

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
April 30, 2017

Rise!

Acts 9:32-43

Though we're now a couple of weeks past Easter Sunday, the good news of Christ's resurrection is still just as potent. It's easy to get pumped up for the annual celebration of Jesus' exit from the tomb. But the resurrection was more than just a one-time event. It's the beginning of God's new creation, the age of redemption when God arrived to put things right in a lost and broken world, rescuing us from the power of sin and death. Easter means that God's saving, life-giving power has been unleashed in the world. Nothing can ever be the same.

And yet, when we listen to Luke's story about the mission of the early church, so many things do seem to be the same. For instance, people still get sick and die, including faithful and righteous individuals. One such person was Aeneas, whom we meet in this morning's Scripture passage from the book of Acts. Just because Jesus was raised from the dead didn't mean that Aeneas's eight-year battle with paralysis was instantly over. But it soon would be. Peter came, invoked the name of Jesus, and Aeneas was back on his feet.

In today's story, we also meet Tabitha, a disciple who spent most of her time helping the poor in Joppa. Whenever they needed someone to restock the community food pantry, Tabitha was there. Whenever a call came in asking for help from the benevolence fund, Tabitha was the one who followed up on the request. Whenever they needed more help at the homeless shelter, Tabitha led the effort to recruit more volunteers. Her name was synonymous with compassion.

But now, the woman who had brought such comfort and hope to so many lives is dead. The whole community is in mourning. Makeshift altars have been set up on the doorstep of Tabitha's house. Individuals pause to leave a flower, light a candle, or tie on a ribbon. Some of them are poor folks who've been directly touched by Tabitha's ministry. Others are townspeople who knew her name and her reputation for service to others. From the moment that news of Tabitha's death began to circulate, the flow of mourners hasn't stopped.

Some of those who come to pay their respects see the situation as an end. The end of Tabitha's life. The end of her ministry. The end of her witness for Christ. But there are others, namely her fellow disciples, who look at the situation and see not an end, but the opportunity for a new beginning. Where others see only death, these followers of Jesus see the possibility of life.

So they send word to Peter to come quickly. Notice, they aren't summoning Peter because they want him to officiate at Tabitha's funeral. They aren't asking him to come and provide pastoral care in this time of shock and grief. They're calling upon Peter because they know that he has a reputation as a healer. Remember, these are followers of Jesus. Not a dead Jesus, but the risen, living Lord Jesus whose power is at work in the ministry of Peter and the other apostles.

Yes, Tabitha is dead. Her body has already been prepared for burial. The family has already been to the funeral home, picked out a casket, and made all the other arrangements. But since when has God let death have the final say? What about the time that the son of the widow at Zarephath was dead and Elijah restored his life (1 Kgs. 17:17-24)? What about the time that Elisha took the Shunammite widow's dead son and gave him life again (2 Kgs. 4:18-37)? What about the time that Jesus went to a town called Nain, stepped right into a funeral procession, brought a young man back to life, and gave him back to his mother (Luke 7:11-17)? What about the time that Jesus took Jairus's dead daughter and raised her to life (Luke 8:41-42; 49-56)? And all this even before Easter!

No wonder the disciples in Joppa weren't ready to give up on Tabitha. They knew that God had a history of making the dead live again. So they summoned Peter, trusting that the power of Jesus, the power of the creating, redeeming, life-giving God was at work through him. And they weren't disappointed. Peter sent everyone out of the room, then got down on his knees and prayed. He looked at the dead woman and said, "Tabitha, get up." She opened her eyes and sat up. Can you imagine the looks on the mourners' faces when Peter, and Tabitha, came walking out of the room? The community that had lost one of its own had now gotten her back. Once again, God had wrenched life from death.

The power of God operates in and through the community of God's people. And not just any power. I'm talking about reconciling, resurrection power, the power of the God who has dealt with our sins at the cross and has delivered us from the tomb by delivering Jesus from the tomb. The apostle Paul speaks of him as the God "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" (Rom. 4:17, NRSV). Paul also says, "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you" (Rom. 8:11).

Paul has in mind not only God's promise to raise believers from the dead when Christ comes again, but also the assurance that this resurrection power is already at work here and now in the lives of those who belong to Christ. In other words, becoming like Jesus isn't just what will happen to believers at the end. It's what's already happening to us on the way to the end.

And in order for this to happen, we need to remain firm in our connection with God, so that his resurrection power, the very life of Christ, can flow into us and through us. In a seminary missions class, Herbert Jackson told about how, as a new missionary, he was assigned a car that wouldn't start without a push. After pondering his problem, Jackson devised a plan. He went to the school near his home, got permission to take some children out of class, and had them push his car off. As he made his rounds, he would either park on a hill or leave the engine running. He used this ingenious procedure for two years.

Eventually, poor health forced Jackson and his family to leave, and a new missionary came to that area. When Jackson proudly began to explain his arrangement for getting the car started, the new man began looking under the hood. Before the explanation was complete, the new missionary interrupted, "Why, Dr. Jackson, I believe the only trouble is this loose cable." He gave the cable a twist, stepped into the car, pushed the switch, and to Jackson's astonishment, the engine roared to life. For two years needless trouble had become routine. The power was there all the time. Only a loose connection kept Jackson from putting that power to work.¹

When we remain firm in our connection to God through worship, Bible study, prayer, fellowship, and service, the power of God that raised Jesus from the dead can work

in us to raise us to newness of life, individually and as a congregation. So perhaps the word that we as a church need to hear this morning is the same word that Peter spoke to Tabitha: Rise!

Rise, Grace Baptist Church. Rise, people of God. Rise, insert your name. Rise and let the Spirit of God, the power and life of God himself, operate in you more fully and effectively.

How slowly but steadily deadness can work its way into our lives, as individual Christians and as a community of Christians. We grow satisfied with the status quo in our lives, in our church, in the world. We become complacent about our congregation. Our passion for Christ and for the community of Christ's people wanes. We grow tired, or apathy sets in, and we lose our zeal for the life and mission of God's people. We lose sight of the fact that we as a congregation have been called into existence by the God who raised Jesus, who conquered sin and death, and who has placed his Spirit in us as a guarantee of what is yet to come.

But are we as a congregation waiting eagerly and expectantly for what is to come? Or are we just satisfied with what has been, or what now is? True, we give thanks to God for what he has done and is doing in and through our church. But that doesn't mean we close ourselves off from the possibilities for the future. One of the ways that paralysis and deadness can work their way into our lives and into our congregation is by convincing us that the way things are is just the way things are, in our lives, in our church, in the world. The boundaries are fixed. Things can't be changed. Nothing can be made new.

Fred Craddock tells a story about a young pastor who goes to pray with an elderly woman. She's in the hospital, near death. As she lies on her pillow, gasping for breath, the pastor spends some time with her, and then he says, "I need to go, but would you like to have prayer before I go?" "Yes," she says. So he asks, "Well, what would you like us to pray for today?" And she answers, "I'd like to pray that I'd be healed, of course." The young pastor gasps but goes on, "Lord, we pray for your sustaining presence with this sick sister. And if it be thy will, we pray that she will be restored to health and to service. But if it's not thy will, we certainly hope that she will adjust to her circumstances."

Suddenly the old woman opens her eyes and sits up in bed. She throws her feet over the side of the bed. She stands up, and says, "I think I'm healed!" Then she strides out the door. The last the pastor sees, she's striding down the hallway toward the nurses' station, saying, "Look! Look at me!" The pastor goes down the steps and out to the parking lot. Before he opens the door of his car, he looks up and says, "Don't you ever do that to me again!"²

Thanks be to God, who comes into our state of death with heaven's liberating command: Rise! Rise, Grace Baptist Church. Get up, people of God. In this moment, I mean that literally. Stand up with me. Get up and see the things the Lord has done, is doing, and will do, in you and through you. Join me as we read the Scripture printed in today's bulletin: "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen" (Eph. 3:20-21).

¹ *Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching: From Leadership Journal*, ed. Craig Brian Larson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) 182.

² As told by William H. Willimon, "Evangelical Laughter," *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 137.