

## HOPE BEYOND DEATH

Acts 9:36-43, Psalm 23 and John 10:22-30

Following the glorious celebration of the resurrected Christ, the New Testament contains amazing stories of the apostle's courage and boldness in the face of opposition. The apostles witness the power of the Spirit and the Resurrection of Christ Jesus. The resurrection legitimizes and empowers the witness of the community, symbolizing that death to the ideologies of power and dominance in the old system results in new life.

Human authority may falsely look like the answer to all of our problems and the potential saviour of our country or world. What are those earthly things or human authorities that demand our allegiance and call out for our obedience? "How can we best protect our interests?" "What can we do to get ahead?" In what ways have we let fear direct our path rather than praying for the courage that comes through the power of the Holy Spirit? In what ways might God be calling us to be bolder for the sake of God's Kingdom?

After a harsh warning from the elders and rulers of Jewish religious law, Peter delivered a powerful statement to the high priest. "The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you had killed, by hanging him on a tree; God exalted him at his right hand as leader and saviour." This powerful and poetic statement can be summed up in terms of *overturning*. First, the actual death of Jesus is overturned by God's rising of Jesus. Second, Jesus' death is not the final word, but a pathway into new life of repentance and renewal.

Literarily Acts 9 verses 36-37 imitate the shocking reality of death. The author introduces a woman called Tabitha (Dorcas) who is dead. Luke recalls her good works and acts of charity, drawing attention back to other faithful people like the centurion in the gospel of Luke who asks for Jesus' healing of his servant (Luke 7:1-10). Tabitha had a reputation among the believers as being "full of good works." She helped people by using the talents she had to encourage others. Her death stunned the community, where she was adored for her sweet, giving spirit. She is remembered as a person of deep faith and creativity.

One wonders, however, what Tabitha's friends expected when they called Peter. Did they want Peter to know about this extraordinary believer? Did they wish for the memory of their dear friend to be shared with this pillar of the burgeoning church? Did they perhaps hope for a miracle beyond miracles? Did they perhaps hope against hope for a reprieve from death?

Tabitha's friends had reason to hope otherwise they wouldn't invite him to help. *"Peter went with them, and when he arrived he was taken upstairs to the room. All the widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them. Peter sent them all out of the room; then he got down on his knees and prayed. Turning toward the dead woman, he*

said, *"Tabitha, get up."* She opened her eyes, and seeing Peter she sat up." (Acts 9:39-40 NIV)

So, when the residents of Joppa see Tabitha restored to life, they do not join this community of believers so much because they are stunned by this miraculous act of healing but because of what it might mean for them and for the world. If death is no longer a barrier between us, can we dare hope that the ills that plague us, our families, and our communities might also be healed by a God who cares so deeply for us?

Has Jesus become hope when there was no hope, freedom from burdens you know would crush you, peace from turmoil within and without? That voice of the one who has called you to trust him is the one of the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for you, for me, for all on the cross. He gave up his life so you and I could have it. Then he rose from death to tell us all he said was true. His words, his promises, his love for us and all people, his acceptance of people of every kind, his leading us and giving us eternal, never-ending living with him--all true. What a voice to hear and to follow!

In Jesus' statement, *"I am the gate for the sheep"* (v. 7), Jesus is using the image of a shepherd, and applying it directly to himself. There is neither roof nor door, but thorns along the top of the rock walls protect the sheep from wild animals, and the shepherd himself sleeps in the entrance, providing a door. (cf. Bailey 1993:11; Beasley-Murray 1987:169).

When it comes to the trunk of the tree of Christian beliefs, the apostle believes that we will confront total death. No immortal soul escapes the body. All of who we are—body, soul, and spirit—will die. He likens our death to that of a seed buried in the ground. The seed looks dead when we bury it. Yet, later, it sprouts up again. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. (1 Cor. 15)

"The true joy of Easter comes from the tremendous hope that swells in our heart when we ourselves meet Jesus," said the Bishop. "This inner joy endures despite the many difficulties that we inevitably face on our human journey. Indeed, it gives us much strength to face these difficulties and overcome them." Only the living God can empower us with new life. It is the indwelling compelling Spirit of Christ that can transform death into life, sadness into joy, carelessness into compassion.

Perhaps we have heard the wonder over the resurrection repeatedly, and our hearing has grown dull. Perhaps Lazarus and Tabitha seem altogether too ordinary. 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. 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. Amen.