

Acts 9:36-43

³⁶Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas.^[b] She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. ³⁷At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. ³⁸Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, "Please come to us without delay." ³⁹So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. ⁴⁰Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, "Tabitha, get up." Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. ⁴¹He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. ⁴²This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. ⁴³Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

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An Ordinary Resurrection

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Kerra Becker English

Let me ask you to think on a question for a moment. What do you think is the central affirmation of Christianity?

Trinity – Jesus is the Son of God (Spirit in there for good measure)

Incarnation – Jesus is fully human, fully God, Christmas story

Messianic hope fulfilled – Jesus is the fulfilment of the prophets

God is love/Calls us to love

Resurrection – the Easter story, promise of eternal life

All of these are important affirmations to be sure. Each has its place in the development of Christian theology. Volumes upon volumes have been written to expound on each one. Some of those books are incredibly insightful, others will cure even the toughest insomnia. Sermons seek to color within the lines of these doctrines. Believers proclaim their veracity in affirmations of faith. We try to teach these concepts fully and completely, but in the end, all of us find our understanding incomplete, partial knowledge of something far larger than we can fathom. All are mysteries – and I completely agree with Richard Rohr’s definition of the word *mystery* when it comes to its use in religion. Mystery isn’t something you can’t know; mystery is rather something that has “endless knowability.” These are the mysteries of our faith. Sure, there are more. You may have thought of other affirmations of Christianity that you ponder on the daily. But those big themes of our faith are the very ones that cause us to wonder, and imagine, and keep us growing in our own understandings.

Another way Richard Rohr talks about these truths is to say that if they are true now, they were always true, and their truth will continue to be repeated in multiple ways in the human experience. That's the thing. These concepts arise out of experiences. They don't just poof out of the air or even out of the Bible. The Bible tells the stories. But then again, so do we. Our stories, based in our experience and supported by the longer history of our faith deepen us into the revelations of the Christian life.

The example of holy mystery we are going to consider today comes from the Easter story - resurrection - being raised from the dead. Jesus was crucified, died, and was buried. On the third day, he rose again. That is a central affirmation of Christianity, has been since the earliest days when our faith was simply called "the Way." Some go so far as to argue that if you don't believe in a bodily resurrection, that he was raised in HIS body and that we will be raised in OUR bodies – that you can't claim to be a Christian. But for me, resurrection can be classified as one of those mysteries that is endlessly knowable in all kinds of ways. It isn't just holding on to one specific interpretation that makes it true. It's true in the ways that the disciples experienced the resurrected Christ with both faith and doubt. And it's true in the ways that God seems to lift us up out of the graves of our own metaphorical making in the life we know here on earth that is distinctly limited by the power of death. That we can have a life beyond our fear and grief is a powerful message. That we will have a knowable life beyond death – a powerful miracle.

The message and the miracle of resurrection is repeated in scripture and its place in our story begins way before the historical Jesus even appears. How about that for a mystery! Both Elijah and Elisha have experiences of bringing someone back from the dead. Elisha's power is so significant that when a dead body is accidentally put into Elisha's grave, it also comes back to life. Jesus himself raises the widow of Nain, Jarius' daughter, and his friend Lazarus all before

he experiences his own death and transformation beyond. And then after Christ returns to demonstrate to the disciples that he is not dead, but alive, the power seems to transfer to his key disciples Peter and Paul who both have opportunities to mediate God's love in this way and bring a person back to life.

In today's story of the day, Peter was "sent for" when a disciple named Tabitha died. She had been devoted to good works and acts of charity. Her friends were grieving. But they knew the story of Jesus and they knew that Peter was a teller of that story, a powerful speaker delivering the message on the day of Pentecost saying: *Acts 2:22* "You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know—²³ this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. ²⁴ But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power... ³² This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. ³³ Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear.

If anyone could "do something" about Tabitha's death, it would be Peter. When he arrived, he was immediately directed to an upstairs room where she was. In that room were the women, the widows, her friends who knew her best who had brought with them all the clothes that she had made for them. This reminds me of going to the memorial service for Union Presbyterian Seminary professor Dr. Katie Cannon near the end of last summer. Dr. Cannon had been a powerful influence on so many people – especially the women and African-American students that she mentored and dutifully mothered. I suspect that people would easily describe

her, like Tabitha, as a disciple devoted to good works and acts of charity. And each person seemed to bring tokens with them of what she had given to them in her lifetime. For Dr. Cannon, it was mostly words that she crafted into intricate garments to clothe seminary students in the fabric of their faith. But be it the tunic sewn in love or the transition weaved into a sermon – the symbols that connect us to our beloved friends, family members, or fellow pilgrims in the Way – are in fact symbols of the life that persists even in the face of death. That’s no small detail of the story. Rather it’s an important reminder that we carry the dead with us, and the ways in which they are resurrected in our own lives may be ordinary – but certainly not insignificant.

In this biblical story, Peter was moved to act and did so. He took Tabitha’s hand and lifted her up. And yet, after this passage, we hear nothing about Tabitha again. In this instance of resurrection, the power is reflected back on God – even more so than on the person given an extension of life, even more so than on Peter as the one acting in God’s name. The assumption is that eventually Tabitha died a natural death – just as happened with Lazarus, just as it happened with all those other healings completed out of compassion. But in this case, the powerful love of God to move even beyond the barrier we know as death is a message we are to receive from our sacred stories loud and clear. There is a cycle going on and the end point is not death. We are born, we live, we die, but then we are born again. In our Christian understanding, this means that we trust in a resurrection hope.

This pattern is found repeatedly true, not just in the stories of our faith, but in the patterns of our natural world. Birth, life, death, new life is set on repeat so that we will see it, and know it, and trust it. Those resurrections may be ordinary, but the one that Christ teaches us seems extraordinary – a blazing reminder that even the most gruesome death is not the final end. Bodies that are broken... Minds that are wounded... Spirits that are crushed can be renewed in

God. And God's power to lift us up goes beyond our wildest imaginations. Look for renewal and rebirth in your own life. Look for it in the natural world in your own backyard. Look for it in hospital rooms and family gatherings. The pattern is there. God's love is always there. Amen.