

## **ONGOING RESURRECTION**

*A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Nadene Grieve-Deslippe on April 25, 2010*  
**Crossroads United Church Kingston**

### **Psalm 23** **Acts 9:36-43**

I am not a Biblical literalist but I love the attention paid to detail in this reading from Acts. Sometimes the minutia of information is glossed over, but in this story we are told the name of the woman in both Greek and Aramaic. This is particularly interesting since many of the stories of the women in scripture contain no names at all. There is the woman at the well, and the woman caught in the act of adultery, and the woman who anointed the head of Jesus, and the widow who proffered her last two cents into the treasury. In this Lukan passage from Acts reader is informed that Tabitha is the Aramaic name and Dorcas is the Greek name for gazelle.

Tabitha had the reputation of proffering good works and charity. She was a seamstress and had many articles of clothing. She was much beloved accordingly, suggested by the care that was rendered to this widow after she died. She was washed and laid out in an upper room. There is a company of widows who mourn her passing, and two men go to seek out Peter to come with them and without delay. In this story it is the men who are nameless. We are not apprised if Peter was given any more information on the situation. He responds to the sense of urgency and goes with the two men, puts the mourners out of the room, prays and then orders Tabitha to get up. She opens her eyes and sits up, where upon Peter offers his hand to help her up. It is this gesture of proffering a helping hand that particularly engages me.

Luke does not explain anything in this story. The author of my commentary makes this point abundantly clear. Writes William Willimon, the author of my commentary, How God's agents wrench life from death is not something so trivial as to be explained. The stories can only be told and heard, asserted, inserted into life as they are thrust into the flow of Acts. It is not Peter who turns our history inside out but the story, the story, which proclaims that our history is not closed and that there is

someone, some subversive reality, there for the widows of this world.... Every time a couple of little stories like these are faithfully told by the church, the social system of paralysis and death is rendered null and void. The church comes out and speaks the evangelical and prophetic "Rise!" and nothing is quite ever the same. (Willimon- 1998-85-86). In an era when the church has long been labeled outmoded and redundant, I take great heart in the wisdom to tell the story of new life and hope in Christ. Resurrection is ongoing when new life is breathed into tired old bones and institutions, and when we continue to use our hands to offer transformation.

It strikes me that a proffered helping hand is an appropriate symbol of what it is that we do in Jesus' name as contemporary disciples and members of the Body Of Christ. It is a symbol of both companionship and empowerment. As Jesus empowered the disciples to carry on his mission and ministry after the resurrection so we continue to be enabled to similarly demonstrate companionship and empowerment in his name and for his sake. In other stories of healing part of the commandment is to follow. No such command is issued to Tabitha. In the healing story of Peter that precedes this one, the command to the bedridden Aeneas is to get up and make his bed. Clearly the life of leisure is over for Aeneas. In the raising of Tabitha she is awakened from the sleep of death and is taken by the hand of Peter and we assume that she will remain in Joppa doing what she had always done in Jesus' name: sew garments for the poor and the marginalized with the same hands that Peter now holds.

Into our hands have fallen the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ. Our hands have been entrusted to do the work of preservation and discipleship. As Peter offers his hand to pray, heal and help so into our hands has fallen the same responsibility to pray, heal and help.

Ours are the hands that are clasped together in prayer. Our hands have prepared meals, and handed out bulletins, and accompanied the hymns, and collected the offering. Hands have swept the snow from the entrance and scattered salt on the ice, and baked and sewed and scrubbed and painted. Hands have taken pen in hand or

fingers to keyboards and drafted minutes, and policies, and motions and resolutions. Hands have broken the bread and raised the chalice and poured the water in sacrament. Hands have swept the floors, and polished the communion-ware, and changed the seasonal antependia. Hands have greeted us warmly on a Sunday morning and clasped ours in greeting or embraced in a hug. Hands have carried babies forward for baptism, and carried caskets to hearse and graveside. Hands have been raised in the air to vote yea or nay at council and congregational meeting. Hands have counted ballots on issues, and been laid on those at ordination, and on those kneeling for the laying on of hands at communion. And in all of these actions and more the gospel runs its course.

In the actions of the proffered hands we continue to be instruments of grace, compassion and empowerment. The command to us for our healing and transformation from death to life may include following away and it may mean that, like Tabitha, we stay where we are and continue to exercise the ministry that we have. But we exercise our ministries subtly different because of the experience of transformation. Indeed, this is the plateau that we are on now as a newly amalgamated congregation. Having experienced the figurative resurrection in the coming together of two distinct congregations the task before us now is to become the new creation birthed in January.

This rising from near death has been whirlwind and accomplished in a much shorter time frame than initially assumed. Like Tabitha, we may find that this plateau of change leaves us reeling as well. Coming back from the dead must, at the very least, make one a little light headed. We, too, may need the hands of the ones who have been the agents of transformation to steady us in the wake, and support us until we can stand ready and steady. And proffered hands come in sundry ways and means.

I attended a workshop on Racial Justice that has been mandated by General Council of all persons in ministry leadership. I attended the event held in Cobourg on Thursday. When I attend these things I fret about sundry things-some of which are beyond my control. I wonder if I will know anyone, and if there will be someone to sit

with at lunch. I worry about not grasping quickly enough, or worse, fret about saying the wrong thing and being judged a fool. In these circumstances I bow to the folksy wisdom of Abraham Lincoln who said, "Better to keep one's mouth shut and be thought a fool than to open it and remove all doubt."

I arrived at the venue the same time as another man. I followed him into the building and stood behind him in the registration line. After signing in, making a nametag and receiving my registration pack, I made my way to the seating area to divest myself of packet and purse. I made my way to the coffee table and filled my cup directly behind the same man that I had been shadowing from the Parking lot. We each stood on opposite sides of the muffin table and this was the first time that we had faced one another. He extended his hand and said, "I'm Craig." I responded, "I'm Nadene." And then he said, "Nadene, I don't know if you know this about yourself, and if this is what you intended, but you have put your name tag on upside down."

I immediately felt like an inept fool caught with my hand in the cookie jar and thought to myself, "I know how the rest of this is going to go." But then I reasoned that like the person who walks about with a piece of spinach caught in their teeth, or their zipper open on dress or pant, we can be grateful that someone cares enough about us as friend or newly acquainted friend to tell us. Sometimes the hands that we offer in saving face can be as simple and significant as the gifts proffered as saving grace.

Life can be challenging on the road to transformation. As we continue to listen to the controversy surrounding the pope and the catholic hierarchy for their non response to the issue of abuse we cannot help but look inward about the consequences of our action and non action. To the one that Christ offered the keys to the Kingdom is also given the power to heal, help and support in this life. Peter did not send the two unnamed men away because he was too busy with more significant things to go to Joppa in the wake of death. To those whom much is entrusted, much is demanded. In the eternal now we too have responsibilities to use our hands to make a difference towards wholeness and healing.

Once Tabitha was steady he summoned in those who had been grieving to experience the life. This may be the most significant gift to the one who reels in the clutch of death and in the shifting sands of uncertainty. Peter summoned the broken hearted widows into the room that once housed death “and showed her to be alive.” As we continue to live as agents of transformation and as resurrection people I pray that we will be empowered to never think of ourselves more highly as we ought, and therefore be willing to tend to both Kingdom and individual. May the fruits of our labours and hands result in both saving face and saving grace. Amen.