

Easter 4, April 17 2016. Acts 9:36-43, Revelation 7:9-17, John 10:22-30 Nigel Taber-Hamilton  
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So many different types of biblical literature today! We've got some historical narrative in the story of Tabitha and Peter; we've got what is, without a doubt, the best-known psalm in the bible - a spiritual reflection on the presence and power of God; we've got a peek into heaven, and we've got a reflection on the identity of Jesus and his oneness with God.

In the first reading – from Acts – Luke tells us about a remarkable woman – Tabitha – a disciple “devoted to good works and acts of charity,” a woman whose life was all about acts of love focused on the poor. That Tabitha – a woman – has a name, and is described as a disciple tells us how much Luke valued this story and this woman. In fact he's using Tabitha as a role model for how those who are privileged – and apparently Tabitha was a privileged woman – should orient themselves toward those less fortunate in life.

The irony of Tabitha's story is that we learn of her not because she – as a woman – was a role model for all early Christians, male AND female, but because she died. That has a familiar feel to it, though; it seems to me that we're all pretty good at valuing the good works and gifts of others only after they're gone from us!

The story of Tabitha, and of Peter's intervention, echoes another New Testament story - any guesses? It's the story of the healing of Jairus' daughter, which is in all three synoptic gospels – meaning that Luke was familiar with it as he recorded the passage we have today from his “Volume II,” the Acts of the Apostles. Just as Jairus' daughter was presumed dead, only to be awakened with a word from the healer, Jesus, so Tabitha's presumed to be dead and then awakened with a word from the healer, Peter.

And it means? I think it means, in part, that faithful followers of Jesus – women and men alike – will be able to emulate Jesus' actions, that the power of God to heal and restore – so evident in the Anointed One – is a power accessible to all of us. We don't have to be literalists to believe this – lives are transformed all the time by those who are acting in the self-confident assurance that the power of God is more than capable to do so – we pray just that ourselves in the Prayer Book, “that things which were being cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made.” (BCP)

And I also think that the root of this transformation in the Acts story is not in Peter's actions – which are really an exclamation point – but as a result of the sort of person Tabitha was. God was already acting through Tabitha; Peter was simply another vehicle through which God was acting.

The message of Jesus' resurrection isn't – as I said on Easter Day – about mere resuscitation of a corpse, or restoration to the life that we formerly enjoyed. Eventually both Jairus' daughter and Tabitha died as did all the other New Testament characters. We might think that when we pray for someone who is dying what we want is a cure; I believe that it's a much more significant

thing we long for: healing, and that requires of us an act of trust: we need to trust that nothing – not even death and disability – can separate us from the love of God.

And that's the story of Psalm 23 – it reminds us that our trust is in God, not necessarily in a worry-free life. The Psalmist affirms that he will fear no evil, despite the reality of threat. He knows that he must go through the valley, and live with his fears, getting through the journey only because of his confidence in God's companionship. God makes a way where there is no way, and provides us comfort with what cannot be changed but must simply be endured.

The author of Revelation gives us a peek into heaven. He describes the angelic host, the Divine Parent, and the Lamb of God, the victorious Christ, and like those who have had "near death experiences," he discovers that all tragedy, terror, and trauma will be healed through the power of God. The martyrs may be lost to us but they are not lost to God. God will wipe away every tear, heal what is broken, and bring wholeness to our wounds. Heavenly hope doesn't turn us away from the world, rather it enables us to live courageously when all external hope seems to be gone. We will all experience loss, but no loss is final in light of God's everlasting love.

And John's Gospel addresses where we find the confidence to live in the knowledge that no loss is final in the light of God's everlasting love: it's Jesus' unity with God that is that source. John says that Jesus reveals God's nature to us, and calls us to be his own, calls us to align ourselves with God's vision in exactly the way that Tabitha did. Jesus' sheep are ultimately safe, and their safety lies in their alignment with God's vision for them and the world.

In the end, the readings proclaim one core Christian message: that eternal life is happening right now. When we experience ourselves in relationship with Christ, we live on earth as it is in heaven!

Today there are many voices clamoring for our attention; they evoke fear, make demands, give advice, seek control. Amid that cacophony of sound one voice – the still quiet voice – can be heard, if we listen with ears that hear: the voice of the good shepherd, a voice of promise – a voice that calls us by name and claims us as God's own. We may still make mistakes, feel anxious, and lose our way, but when we hear God's voice, we know that the journey is leading us home and that Jesus is our companion each step of the way. Amen.