Stevens in the old TV sitcom Bewitched.

But the woman in our scripture is far from a “witch.” Luke identifies her as a disciple, which might be a little surprising for those of us who thought that only 12 men were disciples. In truth, the word “disciple” means “student” and there

were many people beyond the 12 who were disciples/students of Jesus, both men and women.

Still, Tabitha, (or Dorcas as she was known by her Greek name), must have been an exceptional disciple to have been listed by name in Luke's sequel to his gospel, called the Book of Acts. In fact, we are told that she was renowned for her good works and charity, an extraordinarily giving person.

We don't know from our reading this morning about Tabitha's state of mind as to whether she was ready to go to her heavenly reward. It sounds as if her illness came on suddenly—and severely.

What we do know is that there were people in her life who were not ready to let her go. Standing beside her deathbed were her friends who wept over her, holding the clothing she had made them in her lifetime. Just the manner in which Luke describes her "visitation" lets you know she was someone special. Usually, most people were taken to a local tomb after the body's post-death preparation was completed. But Tabitha's body was left in the house—lying in state as if she were someone of importance.

And she was, to those people in Joppa. They stood beside her deathbed and wept over her, holding the clothes she had made for them in her lifetime.

Some of her friends knew that Peter was visiting in the neighboring town of Lydda, so they sent word to him about her death. Peter--the disciple who had denied Jesus, now redeemed and leading the apostles with his miraculous work—Peter came, representing the resurrected Body of Christ.

I'm not sure what they expected him to do. Perhaps he was known as a great funeral preacher. Perhaps since their friend was so great a disciple herself, they thought that only the leader of the Christian movement would be appropriate to offer last rites.

So they may have been surprised when he entered the upper room and ordered all the mourners to leave. Once the room was emptied of all but himself and

the corpse, Peter knelt by the bed and prayed. Then he turned to the body and commanded, "Tabitha, rise."

When she opened her eyes the first thing she saw was Peter. Now this was before all the "St. Peter at the pearly gates" jokes, so we can only imagine what her first impressions were upon! Perhaps it was something like the woman who woke up from an anesthesia-induced sleep after surgery. From far off she heard church bells chiming. The woman murmured, "Am I in heaven?" Then she looked up and saw her doctor, "No, I can't be; there's Dr. Campbell." (Ibid., "The Sure Sign")

In The Message paraphrase of the Bible, Eugene Peterson describes Peter holding out his hand to the prone woman and raising her to her feet, then calling the others back in to show that she was alive and well. And there was much rejoicing!

What on earth do you and I do with this story? Clearly, Luke, the gospel writer, wanted it plainly understood that the resurrected church of Jesus Christ--symbolized by its leader, Peter--had resurrection power itself. Clearly, Luke wanted it to be understood that Jesus had passed the baton to Peter and to the Body of Christ that was to become the Christian Church, and that the church had the power to raise the dead to new life.

Ah—if only.

I can't tell you how many times I have stood by the bedside of one who is dying or has just died, and wished for that healing, resurrection power for the grieving family members. How wonderful it would be to have that power!

And, truth be told, we all know of miraculous medical stories of resuscitation that are almost common place now—of hearts stopping and, with life-saving CPR, started again. The fact that Byron Clark, a member of this church, is still with us is such an example. Immediately after his stroke, the doctor told Yvonne to prepare for the worst, but Byron surprised everyone by getting up out of his bed and doing as well as he has done!

Still, we have to agree with theologian Martin Marty who said of this text, "Church rolls haven't swelled because people sat up after having been dead," although that would be one answer to the decline in church membership!

But, Marty would say, one of the biggest gifts we as church have to offer the world is to be able to point to what is behind and beyond the realm of death, what Karl Rahner called, 'the abyss of mystery.'" The resurrection power of the church is to point to Jesus, the one who offers new life in all of its various appearances in our world.

Marty writes, "Through and in it all they have seen and known and experienced Jesus Christ's rising as something that breaks the mold and ushers in a new age in history, including in our personal histories." And so, hearing the witness of others, we can each of us learn and be strengthened and sometimes, even rise up when life presses in and trouble has us down. Like Paul getting back up on his feet on that dusty road to Damascus and beginning a whole new life and ministry, like Dorcas/Tabitha rising again to her ministries of compassion and generosity, we are invited to begin again and to taste the sweetness of new life lived...." (cited by Kate Huey in the UCC e-journal "Weekly Seeds," April 19-25, 2010)

Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann echoes this sentiment that Luke's purpose in sharing this story was to emphasize for us that Peter—who represents the resurrected church of Jesus Christ—is entrusted with the resurrection power of Jesus himself. The church is entrusted with the power to create new life. . .bodily, concretely, locally."  [Blogging toward Sunday](http://www.theolog.org) April 24, 2007, www.theolog.org

Perhaps my friend and colleague, David Emery, pastor of Middletown Christian Church in Kentucky, had it right when he gave his sermon entitled "Sharon Watkins is going to Hell." No, Dave doesn't have it in for the General Minister and President of our denomination. Instead, he sees her work—indeed the work of all Christians—as following Jesus into the darkest depths and opening the gates of hell, holding out a hand and raising people from hell into the freedom of God's grace. That's the resurrection power we've been given.

We are all invited to go into hell with our resurrection power, and hold out our hands to raise people to the promise of new life on this earth—and eternally.

That's our mission as disciples of Christ—to call out to the Tabitha's of today to live anew.

And how do we as church offer that resurrection power?

First, we are called to use our resurrection power by being the community we were created to be for one another. Tabitha was known for the way she cared for the members of her community, and they, in turn, cared for her. There is power found in a caring community of faith that comes alongside one another when trouble hits in hospital rooms or in courtrooms. There is power that comes from the gift of presence that infiltrates and conquers the hell of loneliness.

Second, we are called to use our resurrection power to speak on behalf of the downtrodden and the misbegotten. I remember feeling that power when a group of churches in Tucson banded together and went before the school board on behalf of a local elementary school in the mid- 1990's. That elementary school was on an Indian reservation, and for some reason, it had had no air conditioning in several years. Think about it—no air conditioning in the Arizona desert!

But when good Christians came together and joined their voices with a community that wasn't used to speaking out for themselves, the children were soon learning in a comfortable, air-conditioned environment.

And finally, there's a mysterious power found in the sacramental worship we weave into the rhythm of our weeks. It's mysterious because it's unexplainable, and yet new life is experienced through the familiar rituals of worship in which we participate—even today.

Author Sara Miles' life is a testimony to that. Raised as an atheist, Sara Miles lived an enthusiastically secular life as a restaurant cook and writer. Then early one morning, for no earthly reason, she wandered into a church. "I was certainly not interested in becoming a Christian," she writes. "Or, as I thought of it rather less politely, a religious nut."

But then, one early, cloudy morning when I was forty-six, I walked into a church, ate a piece of bread, took a sip of wine. A routine Sunday activity for tens of millions of Americans — except that up until that moment I'd led a thoroughly secular life, at best indifferent to religion, more often appalled by its fundamentalist crusades. This was my first communion. It changed everything.

Eating Jesus, as I did that day to my great astonishment, led me against all my expectations to a faith I'd scorned and work I'd never imagined. The mysterious sacrament turned out to be not a symbolic wafer at all, but actual food — indeed, the bread of life.

In that shocking moment of communion, filled with a deep desire to reach for and become part of a body, I realized what I'd been doing with my life all along was what I was meant to do: feed people.

And so I did. I took communion, I passed the bread to others, and then I kept going, compelled to find new ways to share what I'd experienced. I started a food pantry and gave away literally tons of fruit and vegetables and cereal around the same altar where I'd first received the body of Christ. I organized new pantries all over my city to provide hundreds and hundreds of hungry families with free groceries each week. Without committees or meetings or even an official telephone number, I recruited scores of volunteers and raised hundreds of thousands of dollars.

My new vocation didn't turn out to be as simple as going to church on Sundays, folding my hands in the pews and declaring myself 'saved.' Nor did my volunteer church work mean talking kindly to poor folks and handing them the occasional sandwich from a sanctified distance. I had to trudge in the rain through housing projects, sit on the curb wiping the runny nose of a psychotic man, take the firing pin out of a battered woman's .357 Magnum, then stick the gun in a cookie tin in the trunk of my car. I had to struggle with my atheist family, my doubting friends, and the prejudices and traditions of my new-found church. I learned about the great American scandal of the politics of food, the economy of hunger, and the rules of money. I met thieves, child abusers, millionaires, day laborers, politicians, schizophrenics, gangsters and bishops, all blown into my life through the restless power of a call to feed people, widening

what I thought of as my 'community' in ways that were exhilarating, confusing, often scary.

Mine is a personal story of an unexpected and terribly inconvenient Christian conversion, told by a very unlikely convert: a blue-state, secular intellectual; a lesbian, a left-wing journalist with a habit of skepticism. I'm not the person my reporter colleagues ever expected to see exchanging blessings with street-corner evangelists. My own family never imagined that I'd wind up preaching the Word of God and serving communion to a hymn-singing flock."

Sara Miles' life was changed by the resurrection power of this table, and in turn, she is feeding that same resurrection power to her world.

Resurrection power is mysterious. It can raise a woman from the dead, and it can raise the dead places from living people.

And Jesus left us with the power of resurrection in our hands.

Do you feel it, church? Are we empowered to use it, church? What will we do next?