

The Love that Is Stronger than Death

Acts 9:36-43

John 10:22-30

“My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish.”

Tabitha was dead as a doornail. Nevertheless, the disciples sent two men to fetch Peter with the request: “Please come to us without delay.” As I read Luke’s story this week, bells began ringing in my head. Even though the raising of Lazarus was John’s story to tell, I wondered if Luke knew a version of it and borrowed a detail, in particular the detail of Jesus waiting to leave until Lazarus was dead, so that his disciples “may believe” as the people of Joppa believed when Tabitha was shown to be alive. Or maybe Luke was thinking of the story in his own Gospel about Jesus taking Jairus’ dead daughter by the hand and calling, “Child get up!” So he wrote, “Peter gave Tabitha his hand and helped her up.” Or did he have in mind the older stories of Elijah and Elisha. In the one, Elijah takes the dead son of the widow of Zarephath from her bosom to an upper room, as Tabitha was in an upper room, and asks God “to let the child’s life come into him again.” In the other, Elisha is summoned to the house of the Shunammite woman where her dead son has been laid out on the holy man’s bed. Elisha goes into the room, closes the door on the woman and his servant, as Peter closes the door on the widows, and lays on top of the child—mouth to mouth, hand to hand, eye to eye. A little creepy, but the child becomes warm and then sneezes seven times! I wondered, this week, if Luke’s story were written to bring to mind each of these stories, stories surely told and written down so that we may believe.

But believe what, exactly? Believe in the God who brings life out of death, to be sure. But notice that these are stories about dead people being resuscitated. I think it not by chance that the church confesses every Sunday, “I believe in the resurrection of the body” and not “I believe in the resuscitation of the body.” So to tell you the truth, I wish Luke’s story at the beginning of the church’s life went something like this: “They took Peter to a room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and Peter comforted them with these words: ‘Know that because of him who died and was raised on the third day, Tabitha now lives not in the grave but in the room Christ has made for her eternally in God’s love.’ Then he exhorted them to believe and bear witness, in the face of death, to the love that is stronger than death.” I wish this not because I think the story, as Luke tells it, cannot be true. Certainly the God who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ is able to resuscitate dead bodies. Rather I wish this because, two thousand years later, we are still mistaking the miracle of resuscitation for the more radical work of resurrection.

“Death and resurrection,” Rachel Held Evans wrote. “It’s the impossibility around which every other impossibility of Christian faith orbits. Baptism declares that God is in the business of [raising the dead to a whole new life], so if you want in on God’s business, you better prepare to follow God to all the rock-bottom, scorched-earth, dead-on-arrival corners of this world—including those in your own heart—because that’s where God works....It’s just death and resurrection, over and over again, day after day, as God reaches down into our deepest graves and with the same power that raised Jesus from the dead wrests us from [death’s grip on us in the form of] our pride, our apathy, our fear, our prejudice, our anger, our hurt, and our despair.” The woman who wrote those words died last Saturday. Rachel was a 37-year-old recovering Evangelical Christian, the author of four books, a young wife and mother of two. Her daughter turned one this last week. Apparently whatever the doctors used to treat an infection caused seizures and brain swelling so that, when they brought her out of an induced coma, she died. Dead as a doornail. Her husband posted the news and then wrote, “I keep hoping it’s a nightmare from which I’ll awake.” But there was no Peter to rush to her bedside and usher her family out of the room so that he could, with a word, bring her back to life.

Instead it was her friend, the tattooed Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber, who stood by her bedside while she lay in a coma and did what the work of death and resurrection, did what the church has done for two thousand years. Nadia anointed her forehead with frankincense while saying, “Lord, let your servant go in peace.” “In times that we are collapsing,” Bolz-Weber told Eliza Griswold of *The New Yorker*, “these are words that have been

worn smooth by generations of the faithful.” Two thousand years of death and resurrection, over and over again, day after day. I wish Peter had invited the widows to surround Tabitha’s bed; I wish he had anointed her forehead with frankincense--the foreshadowing gift given by the wise men to the baby Jesus, the oil used by the women to prepare Jesus’ body for burial; I wish he had simply said, “Lord, let your servant go in peace” because this, and not resuscitating bodies, will be the church’s witness and work, until Jesus comes again. Trusting those who are dear to us to God’s never-failing love for this life, and the life to come.

But more, for the work of death and resurrection has to do not only with our personal living and dying but also with the church’s life and death. Why do we keep resuscitating dead institutional forms, dead congregations, dead relationships, and dead dogmas in a frantic effort to revive the church, rather than living as a people who have died to death’s power in the waters of baptism and been reborn as a people who are doing our fallible best to follow “a God who knows his way out of the grave.” (Chesterton) “The message of the church is a specific word,” said Robert Jenson. Death and resurrection. “If the church does not get this word said, all the other words it might say are better said by someone else.” Or as Rachel Held Evans put it in an Op Ed three years ago, speaking for millennials, “You can get a cup of coffee with your friends anywhere, but the church is the only place you can get ashes smudged on your forehead as a reminder of your mortality. You can be dazzled with a light show at a concert on any given weekend, but church is the only place that fills a sanctuary with candlelight and hymns on Christmas Eve. You can snag all sorts of free swag for brand loyalty online, but church is the only place where you are named a beloved child of God with a cold plunge into the water. You can share food with the hungry at any homeless shelter, but only the church teaches that a shared meal brings us into the very presence of God. What finally brought [Rachel] back, after years of running away, wasn’t lattes or skinny jeans; it was the sacraments...[which]...don’t need to be repackaged or rebranded; they just need to be practiced, offered and explained in the context of a loving, authentic and inclusive community.” In that regard, I wish Peter had stayed for supper so that, when they had broken bread together, they would have recognized their risen Lord at table with them.

While I’m at it, I also wish, rather than putting the widows out of the room, Peter just sat down and helped them cry. I imagine they called for Peter to come without delay not because they expected a miracle to fix their grief, but because they needed to hear, in Peter’s voice, the voice of the good shepherd, who accompanies his own through the valley of the shadow of death. “When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives means the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand.” So said Henri Nouwen, a priest, professor and disciple of Jean Vanier, founder of the L’Arche Community, who also died this last week. L’Arche in French means ark, the boat of salvation. L’Arche Communities are just that for thousands around the world who are developmentally challenged. They are spiritual homes whose core belief is that strength is revealed through weakness and human vulnerability that, when given room to grow in trust, creates community. Likewise, the church’s strength is revealed when the church doesn’t offer a cure or a quick fix but just sits down and helps us cry. Or as Brene Brown puts the matter appropriately on Mothers’ Day, “I went to church thinking it would be like an epidural, that it would take the pain away...But church isn’t like an epidural; it’s like a midwife...I thought faith would say, ‘I’ll take away the pain...but what it ended up saying was, ‘I’ll sit with you in it.’”

In sum, I wish Peter had loved these widows, these lambs of Jesus’s flock, in the way Jesus had loved him. When Jesus commanded Peter to tend his sheep on the beach that morning, the word Jesus used for love was “agapao,” meaning self-sacrificing, self-emptying love. It is the love of the good shepherd, who lays down his life for the sheep. Peter responded, “Yes, Lord, I “phileo se” meaning I love you like a brother (Philadelphia—the city of brotherly love!). The love Jesus commands is not a personality trait; it is shorthand for a narrative: death and resurrection... Therefore to love,” Robert Jenson writes, “is to accept death...it is to give up my cautious claims to hang onto myself.” Peter one day will love in this way. Just not on this day. No, on this day, before Peter even showed up, before he put them out of the room, it was the love of the widows for Tabitha that proved stronger than death. I think that the “marginalized are always the first to comprehend death and resurrection,” Rachel Held Evans observed, the ones “who stand totally exposed before evil and death and declare them powerless against love.” Thanks be to God!