

## “See You and Raise You”

So by now Easter is old hat... old Easter bonnet, if you will, still with all the frills upon it but now once again in its bag from the cleaners and tucked away on the farthest corner of the highest shelf of the least visited closet in the house. Even the most disciplined among us has made it through all the Easter candy by now. The last shreds of plastic grass have been flossed from our teeth and vacuumed from the carpet. Some of us have even regained our appetite for egg salad. Easter is done.

But of course in the church we never let go of anything that easily. Furniture stays forever, we sing the same old hymns over and over again, committees once established go on and on and on and on. So we're still just getting started with Easter. We've got a solid month to go until Pentecost, which this year arrives the week before Memorial Day. The season of Easter, the great 50 days of Easter, is longer than Lent. We're just warming up. In the words of the old gospel song, “don't feel no ways tired.”

The Easter story keeps going; and the amazing thing is that God keeps raising the stakes. Here we go again: I'll see you and I'll raise you.

Our scripture lesson for today is an odd little reading from Acts. By way of reminder: the same person wrote both the Gospel According to Luke and the Acts of the Apostles; so we refer to the author of Acts as “Luke.” Luke has an intriguing literary style. He holds our interest in the big picture by jumping back and forth from one strand of the story to another: first the focus is on Peter in Jerusalem, then it jumps to Gaza to pick up the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, then to last week's story of Paul's call to serve Christ as a missionary to the Gentiles. This week we're back to Peter, but he's no longer in Jerusalem, he's on the Mediterranean Coast in a town called Joppa, where the stage is being set for one of the most important chapters in the New Testament, the meeting between Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10. But first comes the prelude, the prologue—and it's some prologue: Peter raises a woman from the dead.

Peter emerges in Acts as the real deal, the rock on whom Christ's Church has been being built. He preaches fearlessly and heals miraculously—all through the agency of the Holy Spirit. Recently Peter has been making the rounds of fledgling Christian communities, offering a

combination of spiritual support and apostolic guidance. Little house churches have been springing up here and there. In describing these small communities Luke particularly emphasizes their economic interdependence, recounting that often these early Christians held all possessions in common.<sup>1</sup> The communal nature of these churches helps us picture what we're reading this morning.

A woman named Tabitha is living in Joppa. Luke also gives us her Greek name, Dorcas, which sends the clear signal that Luke is writing for a mixed audience. (This will be important later.) Tabitha is a widow who seems to be a part of a community of widows. In the first century, widows who weren't taken in by family members needed to find some means of support. Evidently these widows make their living sewing tunics and other clothing—sort of a Christian widows' boutique.

Joppa would be a lovely setting for such an enterprise. It's set on a hill from which you can look to the north along the Mediterranean Coastline, breakers marching majestically toward the beach. In the distance you can see the town of Acre, formerly Caesarea, where there is a wonderful natural harbor.

Tabitha has died. We're given no details, just told that she was "devoted to good works and acts of charity" and that she became ill and died. This brief account, usually so sparse with details, gives us the tender image of the other women in the community washing the body and laying Tabitha in an upstairs room. Because this community of Christians is aware that Peter is nearby (and perhaps even planning a visit anyway) they send for him.

The whole account is eerily reminiscent of the story in John in which Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. It also echoes with imagery from other biblical resurrection stories: when Elijah raises the only son of a widow in I Kings<sup>2</sup> and Jesus raises the daughter of a man named Jairus.<sup>3</sup> Little details common to these other stories make today's lesson seem both comfortingly familiar and stiffly stylized.

As in the Elijah story, the deceased is in an upper room. Peter sends the mourners away as Jesus does in healing Jairus's daughter. Peter prays

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 4:32-5:11 not only describes their sharing, but recounts a very peculiar story in which a husband and wife (Ananias and Sapphira) don't report income from the sale of a field and are struck dead for holding out on the Holy Spirit. That story doesn't show up in the lectionary!

<sup>2</sup> I Kings 17:17-24.

<sup>3</sup> Mark 5:35-43.

over the body as Jesus prayed over Lazarus. Then he tells the woman to rise much as Jesus told Jairus's daughter to rise. Jesus called her "Talitha," which means "little girl" in Aramaic. Here the woman's name is "Tabitha." She opens her eyes and sits up. Then Peter restores her to her community.

This is a wonderful story in its own right. It carries with it the affirmation that those who believe in Jesus share in his resurrection; that Easter means life and new life for those who trust in the God who raised Jesus from the dead. So the story has a lot to say to us.

But it is even more powerful in its context. As it functions in Acts, this little lesson really just sets the stage for what follows, the encounter between Peter and Cornelius. Our unadorned lesson, sparse and direct in its language, consists of seven verses. The Peter and Cornelius account, rich in detail, covers an entire chapter: 48 verses. But because we get these stories back to back we are invited to understand that they are both Easter stories.

Cornelius is a centurion in Caesarea, about half a day's journey up the coast from Joppa. He commands a hundred men. And he is of the Italian cohort: he's not a mercenary in the Roman army, he's an actual Roman from Italy, a Gentile of Gentiles. But he has an open mind—fearing God, praying regularly and giving alms. He has a vision in which an angel instructs him to send to Joppa for a man named Peter. He does this, even though he does not yet know why.

Just as Cornelius's emissaries are approaching Joppa, Peter has a dream in which a great sheet descends from heaven with every kind of animal—clean and unclean—on it. A voice tells Peter to kill and eat, but Peter protests that some of this food clearly is not kosher. The voice replies that, "What God has called clean you must not call profane." Peter is puzzled regarding what this dream might mean.

Then the messengers from Cornelius arrive, and it becomes evident that Peter's dream isn't just about food and Jewish dietary laws, but about relationships between Jews and Gentiles. God's new community, he comes to understand, will consist of all kinds of people: both the Jews among whom Peter has been preaching, teaching and healing, and the Gentiles to whom the Apostle Paul will eventually be sent. God is out to get everybody. And in Christ, as the Apostle Paul will come to say, God, "...has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ephesians 2:14.

What I find truly beautiful about this story is that neither Peter nor Cornelius can understand what has happened to him without the other. On different sides of the dividing wall, each needs the other to find his own wholeness, peace and salvation. Together they learn about what God is up to, and it rocks the world for each of them. Resurrection means not just raising the faithful from the dead. It also means lifting up a new kind of community: new life and a new world.

Which is harder: raising the dead or burying the hatchet? One can make the case that they are equally impossible by human effort alone, but that all things are possible with God.

So throughout this season of Easter, God keeps raising the stakes: I'll see you and I'll raise you—raise you from the dead or raise you to a whole new world in which all the old divisions, distinctions and animosities don't matter any more.

That's the kind of vision, so close to the heart of our faith, that can never grow old, never be packed away on a shelf, because it keeps calling us to newness of life.

Thanks be to God.

Amen

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