

“The Power of the Resurrection”

“The good news is about bringing life where there is death, love where there is hate, healing where there is brokenness,” writes William Loader. In the aftermath of events that have captured our news media these past weeks, that is an affirmation we need to hear: the horrible devastation being dropped on cities in Ukraine makes us gawk at the level of inhumanity; then there are the fires that have swept across several states in the western portion of our country, burning acres and square miles of land and destroying homes and entire communities. That is topped by the accounts of storms bringing blizzard conditions to some, tornadoes to others (including here in northeast Ohio), and hurricane-force winds and rain to other areas. And shootings, murders, baby stealing, hit-and-run killings, and on and on and on.

As we go through these events, there comes the insight that reveals that life can end in a heartbeat without warning. We all know that, but rarely do we dwell on the implications of that knowledge. In fact, if we were to dwell on this idea that we could die at any moment, we could fall into a catatonic state, unable to live life at all. But, we blithely move along without giving this a second thought, and are brought up short by such cataclysmic events as occurred these past weeks, or by a closer and more personal event, such as the death of a loved one.

It was just such an event that frames the narrative of today’s First Lesson. Professor James Boyce wrote: “. . . *this [is a] poignant story of sorrow and loss. In the midst of comfort, success, and growth, there is the painful reminder that the last enemy of death still lingers and threatens this early Christian community’s, and our own present day community’s, confidence and faith in the power and promise of Jesus’ resurrection.*”

Up to this point in the Book of Acts Luke has provided a narrative that recounts victory after victory, success following success. In this stretch of the story, even the setbacks turn out to be glorious occasions. Imprisonments become times of extreme freedom and opportunities for

witness; beatings give rise to greater boldness to proclaim; a season of blindness is viewed as little cost to pay for the experience of Jesus. But now here, for the first time, the question arises: *“How are we to confront death in light of Jesus resurrection?”*

Luke sets up the narrative in a way that tells us of the shock that accompanied this death. First, he *“begins by naming Tabitha, taking time to honor her by translating her name and praising her life for its devotion to ‘good works and acts of charity’ (9:36)”* [Boyce] The Hebrew name “Tabitha” in Greek is “Dorcas” — so of course you all know immediately that in English this means “gazelle” (I knew a Dorcas in high school; she was anything but gazelle-like. That may have been why she preferred to be known as “Dee.”) The name itself does not tell us much; that we are given the name at all is testimony to Luke’s consideration of her impact on the early Christian community.

The next verse is somewhat muddled by the NRSV translation, *“At that time . . .”* The Greek literally says, *“And it came about in those days . . .”* which is a line that Luke used repeatedly in his Gospel and will use many times again in Acts. Because of that phrase, we are conditioned to expect that what will follow will be yet another story of success and promise. *“Instead, before we are through the next sentence, Tabitha has become ill and died. We are shocked by the suddenness. The simple direct narrative of the unnamed ‘they’ who wash and lay her out in an upper room hardly masks the love, the care, and the grief of the community who have experienced her acts of mercy.”* [Boyce]

Still in shock, the community grasps for any hope and cries out in desperation for Peter to come without delay, carefully strengthening their appeal by sending *“two men”* to carry their request. Peter responds by coming immediately and, upon his arrival, is ushered into the *“upper room”* so recently identified (9:37) as the sanctuary of death.

It is also the sanctuary of grief and the outpouring of love as her friends gather around him, eager even in their weeping to detail their loss by the parade of tunics and clothing she has made, the signs of her loving and

caring life. That those gathered are “all the widows” (9:39), witnesses both to that culture and to that society where the poor have their suffering multiplied, and to the fact that these women have been no strangers to death. The fact that they have been in many such an upper room before does not ease their grief.

Luke reminds us of the sources of their grief, while at the same time ushering in the first ray of hope. In telling us that these widows brought out the clothing Dorcas had made, Luke concludes with the phrase, “*while she was with them.*” This is an echo from Luke’s writing that certainly recalls a different upper room and The One who “*was with them*” in a story that moved from death to resurrection. Always in the background of this story, as in the stories of our lives, there is the Good News of Jesus’ resurrection. No matter how painful or full of grief life becomes, that hope remains.

It is a hope that is expressed in today’s Second Lesson. It is something of a refrain that must have echoed in many hearts as the scenes of missiles and wildfires and blizzards danced across our television screens, mowing down people and property. We are to ask ourselves: “*Will those deaths result in life?*” The innocent spectators? A child? Valiant volunteers who were only trying to help? Are they not Dorcas-like and deserving of resurrection?

St. John the Divine looks upon this “*great multitude that no one could count, from every nation . . . robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.*” They are the ones “*who have come out of the great ordeal*”

Scholars have debated for centuries which ordeal qualified as “the great” one — most agree it was one of the many persecutions inaugurated by Roman Emperors (the villains usually cited are either Nero or Diocletian) — but it really isn’t essential that we settle that debate. It is enough for us to know that, in John’s vision, it is no longer the pain of the persecution that is focal. The focus now is on the Lamb in whose blood “*they have washed their robes and made them white*” It is not death and

destruction that defines them, it is hope.

These accounts do not answer all of our questions, the big one being *“Why do we not today experience the same resurrection of loved ones that was given to Tabitha and the early Christian community?”* What the story does bring is the clear and certain witness to the power of our Lord's resurrection, and to the good news that not only at times of death, but at other dark times, the Spirit of the risen Lord enters our world to bring life and healing and hope.

We see that enacted each time a child is brought to our baptismal font. In our presence God takes an infant (or for that matter, an 80-year-old man, who I was privileged to baptize) and bring them from death to life. Drowned in the waters and joined in death to Christ, they die with Him before our very eyes, and are resurrected right before us — new life surging forth.

John Westerhoff III, Professor at Duke Divinity School, tells of a time when he was in Central America and saw a notice on the local church bulletin board about a baptism to be held that Sunday. He decided to attend, and described what he witnessed:

As the congregation sang a funeral dirge, a small procession walked down the aisle, a mother carrying her infant child, wrapped in a simple burlap covering, and her husband bearing a small coffin he had fashioned by his own hands. The coffin was placed on the altar, and the priest filled it with water. Taking the child from its mother's arms, he removed the simple garment, held the child high before the congregants and declared in a loud voice, naming the child, *“I kill you in the name of Jesus Christ!”* He then lowered the child into the water-filled coffin, and lifted the child back up and again high before the assembly and shouted, *“And I resurrect you in his name, so that you will always know whose you are and whom you serve.”*

And I say, *“Yeah. That's a baptism!”*

For all of us who have passed through the waters of Baptism, this is the

hope now proclaimed: ***“They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”***

So today we also delight in the Good News that this Lamb is, at the same time, our Good Shepherd. You caught that: ***“the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd”*** — OUR Good Shepherd, not just THE Good Shepherd, who says of us: ***“I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.”***

What happens at this font is no mere symbol; it is a real life-and-death-and-life-again enactment. Your brain will never grasp this — not your logical left brain nor your creative and imaginative right brain. This can be grasped only in faith, and for that we use our hearts — hearts given to Christ to be shaped and molded by the Holy Spirit so that the things of faith can be grasped and held. Hearts that are lifted up in hope because they have perceived the presence of the One who promises new life. When our thinking becomes confused or confounded, it is our hearts that will carry us into the arms of the Good Shepherd.

What the story of Tabitha brings is the clear and certain witness to the power of our Lord's resurrection, and to the good news that not only at times of death, but at other dark times, the Spirit of the risen Lord enters our world to bring life and healing and hope. So bombs, explosions, hurricanes, tornados, cancer cells, viruses, evildoers, angry crowds, crazed gunmen, screaming dictators, earthquakes, tsunamis, avalanches — all that the natural world and human sinfulness can throw into the mix to mess up our lives — they do not hold sway. We confess that the Christ who claims us in Baptism will not let us go, and will be true to every single promise.

Professor Eric Barreto writes: *“In these weeks after Easter, it may be that our wonder over the resurrection may have abated somewhat. Perhaps we have heard the story repeatedly, and our hearing has grown dull ...*

But any of us who have tasted the power of illness and the bitterness of loss can never lose sight of this dazzling miracle. The gospel looks out over a world characterized by death, illness, and loss and yet declares that eternal life is the new order of the day, that Jesus himself embodies and assures us of the promise that death will not have the last word and that no boundary can ever cleave us apart from one another.”

And to that I ask God’s people to say, “Amen.”