

Fourth Sunday of Easter  
Year C

Acts 9:36-43

Psalm 23

Revelation 7:9-17

John 10:22-30

Last week, we explored the conversion of Paul, who became the leading evangelist of the early church to the gentiles. Today, our focus is on the early ministry of Peter, who was considered the evangelist to the Jews, although he was also very instrumental in the ministry to the gentiles.

In the passage immediately before our reading today, Peter is described as going about among all the believers in a wide area of Judea. As he visited Lydda, Peter visited a man who had been bedridden of many years as he was paralyzed. Peter spoke to him in the name of Jesus and told this man to get up and make his bed. And, immediately, the man did it and, as a result, many in the neighborhood turned to God.

In our reading, the people of Joppa were mourning the death of one of their leading members, a woman named Tabitha. When they heard that Peter was in the nearby village of Lydda, they sent for him. What were their expectations? Why did they ask Peter to come to them?

We know Tabitha had already died - they were preparing her body for burial. They were mourning the loss of this important woman in their community. She was renowned for her acts of charity and the good works she had done. So well-known was this woman in the village that we are told both her Aramaic name, by which she would have been known within the community, but also her Greek name by which the greater region around Joppa. The city of Joppa was a very old, historic city on the Mediterranean coast. It was the city from which Jonah set out in his efforts to avoid going to Nineveh. It was also close to the Roman regional capital of Caesarea. This woman was well known throughout this important area. But, what were the expectations of the members of the church when they called on Peter?

We see in Peter's actions a close parallel to Jesus' healing of Jarius' son, as recorded in the gospels. When he arrived on the scene, Peter was taken to an upper room where they had laid the body. Peter, like Jesus in the earlier event, cleared the room, knelt down beside the bed, and prayed. Then, turning to the body, Peter called her by name and told her to get up. She opened her eyes, saw Peter, and sat up. Peter had witnessed Jesus' raising of Jarius' son and had followed the lead of his Lord.

Was this what the people expected? Was this their motivation for calling Peter? Perhaps, in the back of their mind they might have hoped for such a miracle, but I doubt that was in the forefront of their decision. Like many of us in our hour of grief, I believe they were looking to Peter for pastoral comfort. Such a miracle was beyond their wildest hopes. But, here it was.

What does this say to us? Are we to expect people to be raised from the dead? One message we have in this is that God is still in business. The same God who created the world and raised Jesus

from the dead is still active in the world, bringing healing to the ill, hope to those in despair, and life in the midst of death. But, this is not a message that sits well in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. How can we move into such a context of faith?

First, we do NOT need to leave our intellect at the door, but we do need to accept that God is still at work and can impact lives today. The Holy Spirit does work through us to change the lives of people and through our society to heal this broken world. Just as the early church turned the world upside down, so can we turn individuals' lives upside down. How? By bringing the presence of God into their lives, by not accepting the status quo as the norm but standing on the precedent set those early Christians and acting as God leads us.

Tabitha was a disciple, a widow, and a woman highly respected in her community. In a culture where women, especially widows, were marginalized, she devoted herself to doing good works and making an impact on neighbors. She served others and refused to be cast aside. When she died, the people around her did not just throw up their hands and say, "that's the way it goes." They took action - they called for Peter. They didn't give him a long explanation of why they wanted him to come. They just requested he come right away, and he did.

Peter did not despair when he arrived and saw a dead woman. He did what he saw Jesus do - he prayed and then told her to get up. It's great to know that God works on a different plane than we do. The Spirit of God moved in Tabitha and restored her life. That same Spirit can move in us. As Mary said in her song, God will lift up the lowly. God doesn't use the rich and powerful. God uses people like us.

We all know people like Tabitha - people who have a deep and abiding commitment to do the work of God and give expression to God's compassion for those in need. Tabitha's work was too important to die in the first century and it is too important to die today. We need to celebrate the Tabithas in our midst and aid them in the work of God.