

The Wonder of Resurrection  
Acts 9:36–43  
Sunday, May 8, 2022 (Easter 4)

You have already spoken, Lord. Help us to simply hear the word that you have spoken and to follow, obediently and lovingly, in Jesus' name. Amen.

We are still in the *season* of Easter, and we have been hearing stories of the risen Christ appearing to his disciples, eating with them, teaching them, preparing them for what was to come *next*. For the first three weeks of Easter, the lectionary (the calendar of assigned scripture readings for each Sunday) has been working through the resurrection stories in John's gospel. But *today*, on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, that changes. It changes *every year* on the Fourth Sunday of Easter. Because the Fourth Sunday of Easter is the midway point; there are three Sundays *before* it and three Sundays *after* it in the season of Easter. And every year on the fourth Sunday, the lectionary shifts from the stories of Jesus' resurrection to stories that help us *understand* Jesus' resurrection; the *implications* of Jesus Christ being the risen Son of God, and (as one theologian says) the hope for new life that spreads throughout the earth.

And so we are looking today at *another* story of resurrection – Peter raising Tabitha from the dead in the book of Acts. So this is *after* the resurrection of Christ, perhaps as much as five years after that first Easter Sunday. The faith has been spreading around the region, gaining thousands and thousands of new believers. The theology and practices of the church have begun taking shape. And one of the things that we see repeatedly throughout Acts is that Jesus' *disciples*, now the *apostles* (they have gone from *students* to *teachers*) are *healing* people, just like Jesus did. One of those people is Tabitha.

It's funny, in the 16 years that I have been a pastor, I have preached somewhere around 1,000 sermons, but I have *never* preached on this story. It shows up every three years in the lectionary, but I've never preached on it. And there is *a lot* that we could say here about the story of Tabitha. We could talk about how she is the *only woman* in the entire Bible to have the word *disciple* attached to her name. It says, "Now in Joppa there was a *disciple* whose name was Tabitha..." Well, only men are referred to as disciples...except for Tabitha. That seems significant. We could talk about why her name is given in both Hebrew *and* Greek. It says, "...a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas." There's actually a good reason for doing that. We could talk about how she helped the poor and widows, those in need in her community, and how by raising *her*, Peter gave back life, not *just* to her, but to the community that was dependent on her good works and charity. We could talk about what happens at the *end* of this story – how Peter stays in Joppa for some time with a certain man named Simon, who was a tanner (he made leather) – and how that minor detail is setting up this monumental *shift* that is about to happen in Christianity that will change the faith forever. All of the commentaries and articles that I read about this story talked about *those* things.

But the more I read this story, I found that I wasn't really interested in those things. The more I sat with this story, I started to *wonder*. We don't *wonder* enough in our lives (and especially in the life of the church). We analyze and understand and seek to figure things out and answer questions and have certainty. We want to *prove* things. We want to make them *make sense*. We want to make things *practical* – how can I *use* this in my daily life? But we don't *wonder*. And wonder is important. Standing in awe before our creator and recognizing that we do not have all the answers; there are things we can't pin down and make practical.

What do you *wonder* about? (That's a really good question to ask yourself in the rest of this day and the week to come.) As I read this story, I found myself wondering about two things: When did Peter believe that *he* could do what *Jesus* did, and what did Peter pray? I don't have *answers* to either of those questions, but let's *think* about them.

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First, when did Peter believe that *he* could do what *Jesus* did? This story parallels a story about Jesus raising a girl from the dead in both Mark and Luke's gospels. In chapter 5 of Mark's gospel, a man named Jairus, one of the Jewish religious leaders, comes to Jesus and says, "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well and live." So Jesus goes with him. But on the way there, some people come from Jairus' home and say, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble Jesus any further?" Jesus says to Jairus, "Do not fear, only trust." It says that Jesus allowed no one to go with him but Peter, James, and John, so Peter was *there*; he *saw* this. There were all these other people gathered there, mourning, but Jesus puts everyone else out of the room, takes the little girl by the hand and says, "Talitha cum," which in Aramaic means, "Little girl, get up!" And, it says, immediately the girl got up and began to walk about, and Jesus told them to give her something to eat. And all the people who saw it were overcome with wonder.

Now, let's flash back to Peter's story. A woman named Tabitha dies, and some men come to Peter and say, "Please come to us without delay." So Peter goes. There are all these other people there mourning. Peter puts them all out of the room, like Jesus did. Like Jesus said, "Talitha cum," ("Little girl, get up!") Peter says, "Tabitha, get up." She opened her eyes. Peter took her by the hand and helped her up.

Peter saw Jesus raise this *talitha* from the dead. At what point did he believe he could do the same thing? Because he *didn't* always. There was this time after Jesus raised Jairus' daughter, when the disciples are out on a boat, and Jesus comes to them walking on the water, and they think he's a ghost. So Peter says, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Jesus says, "Come on," so Peter gets out of the boat and starts walking to Jesus on the water. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened and began to sink, crying out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus reaches out and takes him by the hand and says, "You of little faith, why did you not trust?" So Peter *kinda* thought he could do what Jesus did, but he had doubts about it and ultimately *couldn't*.

There was another time, after Jesus raised Jairus' daughter, when the disciples were trying to cast out an unclean spirit from a boy who was possessed, but they couldn't do it. Jesus comes and casts it out, and the disciples ask him, "Why couldn't *we* cast it out?" Jesus says, "This kind can only come out through prayer." So they *tried* to do what Jesus did, but they *couldn't*.

But Peter, here, never has a doubt. He just *does it*. Earlier in Acts, Peter heals a crippled beggar. Then he essentially *kills* two people named Ananias and Sapphira, a husband and wife who were being dishonest with their money. He calls them out on it, and they each drop dead. Right after *that*, it talks about how Peter's mere *shadow* would heal people when it passed over them. And right before he raises Tabitha, Peter heals a man named Aeneas, who was bedridden for eight years. So something has changed that has allowed Peter to believe that he can do what Jesus did.

Now, after Jesus had risen from the dead, he told the disciples, "By using my name you will cast out demons, speak in new tongues...lay your hands on the sick, and they will recover" (Mark 16:17–18). "The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do

greater works than these” (John 14:12). So Peter *saw* all these things that Jesus did and *heard* all these things that Jesus said. At one point he *couldn't* do them, but then he *could*. What changed? The only thing I can think of is that *before* Christ was risen, they couldn't do this, and *after* Christ was risen, they *could*. *The resurrection changed the way the world works*. Christ's resurrection defeated the powers of sin and death and unleashed upon the world the power of *life*. The hope of new life has spread throughout the world. God has given it to *us* through Jesus Christ, and now *we* can give it to *each other*.

So maybe the question is not so much, “At what point did *Peter* believe that he could do the things that Jesus did,” but, “At what point do *we*?” “The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do *greater* works than these.” Do we believe that? Do we *trust* that? You might say, “But I can't *heal* someone or raise them from the dead!” Well, there was a point when Peter didn't think he could either. And I don't know if we can actually do these things. I've certainly never raised anyone from the dead or healed anyone that I'm aware of. But have we *asked*? In the sincerity of our hearts, have we asked to do the things that Jesus did? In the letter of James it says, “You do not *have* because you do not *ask*. You *ask* and do not *receive*, because you ask *wrongly*” (James 4:2-3). Have we *asked* to do the things that Jesus does, not for *our own* benefit or glory but for *his*? I wonder what *that* would look like.

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The second thing this story made me wonder is, “What did Peter *pray*?” It says that when he came to Tabitha, he put everyone out of the room, “and then he knelt down and prayed,” but it never tells us what he *said*. He just prays, and then he turns to the body and says, “Tabitha, get up,” and she opens her eyes and gets up. What did Peter pray that allowed him to do that? It's like that story where the disciples were trying to cast out the unclean demon that had possessed that boy, but they couldn't, and when they ask Jesus *why* they couldn't, he says, “This kind can

only come out through prayer.” Peter must have remembered that, and so *this* time, as he is casting the spirit of death out of Tabitha, he stops and prays.

We can only *imagine* what he says. Whether it’s, “Lord Jesus, give me the power to bring her back to life,” or, “Lord, raise this woman up from death,” or maybe he prayed a *psalm* (that certainly would have been something he would have known), like Psalm 88, “...I call on you, O Lord; I spread out my hands to you. Do you work wonders for the dead? Do the shades rise up and praise you? Is your steadfast love declared in the grave, or your faithfulness in Abaddon? Are your wonders known in the darkness, or your saving help in the land of forgetfulness? But I, O Lord, cry out to you; in the morning my prayer comes before you.” Maybe he said something as simple as the prayer that Moses prayed for Miriam in the book of Numbers, “El na refa na la” (O God, I pray, heal her).

We’ll never know exactly what Peter prayed. But I think there is a *reason* why we are not told. It’s because it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter what words he used, like if we use exactly the same words, then *we* will be able to raise the dead. It’s not some *formula* or *magic words*. That’s not what prayer is. Maybe we aren’t told because Peter *didn’t say anything at all*. Maybe he was just *silent* in the presence of Christ. Prayer is more than the words we speak. It is a state of *being with God*, placing ourselves in the *presence* of God and opening ourselves up to God’s power and love. Prayer is not *functional*, it is *relational*, and it is *formative*. The purpose of prayer is not to get God to give us what we want. The purpose of prayer is to be formed in the likeness of Jesus Christ. In prayer, Peter was *with* Christ, *at one* with Christ, he was formed in the likeness of Christ, and *Christ* raised Tabitha *through* Peter.

That's an important distinction to make here. *Peter* didn't raise Tabitha from the dead. *God* did. God just worked *through* Peter. The *Spirit* needs a *body*, and that body was Peter's. When Peter heals the blind beggar back in chapter 3, it says that everyone was "filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened." But Peter says, "Why do you wonder at this? Or why do you stare at *us*, as though by our own power or piety we made him walk? The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob has glorified his servant Jesus, and *he* has made this man strong." When Peter heals Aeneas right before Tabitha is raised, he says, "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; get up and make your bed." Peter is careful to point out, every step of the way, that it is not *him* but *Christ* who is performing these wonders. Peter simply places himself in communion with Christ and serves as a channel for Christ's healing power.

Maybe *we* come to trust that *we* can do the things that Jesus did by spending time with Christ in prayer. By regularly placing ourselves in the presence of God, being in *communion* with Christ, formed in the likeness of Christ, opening ourselves up to God's power and love; giving the Spirit a body in which to dwell and work through – *ours*. Maybe it's not so much that *we* can do the things that Jesus did, but that *Christ keeps doing them through us*.

It's like the Prayer of St. Francis on the cover of your bulletin. Turn to that and look at it with me real quick. And actually, what I want to invite you to do is for us all to pray this prayer together:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:  
where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
where there is injury, pardon;  
where there is doubt, faith;  
where there is despair, hope;  
where there is darkness, light;  
where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek  
to be consoled as to console,

to be understood as to understand,  
to be loved as to love.  
For it is in giving that we receive,  
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,  
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.  
Amen.

That's a good prayer to pray every day. Each morning, to just take a few moments to sit in silence in the presence of Christ and then pray these words, opening yourself up to the power and love of God. Being formed in the likeness of Jesus Christ. And in doing so, may you be filled with *wonder* at what Christ can do *in* you and *through* you, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.