

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
Jody McDevitt, co-pastor

April 17, 2016
4th Sunday of Easter
Acts 9:36-43

And the Winner is. . . Life!

This is the season in which we talk about life and death.

Of course, these are year-round topics as well. But in the Easter season, life and death are set before us unavoidably, to make sure that we talk about death and life. Easter is still with us for several more weeks. And in these weeks of resurrection mystery and joy, we are compelled to consider the unpopular topic of death, and to deepen our understanding of the gift of eternal life.

For if we confine the Easter story to one Sunday a year, we've missed the point. Resurrection is the heart of the gospel, the reason we are here, the central mystery and promise that caused the church to form and grow and spread throughout the world. We worship on Sundays because Easter, Christ's resurrection, happened on a Sunday. Yet even weekly remembrance is not enough. Resurrection is our daily calling, our guiding light as Christians. And resurrection is about death and life. Thanks be to God!

So in the Acts of the Apostles, we hear how resurrection transformed ordinary people, those disciples of Jesus—fishers and tax collectors and tradespeople, parents and children, single and married, men and women both—into a community of witness and courage for the sake of the good news of Christ. It's a substantive book, part 2 of Luke's telling of the mission of Christ. In the first book, the Gospel of Luke, he tells Jesus' story with an emphasis on Christ's compassion and tenderness toward all who are needy, and the universality of his mission. In this second book, Acts of the Apostles, the community picks up Jesus' mantle and lives as Christ in the world.

And the disciple whose transformation is most thoroughly documented is Simon Peter.

You gotta love Peter. Impetuous, passionate, and insightful, Peter is prone to speaking more than he knows and then backing away from the truth. "You are the Messiah," he said to Jesus, and then in the next breath, he rejected Jesus' forecast of suffering, death, and rising from death. In another instance, Peter leapt out of the boat and was walking on water towards Jesus—until he realized what he was doing and sank right into the sea. Peter swore he'd be faithful to Jesus, and then on the night of Jesus' arrest he denied ever knowing him, three times.

Yet when the Holy Spirit swooshed into the lives of the disciples at Pentecost, it was Peter who made a great speech to the multicultural crowd telling about Jesus' death and resurrection and God's plan. Not long afterwards, amazingly enough, it was Peter who healed a lame man, who gave his testimony to threatening officials, and whose reputation became so well known that people began to carry their sick family members into the streets in hopes that Peter's shadow might fall on them, and heal them.

This is the background to today's story. It's lovely that we learn of Dorcas' devotion and charity, about the tunics she sewed for the widows and their deep love and affection for her. Such details give us a picture of the early Christian community. And frankly, there are few enough women in the Bible whose names we know, and fewer still whose character is described. Dorcas, also known as Tabitha, was a beloved saint in the church in Joppa. But the story is more about Peter and the community around Dorcas than it is about Dorcas, just as the story of the raising of Lazarus is more about Jesus, Mary, and Martha than about Lazarus. The stories of Elijah and Elisha each raising a children from death

are more about the prophets and the mothers of the children than they are about the children. This story in Acts is further testimony to the transformation of Peter in the likeness of Christ. Peter preaches boldly, he heals the sick, and he raises the dead. The disciple has become like his teacher. This story is testimony to a community's resurrection hope and prayer.

For the power of Christ is loose in the world. And it is resurrection power. It is power that confronts death and says, "Ha! It may look like you are the victor here. It may look like you have the last word. But looks are deceiving. Death, you are not as powerful as our life-giving God!"

A few weeks ago, during the Children's Time, one of the children wanted to tell me something that seemed unrelated to the lesson I was trying to share. He was close enough to my microphone that the whole congregation probably heard it. "Katie's brother died," he told me. As you can imagine, I was thrown a bit off course by this sad word coming from a young child, and I had no idea who Katie was. But upon reflection, I realized that a little child was leading us all toward greater truth-telling in church. Death takes us by surprise and throws us off course. Even when we expect it to happen, there are unexpected feelings which surface. Even when a person has lived a long and good life, we feel grief and sadness, confusion, and maybe anger. Yet our culture is poor at admitting all those feelings. We feel helpless and timid in our expression, for somehow we have absorbed the message that to talk about death is unwelcome, even taboo. We consider it morbid, frightening, depressing. So we use euphemisms like "passing," and put off those important conversations with our loved ones.

We try to distance ourselves from death, sometimes with deadly consequences. On a national level, our all-volunteer military insulates most of the population from direct experience of war deaths. And in recent years, we have developed and used drone warfare, in which drone operators on one side of the world destroy targets on the other side. And then we kid ourselves that those bombs are so precise that only enemy combatants die. Maybe if we were more intimate with the horrors of war, we'd be more determined to avoid, or even eradicate it.

Violent death is never God's will. In the crucifixion of Jesus, judgment is cast on all violent death. But in the resurrection of Jesus, God's will for life is shown to the world. The disciples of Jesus are ministers of life, who are not afraid of death.

It's not that Dorcas would never die after Peter resuscitated her. And it's not that Peter was able to bring back to life all the good, saintly followers of Christ in Joppa or any other place. Like Lazarus, Dorcas would one day die again, and her body would be buried. The inevitability of death is not defeated by Christ's resurrection. But what is defeated is death's sovereignty, and death's finality.

For Easter faith tells us that death is not the end of the story. It was not the end of Jesus' story and it was not the end of Dorcas' story. And though Peter, like Jesus, was crucified and died, we believe that was not the end of his story, either. Tradition tells us that he died in Rome under Emperor Nero's persecution, and that at his request, since he felt unworthy to die in the same way as Christ, he was placed upside down on the cross. Yet even in this gruesome ending, death was not the victor. For resurrection faith tells us that his relationship with our eternal God began in his earthly life. And in life and in death, he belonged and continues to belong to our eternal God, as do all who believe and trust in the God we know in Jesus Christ. Life wins! That is the Easter message. Life is more powerful than death. Life is God's eternal gift to us. For life is God's will.

Which makes the followers of Christ ministers of life, who are not afraid of death. Like Peter and the Christian community in Joppa, we are called to live as witnesses to the resurrection, who claim

the Easter promise “that everything and everyone we encounter will be made new through the power of the Holy Spirit.” (Kathleen R. Flood, “May Your Gaze Turn Upon Us,” *Weavings*, vol xxv, no 2, p. 19)

So what does claiming this Easter promise look like?

It looks like a grieving family finding comfort in a faith community which gathers around and offers hope through shared tears, shared meals, shared memories, and shared prayers. Christian rituals around death are important for the living, and testify to our faith in Christ’s resurrection.

It looks like speaking honestly with children about death and its mystery, and sharing trust that God’s love is greater than death’s sorrow.

It looks like an addict dying to his addiction and being born again by the grace of God.

It looks like investing time and commitment in those on the edges of society, those who have offended, those who are isolated by mental illness or physical limitations or social stigma. It looks like believing that every person bears the image of Christ, is loved by God, and can be a home for the Holy Spirit.

It looks like believing that even I am the beloved of God, who can bear God’s love in the world.

And who is called to live with hope and trust in God’s everlasting mercy.

The Easter promise, and the Easter life, are this:

In life and in death, we belong to God.
With believers in every time and place,
we rejoice that nothing in life or in death
can separate us from the love of God
in Christ Jesus our Lord.

(*A Brief Statement of Faith*, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1991)

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed.