

## THE SEAMS BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Psalm 23, Acts 9: 36-43

He was in Lydda when the call came. The modern suburb of Lud in Israel, where the airport in Tel Aviv is today. But then of course there were no planes, no airport, no telephones, nothing that we take for granted as a means of communication.

So they sent two men to him, to Peter, with a simple but urgent message, “Please come to us without delay.” Luke, the writer of Acts, doesn’t tell us whether they told him immediately that it was because of Tabitha, the Gazelle, as her name means, that they called him to come running. She was the woman who was a dynamo of energy and spiritual strength in Joppa and it was important to all the people there that a saint like her should have the best of care, even in death. So they called for Peter.

But we don’t know whether they told him that she had already died and they had washed her body and laid her out in her bed. Maybe they did. Maybe they didn’t. Maybe they waited until they got to the outskirts of town in Joppa to tell him. We just don’t know. All we know is they sent two men to get him saying, “Please come to us without delay.”

This is, of course, the kind of message that no one wants to get. The telephone rings late at night.

“Hello, is this David Smith?”

“Yes, well, I’m Dr. Martin at the Nassau County Hospital Emergency Room, and there’s been an accident, and it’s your son, and I think you should come as quickly as you can.” That kind of dreaded call.

I don’t suppose Peter necessarily felt the same sense of urgency and fear and disorientation that a parent might feel getting a call like that, but whenever *they send for you* like they *sent for* Peter, you know that it’s not good, and whatever happened is bad, and *they sent for you* for a reason. “Come without delay.”

So Peter got up and went with them, the two men, and they lost no time getting to Joppa.

By the time Peter set foot in Joppa, there was a feeling in the air that told him that death had been in town. That sickly feeling that you get, you know. That sense that something has come through like a strong wind, blowing all the papers across the street, turning umbrellas into skeletons of spine and fabric inside out, leaving things in disarray, things unfinished and abandoned. That’s death’s calling card.

They led him to Tabitha’s house and he entered there, but he must have hesitated at the bottom of the stairs. He knew by then what awaited him there. The sound in the

upper room of the women sobbing, grieving, said it all. So he paused at the bottom of the stairs.

What might he offer in a situation like this? He had hesitated before, that time in the flickering light of the fire outside Pilate's courtyard when the woman accused him of being one of Jesus' people. "Surely you are one of his disciples," she said, and not in a kind or forgiving way, but accusing and threatening. "I do not know the man," he said, three times.

What could he offer in this scene of sadness and despair? What expectation of him was there? "Please come to us without delay," they said. And he had come. But now what?

His own self doubt kicked in. If he had let his friend Jesus down, what might he do in this circumstance for the sake of a woman so loved in the community as Tabitha?

And so he climbed the stairs with hesitation, thinking every step of the way of what he might see, what he might say, what he could do.

Once he set foot in her room he could see the love and sadness that filled the place. The affection with which Tabitha was held. The widows of Joppa who were all in a knitting circle with Tabitha each had brought a sweater, a small blanket, a layette, a scarf... something that Tabitha had made for them, or taught them to make. She had been a one person social service network, a case worker among a group and a class of women for whom no one else was caring. And when she died, they were distraught.

"Look," they said to Peter, "Tabitha made this. Tabitha made this."

Peter put them all outside. He cleared the room, so that no one was left but him and the still and lifeless body of Tabitha. Like Elijah raising the widow's son in Zarapheth of Sidon, Peter prayed.

He prayed some kind of prayer. What words he said I do not know. But he knelt and prayed perhaps more of a prayer than he had ever prayed before. What would you say? Not my will, but thine be done? Lord raise this saint from death? What would you say? Do you bargain, or threaten? Lord, don't make me look bad, these people are heartbroken. I don't know what you say, or what Peter said, but he prayed. And when he had finished praying he said, "Tabitha, get up."

He slowly raised his hand and stretched it out to lift her up until his fingers were but an inch from hers. And it's in that instant that the gap between now and then, between heaven and earth, the hard realities of death and the promise of resurrection bordered and saluted. The length of a finger tip, no more, no less.

In that instant before he took her hand, was there a spark, perhaps? A static electric arc that bridged the divide between possibility and reality? Who is to say?

My friend Rick Spalding writes about this moment,

Peter kneels and is surprised at the gentleness of his own hands when they meet hers. To see the hard won final peace of the body of his Jesus, to touch those splintered, resting hands, was an intimacy which circumstances denied him - perhaps in exchange for his own denial.<sup>1</sup>

But now he reaches for the gentle hands of Tabitha, which have sewn and knitted and crocheted softer things, things of love, things of the heart and spirit and through them she gave life to a new community of saints and widows.

What is the distance between his hand and hers? An inch or two? Enough to bridge the gap between eternity and now?

Where are the boundaries any more? How did these people learn to stitch the love of Christ into the choices of every ordinary day? How is it that the good news has already found its way to the edge of the great sea? And where are the edges of anything any more, the seams between life and death?<sup>2</sup>

He reached out to her, this lifeless form laid out, his sailor's hands that had handled so many ropes and pulled so many nets and repaired so many sails were calloused and rough. Fisherman's hands they were as he reached for her soft and gentle hands, and in the offering crossed the distance from life to death and back to life again.

"Tabitha, get up," he said, and so she did, as if it was meant to happen, as if she heard what he said, as if it were just that easy.

She opened her eyes, and she sat up, and he took her hand and helped her rise. "Then calling the saints and widows," Luke says, "Peter showed Tabitha to be alive. And this came to be known in Joppa, and many believed in the Lord."

Now on the one hand it's fair to say that Tabitha's memory would have lived on in the minds and hearts of the widows of Joppa for a very long time anyway, even if she had not been raised that day. Those women, after all, held in their hands the objects of Tabitha's devotion and service. And there is no doubt in my mind that Tabitha's example would have inspired that community for a long time to come.

This is what that phrase in the book of Revelation means when it says, "They rest from their labors, and their works do follow them."<sup>3</sup>

I think about those who have been mentors and examples to me in my life and who have inspired me. People whose deeds of kindness are my best understanding of what it is to be Christian.

Recently I read about the influence of such a person:

John Fanestil was eighteen years old when his grandfather, who worked for forty years at a small town Kansas Texaco station, died. At the funeral, the preacher told a story about his grandfather that Fanestil remembers to this day. One Sunday, his grandfather, as he left church,

mentioned to the pastor that he had noticed that the license plate frame on the pastor's car was loose. The pastor laughed and said he'd been meaning to take care of that problem for a long time, but that he didn't have the right screw to repair it. That very afternoon, the pastor was eating his Sunday dinner when he heard a noise outside. He looked out the window and saw Fanestil's grandfather on his knees in the driveway holding a screwdriver, repairing the frame.

The picture of his grandfather doing this deed of service so captured the man's character, and so captured something about the nature of Christian service, that years later, Fanestil revisits the memory. He writes, "I cherish the image, and bled it routinely with other images I hold dear. As I close my eyes I see my grandfather kneeling in a driveway turning a screw with a screwdriver. I also see my wife as a young mother, bending over to pick up a fallen child. I see Jesus, squatting and washing his disciples' feet. I see a pastor at the altar clasping the hands of two people who have just exchanged wedding vows."<sup>4</sup>

The widows in Joppa held the blankets and layettes and scarves and sweaters that Tabitha had made. They were her legacy of love left in the hands and the hearts of those who loved her. And no doubt each woman cherished these trophies all their lives, and they inspired them and led them to do similar acts of love and kindness to others.

So often we say at a person's funeral how much their lives have touched our own and how we will never forget them, and how their lives are forever within us. But every one of us knows that that is only a partial truth. Yes, we have been touched by the lives and deeds of those we love. And yes, there are some people who make an indelible mark on us.

But life goes on. And every person who has lost a child, or lost a spouse, or lost a partner, or lost someone who was as life itself to them knows the disappointing truth that people move on, and expect you to move on. Which of course we all know, and we all fight, and then we accept because our own health and healing depend on moving on.

This story of Tabitha's restoration to life is more than just an incentive to lead an exemplary life of compassion, as important as the deeds we do in life are, and the marks we leave on the lives of others.

This event in the life of the early church is an assurance that our lives are a part of something even greater than our span of years, however long or short they may be. The kind of life laid bare in this story is life that is greater than the sum of our deeds, good and ill, memorable and not.

Luke wants us to know that we live in a world where the power of the resurrection has begun to dawn and that at the seams and edges it is already arriving. It is, in fact, reaching out toward us today, drawing us into its peace and healing so that the seams between life and death are sewn together. We often think that eternal life is something

that happens when we die. But here in this story we see that it is something in which we already participate. Our lives are hid with Christ in God. And our worth is more than just the memories others have of us. We are a part of a community of faith that exceeds our span of years.

In Kathleen Norris' book, *The Cloister Walk*, she describes her religious journey. A married woman, a Presbyterian she decided to live in a Benedictine monastery in Minnesota for awhile. After she had been at the monastery for a period of time,

...the monk who was training her in spiritual discipline, said something odd. "It's time for you to meet the rest of the community," he said. He then took her out to the cemetery. "[A]s we passed each grave," Norris said, "the monk told me stories about the deceased. Having been at the monastery over sixty years, he'd known nearly everyone buried there.

Later a friend at the monastery, another Protestant, told her, "Monastic funerals always blur the line between this world, and the next; one feels that the present is just a moment in the continuum, between this community, and the community of the saints." Norris realized that, in such funerals, "the rest of the community' turns out to be very large indeed."<sup>5</sup>

This story of Peter calling forth Tabitha from death bears a message of hope for the church, for all of us. It is an affirmation that the power of life over death did not stop with Jesus, but remains in the life and community of believers who bear his name and share in his resurrection. Because of this fact, the passing of time does not take us farther away from those who have gone before us, but draws us closer to them in the unfolding of God's time which is greater than our time, because our time is but a lifetime, and God's time is eternity.

Where God is, death has no power or dominion for Christ has put all things in subjection to him. Our confidence, then, is that nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, neither death nor life.

This past week I spent a lovely evening over dinner with some other clergy, one Episcopalian, one Lutheran, one Methodist, and another Presbyterian. We are all pastors of large churches here in New York and we all like and respect one another greatly. It was a good evening of conversation and friendship.

At one point in the conversation, we talked about what it is that we feel we are doing on Sunday mornings, standing here at this preaching desk, proclaiming a truth that is greater than any of us comprehend and exceeds our ability to express. My Episcopal colleague said something that has stuck with me. She said, "I think people today have the gnawing suspicion that God is not really committed to them." And ever since she's said it, I can't get it out of my mind.

I think she's right. That all of us are so painfully aware of our own failings and finitude, our compromises and callousness, our secrets and our betrayals that we are

suspicious that God is as duplicitous as we are. After all, if we, even we, cannot keep our promises, who do we know that can?

Well I think that that's exactly what this story about the raising of Tabitha is all about. The affirmation that God is faithful to us, God is committed to us, God is utterly with us, in life and in death and in life beyond death. For there where the seams between life and death are woven, God is present bringing life where death once was in that gap where now becomes tomorrow, and tomorrow becomes eternity.

I don't know if there is anything like Tabitha that I have ever done that might be remembered. I don't know if there is anyone whose life that I have touched that will recall. But that God knows me is my great comfort in life and in death; and that I will always be with God is my spacious expectation in this life and for the life to come.

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<sup>1</sup> Rick Spalding, Moveable Feast Paper, Year C: 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Eastertide, May 2, 2004. Unpublished.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Rev. 14:13

<sup>4</sup> as quoted in Thomas G. Long, **Accompany Them With Singing: The Christian Funeral** (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009) 194.

<sup>5</sup> Long, Ibid. 133.