

Good morning! This Easter season we have been contemplating- what *is* the good news? And I have been a bit surprised to find that, for me, Easter is not so much about one exciting event or believing in a particular miracle. The good news is not that Jesus popped back out of the grave like some kind of divine jack-in-the-box. Easter- like all of Jesus' life, and all of the Bible, and much of my own life- is about the question of the character of God. The thing that Christians don't often talk about on Easter is that people being raised from the dead was extraordinary, but not unique. Even in modern times, stories of individuals coming back from the dead happen every so often. Sometimes we have a glimpse into the science behind the miracle; in other cases, our understanding of the scientific process that resulted in a miraculous occurrence remains opaque.

But regardless of how we understand or explain various extraordinary events, the fact remains (as Ron pointed out 2 wks ago) that miracles generally don't solve problems in any permanent way. If bread is multiplied to feed five thousand people, they will be hungry again the next day. If someone is healed of a terrible illness, they will be healthy for awhile, but they will become sick again. If a person is raised from the dead, they will live longer, but someday they will die and stay dead. With few exceptions: Elijah and the fiery chariot. Jesus after the resurrection.

This is a different way of thinking about miracles for me- not just the ones in Jesus' lifetime, but thinking about all the stories of miracles I can remember offhand in the Bible- I wonder if this same principle holds, that *none of them solved the real problem permanently*. Perhaps it depends on what we think the "real problem" is. Or maybe the issue is whether *our* conception of the problem of the human condition is the same as how God sees the situation. Some parts of Christianity understandably see the problem as sin. Which, with all the violence in the world, makes sense. But while I certainly wouldn't say that human beings hurting and killing each other is not a problem, I suspect that human violence is more of a symptom of the problem than the crux of the issue. I find myself wondering, what then, from God's point of view (which I think we are supposed to try to contemplate, even as we know that we cannot completely grasp it), is the issue? What are the miracles- the science, the extraordinary coincidences- pointing to, if they are not the solution in and of themselves?

To consider these questions together today, we will look more closely at the life of a particular disciple. Let's pause for a second and think of all the disciples names that you know, and then we'll see which one is featured in today's story. (Everybody have a name or two in mind?)

In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (in Greek her name is Dorcas). Her life overflowed with good works and compassionate acts on behalf of those in need. About that time, though, she became so ill that she died. After they washed her body, they laid her in an upstairs room. Acts 9:36-37 (CEB)

The first thing I want us to notice in this story is that Tabitha is named as a disciple. In a time when history was largely written by men about male main characters, it feels significant that Luke the writer starts by saying that there was a disciple. Who was named Tabitha.

Tabitha died before she was finished living. She was interrupted in her work as a disciple, following Jesus' example in his life of taking care of people in need. Tabitha wasn't done yet. As most of us are really not finished when we die. There is more we want to do, more living to be done. And as we discussed last week, Jesus also had more he wanted to do too- more teaching, more healing, more feeding- before death interrupted him.

The story of the disciple Tabitha is an interesting and unusual case. Not because she did good things. And not because she became ill. And not because she died. This, as we all know, is the story of humanity. The people we love the most; people who change our world and bring the kingdom of God into our lives here and now. They die. And we are left bereft.

No, the strange thing about this story is that the people around Tabitha seemed to have a sense that this wasn't the actual ending. That something had gone awry and that perhaps a different ending could be written. And so they called for help, put out the word for a second opinion about what could be done with the abrupt interruption of Tabitha's work and life.

Since Lydda was near Joppa, when the disciples heard that Peter was there, they sent two people to Peter. They urged, "Please come right away!" Peter went with them. Upon his arrival, he was taken to the upstairs room. All the widows stood beside him, crying as they showed the tunics and other clothing Dorcas made when she was alive.

Peter sent everyone out of the room, then knelt and prayed. He turned to the body and said, "Tabitha, get up!" She opened her eyes, saw Peter, and sat up. He gave her his hand and raised her up. Then he called God's holy people, including the widows, and presented her alive to them. The news spread throughout Joppa, and many put their faith in the Lord. Acts 9:38-42 (CEB)

This is an odd story. All of the twelve disciples- the ones who were previously named as chosen to walk with Jesus for three years- at some point, they all died. None of them were raised from the dead, or were taken up to heaven without dying. In fact, for Peter himself, some of the last recorded words that Jesus spoke to him were about how Peter was going to die:

I assure you that when you were younger you tied your own belt and walked around wherever you wanted. When you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and another will tie your belt and lead you where you don't want to go." He said this to show the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. After saying this, Jesus said to Peter, "Follow me." John 21:18-19(CEB)

So, being excused from death, or having one's life extended when death seemed to come too soon, was not the expected experience for the disciples. This was not a formula, for them or for us. We can't dissect the story to discern whether if we just had more faith, or prayed harder, or believed, or did enough good works, or a bunch of widows cried, we could get someone raised from the dead. Or wakened from a coma. Or whatever scientific process was unleashed when Peter prayed.

If the miracle is not replicable. If it is not a formula that we can repeat. If Tabitha is going to live a bit longer, get more of her life work accomplished, and then die again before she finished, what is the point? What problem, if any, did this resurrection solve?

This is a story of how God acted in the world, **(slide of that part of the world)** the inspired writing of events as people experienced God's presence and intervention in their lives. It is not a puzzle to be solved with one right answer, or a code to unlocking a secret formula. The enigmatic beauty of the divine is a mystery that we are meant to seek, always learning, increasingly knowing, but never capturing or defining. God is at work in myriad of ways, never becoming bored by doing the same things in the same manner in infinite repetition. Perhaps infinite variation, but not replication. Our seeking to know is the beauty (and sometimes frustration) of process, not necessarily destination.

And so, in this story, I am looking for the good news. What is (slide) **The news that spread throughout Joppa, so that many put their faith in the Lord?** Because I don't think the good news is that God has power over death. We believe that, let's say, but people- including us- keep dying. So what *good* does it do to believe that God has power over death? How is that news? Or how would that be good news when we observe that 99.9% of the time, God doesn't seem to exert that power on our behalf, at least in any visible way to those of us who are alive on earth.

So what is the faith that is the result? There is no mention of sin in this story. That doesn't seem to be the problem or part of the solution. And everyone knows and expects that Tabitha will die again at some point. So eternal life is not the issue here either. It is neither mentioned nor promised.

And so I wonder if the central question, the human problem, is our conception of the nature of God. Maybe that is what we keep coming back to, starting with Adam and Eve, throughout the history of Israel, highlighted in the life of Jesus, witnessed by the disciples, and encountered on a day-to-day basis in our lives even now. Does God love us? What is God like? Can we trust God to want and work good for us- both here on earth and beyond what we can see in this life, for ourselves and for those we love.

On Easter, we talked about the idea that Jesus' mission was to change our minds about who God is- not to change God's mind about whether or not God could forgive us. **(slide)** And that Jesus' ongoing work- both pre and post resurrection- is to also change our minds about each other. To teach us that the unimaginable diversity of creation is also present in the unimagined diversity of human beings- all loved and desired as reflections and expressions of the goodness of God.

Jesus trusted that goodness. With his whole life. And spent his life exhibiting that the work of God, the reflection of God, is to heal, feed, and teach that the law of God is love. The good

news is that God's love and faithfulness is for all who want to be part of that kingdom of wholeness and goodness, and it extends beyond death. The good news is that Jesus is not confined to the pages of a book- great words and great deeds of a great dead hero. But that God has showcased God's faithfulness and plan for humanity by raising up Jesus to never die again. Jesus continues to speak, teach, and work in our lives and in our world.

But miracles- the ones that Jesus performed himself, or that Tabitha was raised from the dead- are not enough. **(slide)** Or at least, they are not the point. They don't necessarily solve the problem of our doubt that God is good. Our wondering if God is present or if God cares about our suffering. That, I think, is the main issue.

It is so hard for us to trust that God loves us more than any other human being who loves us. That God wants to be *with* us more than the human being who likes us the best wants to be with us. That God is eager to forgive, *more* than we can forgive the people we love who hurt us, or how those same people forgive us when we hurt them. The miracles are meant to showcase that God *does* want to feed us, *does* want to heal us, *does* want to teach us, and *does* want to resurrect us. The issue is whether or not we can trust that. For some of us, the miracles help us see that. But just as in Jesus' day, for many of us, the miracles are only part of the story. The issue is still the same. What do we believe about the nature of God?

And none of us can solve that for anyone else. We can tell our stories- from the Bible, of our own lives- of God's love and intervention. But the choice of belief, of how we view the world we live in, is up to each of us.

I mentioned earlier that the ongoing work of Jesus is to change our minds about each other. Sometimes that means we need a glimpse of what the family that God is putting together looks like. We need a vision of the scope of the plan, to see where we are headed. And so for that we are going to go to another disciple, who did not die until he had seen and written about what the fulfillment of that love and faithfulness will look like. John was exiled on the island of Patmos when he was gifted with a Spirit-inspired vision, a revelation of what is to come. Here is part of what he saw:

After this I looked, and there was a great crowd that no one could number. They were from every nation, tribe, people, and language. They were standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They wore white robes and held palm branches in their hands. They cried out with a loud voice:

"Victory belongs to our God
who sits on the throne,
and to the Lamb."

All the angels stood in a circle around the throne, and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell facedown before the throne and worshipped God, saying,

"Amen! Blessing and glory

and wisdom and thanksgiving

and honor and power and might

be to our God forever and always. Amen." Revelation 7:9-12(CEB)

All nations, all peoples, all languages. More diversity than we could possibly imagine. All reflecting the beauty and wisdom of God. That is the good news. That God's love is for all of us. Everyone is invited to take their place at the communion tables. There we remember that death comes for each of us, but it is not the end. That there is a feast to come, where we will be together with Jesus, eating and drinking in the kingdom of God. We are invited to taste of that promise together now, as a group around a table, or on your own when the crowd has dissipated. Whatever you might need for strength for your journey. Let's pray.