

4th Sunday of Easter
Sermon 5.8.22

Acts of the Apostles 9:32-43

Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity.³⁷ At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs.³⁸ Since 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."³⁹ So 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.⁴⁰ Peter 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.⁴¹ He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive.⁴² This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.⁴³ Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

John 10:22-30

At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one." (362)

Tabitha's death was unremarkable. Like her life, her death was ordinary. She lived, she became ill, she died. Nothing to see here.

Funny that she merited such a wonder as being raised.

It calls to mind a conversation we had in book group a couple months ago. We were reading a commentary on the Gospel of Luke. One by N.T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* takes the book section by section, a close look at each so-called pericope. It also features a translation of the gospel narrative done by the writer.

N.T. Wright is a renowned and respected New Testament scholar so he can do that sort of thing with authority. Not everyone can present their own version of an ancient sacred text and have the rest of the world say, "Yes, that's fine." But N.T. Wright can when it comes to any of the books of the New Testament.

Maybe it's his initials: N.T. Does it stand for New Testament? Who can say? (#clergyjokes)

His version of the Easter story was inelegant, to say the least. But that's the way with a lot of the Bible: its inelegant. The King James Version of the Bible might have us think otherwise. This version, the earliest widely available version of the Bible in English: it was prepared at the

behest of two King Jameses, the fourth and fifth, in the 17th century. To authorize a version of the Bible in the common language: this was an exertion of their power, let's be clear. But history is grateful, as it left to us a gorgeous piece of literature unto itself. Large portions of it are taught in English classes across the land.

The problem is it doesn't really capture the tone of much of the Bible—or doesn't anymore. The Bible is largely rough-hewn. All those sixty-six books, if written at desks, were likely often at desks amidst rubble. So much of the Bible comes to us from times of crisis.

I saw a picture of Ukrainian soldier who's also a professor. Sitting in a foxhole, he was dressed in camo with a rifle nearby. He was also holding his phone up in front of his face. Apparently, he was teaching his students virtually. Probably not his most eloquent lecture, it was likely one of his most urgent. That's the tone of much of the Bible: less eloquent than urgent.

But this is the problem of language, or course. It's always changing, so what feels current one day can feel formal and stuffy the next. Apparently, not even the Queen speaks the Queen's English. Not really. Apparently, Queen Elizabeth speaks now more like your average Englishman on the street did 100 years ago. The Queen then spoke something even more formal and stuffy sounding to us now. As for this side of the pond, "thee" and "thine" which you'll find in the old *Pilgrim Hymnal* were revised for the more current *New Century Hymnal*, where it's all "you" and "your." But "thee" and "thine" are the familiar pronouns, second person, said to those with whom you're intimate. So, to address God in terms of "thee" was to express intimacy, not to establish distance, and far less to evoke groveling. I've been in Quaker households where those are still in use. What sounds formal to me is meant as an expression of intimacy, just an old-fashioned one.

This is why there are so many versions of the Bible these days, more and more coming more and more frequently. To capture that immediacy of the original text, to capture that intimacy: language is living, and must especially be so when giving word to the living Lord.

But it all leaves us with perhaps more inelegance than we'd like, or even than is useful. Beauty has its place in religious life. Beautiful language certainly has its place.

N.T. Wright remembers Easter morning thus: with the women coming to the tomb and then leaving again to tell the apostles all that just happened—the stone rolled away, Jesus' body missing but two men in white there to tell them to remember, remember how Jesus had said he would be handed over to sinners and crucified, but on the third day...

They said all this to the apostles—the stone! the missing body! the two men! Remember! And the apostles heard it all as just stupid, useless talk, and they didn't believe them.

That's how N.T. Wright rendered the Greek phrase: "Stupid, useless talk."

And the question came up in our conversation at book club about his word choice, his translation. "Stupid, useless talk..." How did this strike us?

For me the question came, would I preach on it, or preach from it, on Easter morning?

My answer: "Probably not on Easter morning. But some other Sunday morning..."

The word here is *leros*, which isn't a word used anywhere else in the Bible. Much is made of it among the commentary-set. It gives us in English the word delirious. This, according to David Lose, another authoritative source on matters such as these. He understands the correlation to suggest these women were heard as operating under a delirium. They were spouting crazy nonsense. I've read argument for a still baser hearing of it, *leros* is like something bulls make after eating a big meal. These women were spouting bull---.

All of this is to say the women here were dismissed utterly. Nonsense is speech not even worthy of interpretation. Really, they were being hysterical.

Luke gives us a narrative with shape, we're learning in book club. Luke, the writer of both the Gospel According to Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, from which this story of Tabitha comes to us this morning, gives us a narrative with very intentional shape.

Tabitha was a woman, just a woman. The women who grieved her death were just women, just women. The way they expressed their grief was in showing the tunics Tabitha had made for them. Women's work.

As it happens, though, also God's work. The last thing God did for Adam and Eve according to that story of banishment from the garden, was to make them clothes. Genesis 3:21: "And the Lord God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them."

They'd been naked, of course; and this made them feel ashamed, and their shame was a sign of their having disobeyed the commandment not to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. So, they couldn't stay in this garden anymore. They had to go out into the world where, mysteriously, even felt as punishingly, they would have to labor for life—labor painfully in giving birth, labor ceaselessly in making food.

But they would at least have this to comfort them: the garments of skins that made the whole thing less bruising.

It might seem like cold comfort: this punishing, banishing God at least imagined as sewing them clothes before sending them out. But that's only if we read the story as if it were some sort of historical account—an account of how these things actually happened. It's not, of course. This isn't

a report of an actual incident. So, how to read it? As if it's grappling with the irreducible problems of existing in the world, trying to make it all fit within the reach of an all-embracing, all-loving God: that's how to read it. As if: why is life so crushing, so punishing? why is life given and persistent, but also precarious, laborious? and why are we so easily confused between what's good and what's evil?

If you read the story as a calling out of all the irreducible facts of life, then this detail is quite a lovely touch. Our God is one who will give us what we need, even while doling out some very hard facts. For it is simply the case that life is hard. It is simply the case that in many ways humankind seems ill-equipped for life in this world. We enter the world so utterly in need of fabrication and fashioning—for we, as we are, would simply not survive if not for the crafting of our environment for a better fit, and also if not for tremendous nurture and care.

Yet we do, which means we were created so to do, which suggests somehow our creator intends for this, which means our creator might well be imagined as sewing us clothes for a better fit.

Can you imagine this God of the garden setting down with Adam and Eve and measuring them for the right fit?

If not, can you imagine Tabitha setting down with these women, these widows, who loved her, and measuring them for the right fit?

Have you ever had anyone make clothes for you? I have. My mother. She used to make them for me all the time. I'd stand by her sewing machine while she measured my kid-body—I likely wiggling and her likely telling me to hold still—measuring it as it was and figuring it as it would likely be, given whatever I'd grow in the coming year or so. I understand the love of these women for Tabitha. It's literally a touching experience to be so carefully measured, so mindfully accounted for.

As for her importance, the fact that she is named both in Greek and Hebrew is significant. She was perhaps a key player in bringing together the Jews of the early church and the Greek Gentiles who were more and more joining up with the church, these pagans on whom the building up of the gospel would come more and more to depend.

Because it was imperative that that gospel grow. It was imperative for making the world less brutal. It was imperative for making the world a good place for even the least of the people, which had been unthinkable much outside Israel and Judea, where the poor within the nation were at least thought to be cared for. It was imperative that the church grow not for some otherworldly

abstract notion of salvation and “getting into heaven.” It was imperative for getting heaven into the world. That’s what the church is to do: get heaven into the world, make it so God’s good and loving will is done on earth as in heaven.

The fact of her being known in Greek as in Hebrew: this is significant, a sign of her significance. She’d be a cornerstone in the upbuilding of this syncretistic movement, this *crucial* movement.

But what gave rise to Tabitha being raised was less that than it was this: the women weeping and showing their tunics, Tabitha’s tunics. Their grief. Their grief. These women’s emotional load.

This story is as to make up for the earlier error, the earliest members of the early church, the apostles who took the women returning from the tomb to be speaking mere stupid nonsense. Hysterical really.

The first witness of a group of women facing a group of men: hysterical.

The following witness of a group of women facing a group of men: activating.

Progress. Maybe we’re making progress.

I am thinking of the leak from the Supreme Court of the intention to overturn *Roe v. Wade*. I am thinking of the path this move could lead us down. Making abortion illegal is a dangerous move. Making abortion a crime is a dangerous move.

Women who abort pregnancies have all sorts of reasons for doing so. People of all sorts who have the imperative of pregnancy pressing on them will in some few cases decide to abort for all sorts of reasons. Some of these reasons might seem more worthy than others; we can only hardly avoid our tendency to judge, to evaluate. Our judgement on matters is a great gift, can lead us into good things. But remember our tendency to confuse good and evil. So, this line of question won’t be a good guide for making public policy around abortion.

Also making this nearly impossible to deal with: the pregnancies that are aborted, like all pregnancies, dwell in an in-between space that is a matter of interpretation—interpretation as to when it is exactly that life begins. But legally we need to draw a line somewhere, and it seems to me the right place to draw it is at viability, right because it’s the least wrong.

Of course, that itself is a moving target. *Roe v. Wade* establishes viability at 24 weeks, though recent medical developments have made it so infants born premature, at 22 weeks, have a 50% chance of survival if given intensive treatment.

I tell you all this knowing I'm neither a legal nor a medical expert—and hoping you don't rely on me to be such things. I tell you this only because this imperfect though long-settled framework is what I accept as good enough and what I think we all need in order for women as a whole to be treated as is right, good for each woman, good for all women, and, incidentally, good for all society. When women are free and enabled to act as full participants in public life, everyone benefits. Societies where women are free, educated, and empowered are better societies according to every measure by which we evaluate such things. The fact that this will always come at some cost, and with lots of compromise, is sign merely that the world is yet an imperfect, incomplete place. We wait for God's kingdom to reign perfectly, peacefully, completely all creation. Until then, we weigh, we measure, we discern, we act.

As it happens, it is the gospel that opens a way to such society. It is the Gospel especially according to Luke that takes women as essential to the whole project of blessing the world with goodness, graciousness, compassion, and peace. Let it be said, this is not to the exclusion of men. Men are essential to this project too. Let it also be said that speaking in terms of gender binary is arguably too simplistic, though at times it will do. For now, I am using such terms in the hope that they will do, for now.

Truly, the gospel made imaginable, to say nothing of imperative, a bringing in of women that proves essential. There was perhaps a time when women fully involved was not just unappealing but unimaginable. The gospel of Jesus Christ and him crucified and raised, made it imaginable and therefore possible.

And I'll admit, I don't know for certain whether the church ushered in this new conception of what women are to be in the doing of what's right and good. I don't know if it's mainly due to the gospel, the revelation of God in Christ which was for all the world, this imperative that women be free, equal, and empowered. It's always hard to know what people's mindset used to be, and it's a counterfactual to imagine what the world might have looked like without the church and its good news that is for all.

What we can say with confidence is that essential to the gospel and the whole project of church as a community of blessing to be at work in all the world is that women are essential to it. The narrative shape of Luke-Acts insists upon this. Those who once seemed as full of nonsense are now the ones who are urging upon the world truth. Tabitha must raised, for her love and care are too important to let be lost.

And her raising will be one of those stories that will blow our minds, that don't fit within our framework of what to expect.

Jesus raised people from the dead.

Jesus was raised from the dead.

Next it was Tabitha.

Such vaulted company!

Coincidence? I don't think so.

Thanks be to God,

And a blessed Mother's Day to you—to those who've been pregnant, to those who've given birth, to those who've adopted, to those who care for society's castoffs as Tabitha did, broadly and freely wherever she saw need—she who is raised.