

April 25, 2010 - Rev. Joseph H. Hensley, Jr. [PDF] (Acts 9:36-43; Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30)

I asked Anne this week -- we're having a series in the Christian formation session about a holy death and a perfect end. And when we had this passage from Acts about Peter raising the disciple Tabitha from the dead, I said, "Did you plan it that way?" She said, "I would have loved to." I couldn't resist turning our attention this morning to Acts. And as I was considering it, I was remembering that sinking feeling that some of us have had in the middle of the night when the phone rings and we get up quickly because we suspect the matter may be urgent. We get up vaguely preparing ourselves to pick up that phone and receive whatever news is on the other end. Is someone in trouble? Has a baby been born? Has someone died? We rise from sleep hoping that it's a wrong number. A mistake. That we can go back to bed.

In the lesson from Acts that we heard this morning, the apostle Peter gets something of a call, an emergency call. The text doesn't tell us whether he was asleep. But the believers in Joppa come with a midnight urgency. "Please, come to us without delay," they say. Tabitha, also known as Dorcas, has fallen ill and died. The text tells us that she was a disciple -- a little bit of Bible trivia. She's the only woman in scripture given the title disciple. That she was devoted to good works and acts of generous charity. She took care of poor widows, even making clothing for them. She was probably one of those great persons. The kind of person whose loss leaves a gaping hole in the fabric of a community. "What will we do without her?" the believers must have wondered. And so they summoned Peter. His fame as a preacher and a healer has spread from Jerusalem to the coastal communities of Joppa and Lydda. The believers summoned Peter and we can wonder that they are not just calling on him to perform a funeral. They are calling on him to perform a miracle.

The text tells us that after Tabitha died, the believers washed her body and laid her in an upper room. Now, what's interesting is that no other details of burial preparation are mentioned. Believers do not prepare the body with salts or spices. You remember how when Jesus died, the text told us how they came to the tomb with spices to anoint the body. The text mentions no wrappings such as hung off Lazarus when he walked out of the tomb. And so in a story like Acts that is so intentional about little details, the mention of the washing but no other preparations for burial could very well imply that the believers were hopeful, indeed expectant, that through Peter God would do something amazing. "Please, come to us without delay," they say to Peter. They were preparing the body for a funeral, they were hoping for a miracle.

Now, I read about these believers, these early saints of the church, followers of Christ and I'm a little embarrassed to be called a Christian. I'm a little embarrassed because while these ancient Christians were prepared for a miracle and a funeral, I wonder how many of us so-called modern Christians are prepared for either. We tend to avoid funerals and few of us really believe in miracles anymore. The believers in Joppa washed Tabitha's body and placed it in an upper room. We usually hire professional undertakers to wash and prepare our dead, to keep watch with them and to take them to the grave. The believers in Joppa called an apostle Peter to bring their beloved Tabitha back to life. We hire doctors and technological wonder workers to perform our miracles, to resuscitate the dead. And I want to say that I'm very thankful for doctors and undertakers. Very thankful. What's embarrassing to me is not that we Christians let them work

for us, it's that we let them do all the work for us. Accompanying the dead to the grave is not just the work of ministers and funeral professionals. Healing the sick is not just the work of doctors and nurses. It is the work of all of us as believers to walk with the dead or the sick singing "Alleluia, Alleluia!" The road to the grave and the road to healing are for us roads to resurrection. Sometimes I wonder how many of us Christians are really prepared to walk those roads.

The saints in Joppa believed that Peter could raise their beloved Tabitha from the dead. They really believed this, I think. And to tell you the truth, I'm somewhat relieved that we don't seem to have their faith. I'm relieved that so far no one has asked me to restore life to a dead person. I'm relieved that most of us are pretty much resigned to the fact that when someone dies they are dead. They don't expect a miracle, and I'm not sure I'd want to be a part of one. That would really rock my world. I'm very comfortable telling people that a funeral is an Easter service. That we can rejoice in the midst of our grief because we will all be resurrected on the last day. I'm far less comfortable proposing the possibility that God would raise a dead person today. I'm very comfortable preparing for a funeral. I am far less comfortable preparing for a miracle. And so I must confess that I feel a little embarrassed to call myself a Christian because miracles are such a crucial part of the Christian story.

The text tells us that many heard about the miracle of Tabitha's raising and came to believe in the Lord. This miracle was a demonstration that through his followers Jesus, the Good Shepard, was still working and leading the sheep. In our time when we look at the greater society and we see faith waning, when people are finding it harder and harder to attend funerals, or even stop for funerals, or to believe in miracles or resurrection, when many of us would rather go on our way or hide under the covers rather than answer that phone ringing in the middle of the night, in such a time, what will make people believe in the Lord? What witness, what miracle might demonstrate that Jesus is still working, still leading? Jesus, who is both Shepard and Lamb? What miracle might demonstrate that Jesus is still loving the sheep through his believers?

Though I don't know that it's the miracle of raising somebody from the dead, but maybe it's the miracle of people who aren't afraid of death or people who aren't afraid to prepare for death. The world needs people who are not afraid to look death in the eye and to say, "We know a greater truth." Whether we realize it or not, the world is calling us in the middle of its dark night. The world is calling us to say faith is dying, hope has been arrested, love is missing somewhere. Read the news headlines. The globe is calling to say danger is imminent, we could die from global warming. We could die from global terrorism or global fanaticism and the world is calling us, the church, the so-called believers, calling us so that we might have something to say. But I think they're also calling us to complain a little bit. We've missed a few too many of the world's funerals. We as Christians may have even caused a few too many of the world's funerals. We've been too timid to ask for miracles. We've let other people have that power. The world is calling us because it wants both a funeral and a miracle. The world wants a way to make sense of the death that is all around. The world wants a way to have hope to know that God still has the power to overcome tragedy. Now, the world fusses over our church scandals and likes to poke fun at our devotion to ancient religion. But I believe what the world is really trying to say is, "Get your act together church," because the world wants to believe, I think. And it's calling us in the middle of the night.

It's time for us as believers in Jesus Christ to answer that call. To pull off the covers of our fear, to pull off the covers of our denial because we have funerals to plan and miracles to expect. The world has dead, people who have died of hunger. People who have died of torture. People who have died because they've been abused and oppressed and the world needs us to come with an Easter message. A message that death is not the end. That Christ is risen. That resurrection is possible. It's time for us to claim that theology and power of a Christian funeral which at the same time allows grief and joy. Proclaims both ending and beginning. I think the best funerals announce miracles. It's time for us to sit with the dead. To weep, to wail, to sing and to pray. If not literally, at least in spirit. In many ways, if we don't go to the funeral, we won't see a miracle.

I'm not saying the world is calling us literally to raise people from the dead, but I think the world is calling us to perform a miracle of a resurrection of faith. A faith that believes that God is greater than death. I think it's time for us as Christians to follow the example of that apostle Peter who even -- we may not know what to do when people call us in the middle of the night. And so what did Peter do? He got down on his knees and he prayed. I don't know what he prayed. Maybe he prayed the Lord's prayer that Jesus had taught him. Maybe he prayed in those words of the 23rd Psalm that we hear so often at funerals, "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." Maybe he just prayed in silence hoping that God's holy spirit would do something. It's time for us to get down on our knees and humbly ask for God to work a miracle in our world.

I've talked about the funerals of the world and we certainly have the witness to bear as we can stand with those who have suffered loss. But there's another funeral that I want to talk about in closing. It's a metaphorical kind of funeral. It's a funeral for faith. Christian faith in many ways as we've known it over the last couple of centuries shows signs of dying. And that's not necessarily a bad thing. Everything has to die at some point. Though I say as Christians of today, let's plan a funeral for faith. I'm talking about the faith that has become too weak to matter. I'm talking about the faith that turns our churches into quaint museums. I'm talking about the faith that talks of love, but cannot enact it or even worse, acts to hurt others. Let's wash this faith's body. Let's invite the world to come and view her one last time. The faith that has caused so many to lose their faith. Let's weep and wail and sing and pray. Let's accompany her to the grave and then let us cry, "Alleluia, alleluia, Christ is risen!" Falling down on our knees and praying to God, "God, give us a renewed faith." Perform a resurrection miracle and resurrect faith that has the courage to stand at the grave. Resurrect faith that can move mountains. Resurrect faith that has the power to heal. Resurrect faith that really saves. Faith that is proclaimed throughout the world. Faith that is reckoned as righteousness because the world is calling us in the middle of the night for that kind of faith. We're being summoned for funerals and for miracles. And I believe that God will give us courage, humility and grace to perform both.