



Date: April 17, 2016

Title: "Raising the Dead"

Scripture: Acts 32-43

Description: If Peter, raising Tabitha from the dead, sets the standard for followers of Christ, I'm doing a very poor job. What if we held Tabitha as our role model in this story?

When it was all over and he was alone in Simon the Tanner's guest room, Peter glanced back at his daily calendar. He hadn't planned on raising someone from the dead that day. Nowhere did "Tabitha the Dead Girl" appear on his appointment schedule or his to-do lists. The city of Joppa was not entered on his GPS. It just happened, apparently. It wasn't like he'd taken a correspondence course or practiced his miracle-healing techniques to prepare for it. It just happened. Twice, although looking back on it, the healing of the paralytic Aeneas seemed negligible insignificant compared to the miracle of this little girl.

She was dead; everybody in the house knew that, and Peter sensed it the minute he walked through the door. She was dead. Now she is alive, animated and lively as any young girl should be. If God were going to raise people like Jesus was raised, and if the power of Jesus was going to be exercised through Peter, wouldn't there have been some sort of indication in advance? Was there any strategic planning in play at all?

Peter remembered that time Jesus gathered them around him and issued marching orders. They'd seen what Jesus had been doing, they'd heard his teaching, now it was their turn. Twelve of them Jesus sent out with specific instructions (You can read them in Matthew, chapter 10.) "As you go, proclaim the good news....Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons." (v. 8) "Raise the dead", right there in the middle of the list—he'd given them that authority. But Jesus had omitted one tiny detail: he hadn't taught them *how*.

So when Peter had arrived at Aeneas' house and saw him bedridden as he had been for years, there was no Operations Manual to follow. Only tears of frustration from Aeneas' family, and desperate hope. Peter wasn't about to say, "Sir, your sins are

forgiven,” though he remembered Jesus’ words to the paralyzed man. (He also remembered the homeowner’s shock when a gaping hole appeared in his roof!) And he recalled that Jesus commanded the man to not only get up, but to pick up his bed as well. So Peter spoke with more confidence than he felt, “Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you: get up and make your bed!” Peter was as stunned as everyone else when the man leapt to his feet and began dancing around the room.

Peter didn’t even learn this woman’s name until he arrived in Joppa. As soon as they whispered, “This is Tabitha,” he recalled the words Jesus had spoken, “Talitha, khoum”, which is “Little girl, arise.” “Tabitha”, “talitha”—how could he miss the connection? Jesus had sent everyone out of the room, except for Peter, James and John, so Peter sent everyone out of the room. Then...nothing happened. “Lord, what do I do now?” he asked in prayer. “Tabitha, get up,” he said, almost echoing Jesus’ words. And she did exactly that—though, sitting up so suddenly, she felt a little woozy so Peter helped her stand. “This became known throughout Joppa...” scripture reports. You think?

“Lord, I really, really miss your physical presence,” Peter prayed. “All I have to go on is that rubber bracelet around my wrist, “WWJD”. Do you really mean for us to do what you did when you were here? We could produce a TV series: Walking Dead.”

Let’s leave Peter pondering these things as he waits for the Tanner to call him for dinner. We have our own questions to raise: what is the point of this story? Do we need some sort of proof that Peter was indeed the chosen leader of the movement, named and designated by Jesus himself, “On this rock I will build my church.” Saul, now calling himself Paul, had been converted and was making quite an impression on the faithful. Was this story supposed to authenticate Peter’s credentials? “In your face, Saul/Paul! Try raising the dead!” (In fact, eleven chapters later, Paul would indeed raise a young man who had just died in a freak accident.) If endorsing Peter’s credentials as the leader of the new band of followers was what this was all about, this story is a nice history lesson, but not very relevant today.

What are *we* supposed to do with this story? Does it teach that the dead can be raised by using Christ’s name? If so, it merely imposes massive guilt on me, what about you. I mean, Jesus said if we have faith the size of a mustard seed, well, I can’t move a mountain, much less raise the dead. And I’ve wanted to. God knows I’ve wanted to.

She was twelve, struggling with cystic fibrosis, when she stole my heart. I visited the hospital often, mostly to offer comfort to her parents and pray with them. As one visit drew to a close, Mom and Dad said, “She would like for you to pray with her.” And

they stepped out of the room, closing the door. In those long-ago days, we didn't have a policy that prohibited an adult being alone with a child, so I had no escape. She didn't say anything, just locked eyes with me as if to say, "I didn't come here for small talk. Pray!" Her body weight down to around fifty pounds, she was slowly drowning as her lungs filled with mucus. So I prayed. From then on, during every visit I prayed with her. Until six months later when her dad phoned to tell me she had finally died.

Reading this story from Acts, I realize it had never occurred to me to take her by the hand and say, "Girl, get up. Rise." If Peter sets the standard for being a disciple of Christ, I am doing a poor job. If we're supposed to follow Peter's example, does this story make you feel a tiny bit inadequate? How's your guilt level now?

Any of you who are parents have been there, haven't you? When your child was not invited to the birthday party, failed the first attempt at a driver's license, didn't get admitted to grad school, didn't you want to take them by the hand and say, "Little one, get up and live. When your parent had to relinquish the keys to their car, when your friend was in pain after that hip replacement, didn't you want to say, "Get up now, there's life ahead of you." And not just say the words, but make it happen. I want to raise the dead.

Maybe I'm trying too hard to be Peter in this story, when it might be wise to audition for the role of Tabitha.

Monday, April 4, 2016, Villanova junior forward Kris Jenkins let fly a three-point attempt with half a second left on the clock in the final game of NCAA March Madness. It may not have been the greatest NCAA final game—that would have been the three-overtime championship in 1957 when the Carolina Tarheels defeated Wilt Chamberlain's Kansas Jayhawks, 54-53. But this year's shot by 'Nova's Jenkins produced the greatest final twenty seconds ever. It placed him on the cover of Sports Illustrated and made Jenkins a god in the city of Philadelphia, though in Chapel Hill—not so much.

On Wednesday of that week, a group of women sat in a room at Pleasant Hill, knitting, chatting, and praying. Calling themselves "A Stitch and a Prayer, they were creating prayer shawls to be provided to church people who are hospitalized or recovering at home. "While knitting this, the group offered prayers on your behalf," I tell patients when I am privileged to bestow the gift. To my knowledge this group has never appeared on the cover of our church newsletter, much less of Sports Illustrated! How often have I returned later to find grown men with the shawl tucked under their chin like an infant asleep, or someone proudly sitting in a chair after surgery, the prayer

shall draped over their lap. It is so much more than a source of extra warmth. It is a treasure, a reminder in the middle of a long night in ICU that they are not alone. It is a lifeline to the strong compassion of friends here and to the loving presence of Jesus, the Great Physician.

“...when [Peter] arrived, they took him to the room...showing tunics and other clothing that Tabitha had made while she was with them. (Acts 9:39) Tabitha was a charter member of “Stitch and a Prayer.” She specialized in offering comfort and help to widows, who with no status and no influence and often very little money, were the very least of these in that society. Shawls, tunics, and other clothing made by Tabitha were treasured items linked with treasured memories held by these widows. Peter was big news in the city of Joppa. But Tabitha was adored, because Tabitha, lived among them, loved them, and walked beside them.

Peter produced a miracle *for* those people; Tabitha lived her life *with* them. I am so enamored by doing *for* people. I want to arrive, fix things, and ride off into the sunset with townspeople asking, “Who was that masked minister.” That’s why I often get so frustrated with God: I want God to do *for*, to solve problems, to shower us with good things and mount blessings on me and my loved ones. But God doesn’t seem to do that. God is more about being *with* than doing *for*.

Creation accomplished, after the first day of rest, that evening God came walking in the garden, just wanting to be with the newly created man and woman, to take a walk with them. Jesus’ final promise was, “I will be with you always.” In other words, “There will never be a time when I am not with you.” The final vision in Revelation proclaims, “See, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them...” (Rev. 21:3)

Holding Peter as my hero, I tend to be all about *for* and keep attempting to raise the dead. I overlook Tabitha, who spent her life *with* those who needed her. In many ways, *for* is so much easier than *with*. You can be *for* without a conversation, without having a real relationship, without a genuine shaping of your life in order to be truly alongside another. I like to keep my good deeds on the level of *for*, where they can’t hurt me. *With* may ask more of me than I can give.

That’s why I need the story told in Acts 9: 36-43. Not so much the story of what Peter did that one afternoon, but of what Tabitha did with her life. Peter plays an important part in this story. God hasn’t abandoned *for*. Jesus healed and restored sight and raised Lazarus. There was an important element of *for* in Jesus’ life. But that *for* was grounded in and established on the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among, or *with* us. In the Spirit of Christ, I hope to become more and more like Tabitha.

What about you?