



Resurgence: Tabitha

Acts 9:36-43

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In this Easter season, we are talking about how encounters with the Risen Christ lead to a resurgence of life and faith. When the early believers encountered the resurrected, the Biblical story make clear, they experienced a resurgence of faith and life. Resurgence means coming back – returning – or experiencing anew. For something or someone to experience a resurgence, the person or thing must have existed in the past and have gone away before it can come back again.

For example, last summer, I was visiting family and heard my cousin's teenage daughter talking about how much she liked her fanny pack. Yep – her fanny pack. I thought fanny packs were long dead, at least among everyone but awkwardly dressed tourists. Unbeknownst to me, fanny packs are experiencing a major resurgence in popularity and use; it's a true comeback story. They're called by different names now, like waist bags, travel pouches, belt bags, or even bum bags (over in England), but this long-lost accessory is having a resurgence in public acceptance and use. What was, and was not, *is* once again.

Resurgence is about bringing back what once was.

In the past few weeks, we've seen how Mary, Thomas, John, Peter, and other early believers had a resurgence in faith when they encountered the physical resurrection of Christ in those first few weeks after Jesus was raised from the dead. These stories carry a power with them that is manifested in the *presence* of the risen Christ. They offer us a glimpse of the kind of resurgence we might have in the presence of the Lord post-resurrection – but they can also offer us a challenge: how do we experience a resurgence of life or faith in the world today *absent* the physical presence of the resurrected Lord? Perhaps we are all a bit too much like Thomas, who had to feel the wounds of the crucifixion to believe in the power of the resurrection. Christ may have said, "Blessed are those who believe and have not seen," but that doesn't make such blind faith any easier.

To help us make a connection with life today, our text from Acts this morning offers a story of resurgent faith and life at a time and place when Christ was not physically present. In the life of the early church, we continue to see examples of how the power of the resurrected Lord was manifested in the lives of believers.

The story today takes place in the city of Joppa, the site of modern day Jaffa, which is located on the southside of Tel Aviv on the Mediterranean coast. We are led to believe that the events take place within a community of early Christian believers who had Jewish backgrounds. The

Jewish connection is made clear when the primary character in the story is first referred to by her Aramaic name, Tabitha, before we are given her name in Greek, which is Dorcas.

In the narrative story, our author, Luke, offers that Tabitha was a person of some importance in the faith community. “She was devoted to good works and acts of charity.” She is plainly declared by Luke to be a disciple; without question she’s a woman of faith, and a revered one at that. At her death, we’re told that “*all* the widows” had gathered at her death-bed by the time Peter arrived.

Widows are given a place of importance in the narrative of our faith. In the full of the Biblical text, the word “widow” is found over 100 times. There’s a reason widows are so often referenced in the text – it was common knowledge that in the patriarchal society that defines the Biblical context, widows were at the bottom rung of the societal ladder. Widows were seen during the Biblical era as having no worth, for they no longer had a man in their household to give them worth. Without a man, they had little to no income, and they were seen as undesirable with little opportunity for marrying again. They struggled to maintain even the most basics of life’s necessities.

Here’s just a couple examples of Biblical references to widows: Exodus 22 offers, “Don’t treat a widow or orphan badly.” Deuteronomy 24, which offers multiple rules to aid widows, offers, “When you harvest your crop, don’t harvest twice, but leave the left-overs to the immigrants, orphans, and widows.” Jeremiah 22 offers, “Do what is right and just; rescue the oppressed from the power of the oppressor. Don’t exploit or mistreat the refugee, the orphan, and the widow.” Zechariah 7:10 says, “Don’t oppress the widow, the orphan, the stranger, and the poor; don’t plan evil against each other!” And finally, 1 Timothy 7 offers, “Take care of widows who are truly needy.” ... Time and time again we find instructions by God to the people of faith, and by leaders in the early church to their faith communities, to prioritize the needs of widows, orphans, immigrants, refugees, and strangers. These were the subsets of the population at the greatest risk of struggling to make ends meet; they were at the biggest risk for health and stability concerns; they were the most likely to be on the outskirts of community – on the margins of society.

The presence of *all* the widows at the death-bed of Tabitha should give us some indication toward the kind of faithfulness Tabitha exhibited in her life. This community is one that was vulnerable, and was in need of support. It seems that Tabitha took seriously the call of the Biblical text – of God’s instruction to care for this marginalized population. Verse 39 says that “the widows stood weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Tabitha had made while she was still with them.” She didn’t just care for them, she didn’t just befriend them, she didn’t just offer them support, Tabitha invested herself into the widows of the community by hand-making clothes for them.

When we peer into the connection between Tabitha and this community of widows, we begin to understand why they had all gathered, and why they grieved for her loss. Tabitha was someone who had taken time to connect with these women, to truly offer her time and care for

them. She, unlike many, invested herself into a population that was largely ignored. If she is gone – if her death is final – who will take her place?

Her importance to the community becomes even more evident when Peter responds to the request to come to her aid. Peter had been in Lydda, a town just 10 miles SE of Joppa, when he was sent the request to “come without delay.” With no hesitation, he got up and went to the place where Tabitha had been laid. Peter’s presence, as a direct connection to Christ, makes it clear, this woman was not just another helper in the community, she was a vital disciple in the community who mattered in the work and ministry of the church.

Arriving at her bedside, Peter had everyone leave the room so that it was just him and the lifeless body of Tabitha. He knelt down next to her bed and prayed.

What happened next calls for a memory of Mark 5, when Jesus performed the first resurrection miracle. In Mark 5, Jesus had been called to the home of Jairus, a leader in the synagogue, whose daughter had died. In Mark 5:41, we hear Jesus exclaim, “Talitha, cum,” which means, “little girl, get up!” ... Here in Acts 9, we find Peter bedside to the deceased, and he exclaimed, “Tabitha, get up.”

I find Peter’s confidence somewhat nauseating. “What went through Peter’s mind, what was in his heart, what memory and what hope gave him the audacious confidence that he could say two words, and then count on God, right then and there, to do something so astonishing?”ⁱ This is the same Peter who had failed to own his connection to Christ on the night Christ had been betrayed; this was the same Peter who had denied Christ three times after Christ’s arrest; this was the same Peter who had run to the tomb, but had failed to understand its emptiness. This is the same Peter who revealed discipleship at its worst, offering painful examples of how we all fail to be faithful in some of the most difficult times.

Yet, it is the same Peter who had encountered the risen Christ, who had dined at the seaside campfire on smoked tilapia with the resurrected One, who had been told to feed Christ’s sheep, and who had found a resurgence of faith in the power and presence of Christ.

It is the same Peter who lived the worst of faith, and had faith restored, who now offers the power of the presence of the resurrected Lord for this faith community in Joppa. “Tabitha, get up!” he exclaimed. “Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. He gave her his hand and helped her up.”

Tabitha does not encounter the physical Christ, but she receives new life by the power of the resurrected Lord. Peter, in their midst, offered the promise of the resurrection, which declares that life wins out over death. One who had experienced his own resurgence of faith, elicits the resurgence of life in the other.

Were this the end of the story, perhaps that nugget of truth would serve as a sufficient word for today. In the absence of the physical presence of the risen Christ, it is the resurrecting power of the Spirit that gifts a resurgence of life and faith among God’s creation. But the story doesn’t

end with Tabitha's resurgence of life. Her resurgent life is no more for herself than Peter's resurgent faith is for himself. Peter's gift of faith brings about new life in Tabitha, which in turn brings about new life and new faith in the community.

Peter walks out of the room with Tabitha by his side. "Calling the saints and widows, [Peter] showed [Tabitha] to be alive. This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord."

Yes, the resurrection of Christ, and the power of such a gift among the community of believers brought about a resurgence of life for Tabitha. Her life which was, and had been lost, came back at the memory and power of Christ's own resurrecting miracle. But Tabitha's healing – her resurrection – her resurgence of life – was not just about personal healing, it offered healing for the whole of the community.ⁱⁱ When she was seen to have life once more, the good news spread throughout the community, and many came to believe in the Lord. Tabitha's resurrection is as much about the resurgence of the community as it is about Tabitha's personal re-living.ⁱⁱⁱ

The resurgence of life in this text is not just the new life Tabitha encountered, it's about the new life and faith of those who witnessed and heard. This story is about the shalom – the peace – the wholeness of the full community.

But look closely, because the unscripted text offers an important note: when Peter walks out of the room with the resurrected Tabitha by his side, *Peter* receives no praise or adoration. When word spread throughout the community that Tabitha had been raised from the dead, they did not come to believe in Peter as the Son of God, or as some miracle man. Peter was not worshipped because of this miraculous act. Peter's faith, his action on behalf of God, brings about a resurgence of faith by those in the community not in *his* ability, but in the resurrecting power of God in Jesus Christ.

This is the power of Christ. When even one person shares in the witness of Christ's resurrection – when one person experiences a resurgence of faith by the power of the risen Christ – their witness becomes the embodiment of the resurrected Lord. Our witness of the resurrected Lord, our sharing of our experience with such resurgent faith, our testimony to new life, our living out the life we have received by the power of the empty tomb – these are not gifts to be isolated and hidden for our own edification, but are opportunities to offer healing among others. Such a gift is meant to bring new life to individuals and to communities at large.

If fanny packs can make a comeback, so can any person who is broken, lost, hurting, and marginalized. This is the witness of the widows at Tabitha's resurrection, and it is the promise of God to all who share in the widows' fear and segregation. In the power of the risen Lord, the promise of God is that all who have lost life, all who have lost faith, all who have had their hope and future cut short shall receive the promise of resurgent life – life abundant and redeemed.

What does this mean for us? I believe there are likely people in this space today and in our community who fill the shoes of each of these characters. Some of us may be like Peter, who

have already seen the resurrected Lord and had a resurgence of faith in our lives. Those who are like Peter need to show up and speak a word of faith that offers new life to others. Each act of faithfulness generates new life among others. ... There are some among us like Tabitha, who while they have been faithful, are here today exhausted, tired, and perhaps feeling as close to the grave as Tabitha herself. Those who are like Tabitha need someone to speak the truth of God's resurrecting and sustaining power in their lives so that they may be born again. For again, each act of faithfulness brings about new life among others. ... And still, there are many others who are gathered like the widows, wandering and seeking a sign that the work of the faithful is not in vain, but that God cares and extends love to even those who are often left out, lost, and marginalized. They are waiting to see what the faithful will do – if new life is truly possible with Christ. And as they witness faithfulness, it brings about new life and faith in the community.

And regardless your place or your role, we are each part of the community, we are each called to experience the power of new life offered and received in the resurrection of Christ. This is the power of Easter, this is the power of the resurrection, that even in the absence of the physical presence of the risen Lord, we can still claim new life in the promise that Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed!

ⁱ Kathryn Matthews. *Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year C*. <http://ucc.org>. Retrieved May 8, 2019.

ⁱⁱ Stephen D. Jones. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching Through the Common Lectionary: Year C, Volume 2*. Eds. Davild L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.