

“Eyes Opened”

Valley Presbyterian Church – June 20, 2021

4th Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 90:1-6, 14-17

Rev. John Wahl

Acts 9:36-43

Earlier this ninth chapter of Acts, we heard the familiar story of the conversion of Saul: persecutor of Christians; into Paul: chief among the apostles. Luke, the author of Acts, turns toward Peter once again and his wonder working power among the Gentiles beyond Jerusalem. In the verses prior to this morning’s reading, Peter heals a man in Lydda who has been paralyzed for eight years, confined by his disability to a cot, telling him: “Get up and make your bed.”

Then, in today’s verses, the power of miraculous healing is even more astonishing. In Joppa (a place close to Lydda), Peter is summoned by a group of the people there because a beloved disciple Tabitha – also named Dorcas – has died. It seems they want Peter to come and do something to comfort or help them. Or maybe they dare to hope that he might do something for her. Luke tells us how Peter knelt down and prayed, saying, “Tabitha, get up.” Immediately, her eyes opened and she appears to her friends. In the miracle of all miracles, she has been raised from the dead.

Miracles stories in the Bible – and especially stories about people being raised from the dead, because they evoke such wonder – can encourage people who have lost hope or cling to a fading faith in God’s ability to illuminate a way out of suffering and powerlessness. They make others skeptical, wondering how much these stories stem from legends, superstitions, or ancient ignorance about how the world really worked. And sometimes, honestly, they worry us; making us wonder if the comparatively bland Christianity we practice today bears enough resemblance to what the Christian life might have been like back in the day, when the apostles healed the sick and raised the dead.¹

The miracles that disciples like Peter and Paul – and others in Acts – perform are not an end in themselves. They mirror and continue Jesus’s ministry; they provide a means of bearing witness to Jesus and show that the work of the

¹ Matthew Skinner, *Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel*

church and its disciples is not a new thing but a continuation of God's mercy and power. Through them, Jesus remains present in the church.

And what we learn from this story is how the mercy and power of God is made known through this particular disciple. This is the only time in all the New Testament that the feminine form for "disciple" is used to describe someone. Luke implies by using this term that Dorcas is fully the equivalent of male disciples; and he goes on to say precisely why: because "she was devoted to good works and acts of charity." In particular, she made clothing for the widows, who lovingly show their tunics to Peter when he arrived in Joppa. Dorcas felt a responsibility to help and give to those who had less; those who were marginalized, vulnerable, and oppressed. Her eyes are opened and she bears the burden and privilege of being a role model for all disciples who follow her; to set the pace for what it means to be a follower of Christ.²

We know that the community of which Tabitha was a part loved her and valued her based on the way they mourned her loss. Her dual names suggest that she was herself a sort of cultural hybrid: straddling the line between Judaism and the wider Greco-Roman world. She is at home both in the comfortable confines of her faith and in the many different cultures surrounding her. Although she may not have been famous, she was important to those who knew her. It is clear both that she loved and that she was loved. Thus, they did not want to lose her. She was a disciple who was giving and faithful.

The beauty of Dorcas and her briefly described service resides in how attainable and accessible her discipleship appears to us. Good works, acts of charity, clothing the needy; these are hardly superhuman deeds; and yet we know how these activities can have nearly miraculous outcomes when they generate widespread love, support, and appreciation. She was – and is – every bit a disciple and witness to the gospel as Peter. For, in her commitment to others, she is a leader in her community. In her mercy and power, we see God.

This portrait of Dorcas reminds me of so many Christian disciples who generously and selflessly devote themselves to the needs of others, especially those who are most vulnerable and in need; people in this congregation and many others who work persistently behind the scenes – out of the limelight – not seeking out any attention or compensation but looking to live out their faith. They are so often

² Mitzi Smith from *WorkingPreacher.org*

the women, not exclusively but very commonly; women who fulfill the church's ministries of caring and live out their gospel calling.

Presbyterian author, artist, and activist David Lamotte describes two different lenses for viewing the gospel: either as the story of a hero, or of a movement. We are all familiar with hero stories – whether Batman, Wonder Woman, or Captain America – and the only role we are asked to play in these stories is to watch and offer our applause. Likewise, many view the Christian gospel as a story where Jesus is in the role of the hero who performs miraculous acts and rescues us from our sins. Thus, in our worship and praise, we appreciatively offer Jesus our applause; but not much else is needed or expected.

An alternate lens sees the Christian gospel as a movement in which the followers of Jesus are inspired by his words and his example to act on his behalf. In a movement, we participate in a community of active change: we are the ones who have been called to love mercy and act justly and walk humbly with God. We do not wait for the hero to swoop in and save the day but instead dedicate ourselves – with all our energy, imagination, and love; our resources and time – to the causes that are important to us, and to God.

Lamotte says that these two lenses – seeing the gospel as the story of a hero or the story of a movement – represents the greatest dividing line in the church; not liberal or conservative; progressive or traditional; not the church that will admit some to receive communion and bar others; not the church that blesses some relationships and admonishes others. As followers of Jesus, as disciples, Lamotte asks, are we called to be members in a passive audience or an active community of mercy and change?³

This weekend, I have been witnessing this congregation at work on behalf of those in need as meals have been prepared for our ministry partners at North Church and scores of people donated, sorted, priced, served, shopped and found what they were lacking at the Pass-It-On Store. Today's worship service is certainly not the only thing going on here at Valley; yes, it is important to offer God our praise; but to do so as a thankful response and catalyst for ministries of caring, sharing, and service.

Because, if we – like Dorcas – open our eyes to the needs of the people and the world around us, we understand there are ample reasons for and opportunities to give. Looking around, we see the widespread and ongoing effects the pandemic

³ David Lamotte from *Unbound* Podcast, episode 16

has had on jobs, education, and mental health. We see how lies and disinformation have created deep political rifts; and how we need to reckon with our long history of racism and inequity. We see the devastating effects of climate change in our western states and rampant gun violence throughout the nation.

Like Dorcas, we are participants both in a particular Christian faith community as well as a broader, multi-faith and multi-cultural world. With our eyes opened, we can choose either to be passive audience members – waiting for a hero to come and fix things or rescue us from them – or we can be participants in a movement; in the continuation of Jesus's own ministry of healing, mercy, and transformation. Not everything was completed in Christ's lifetime, nor has it been in the many centuries since, but we have been called to be followers dedicated to the compassionate ways that Jesus – and disciples like Dorcas – have sought to live out the gospel.

How we wish, sometimes, for a miracle to make life less complicated or painful; for a hero to show up with superpowers to set everything right. But, these are not the sort of miracle attested to in scripture. Yes, Dorcas – this faithful and merciful model disciple – is raised from death to new life; but so can we be. When we open our eyes to see the power and mercy of God's gospel movement – and how we have been called to be active participants in it – then we witness the true power of resurrection life. Movements can encourage and lift people up; especially those who – like the widows of old – have historically been marginalized and forgotten. Movements are rooted in community: every follower is also a learner and a leader; a true disciple.

May we, as the church, continue to see ourselves as a movement; ever searching for and pursuing the ways that we can dedicate ourselves to the love of others; so that we, ourselves, can be enveloped within the love of God made known in the ministry of Jesus, and the continuation of that ministry through the disciples of the church. Amen.