

4th Sunday of Easter (Year C)

Acts 9:36-43

Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, 'Please come to us without delay.' So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, 'Tabitha, get up.' Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

Some days, I sit back and marvel at how much I've changed in the past two years. I've gotten married. I've moved across the country. My parents have gotten divorced. I've been ordained as a pastor. I've gone from sitting in classes to teaching them. I'm still adjusting to this new life and all the blessings and challenges that come with it.

And truth be told, we are all practitioners of transformation. We can all recall periods of our lives where we went through tremendous changes. For one person, it might be that time you were diagnosed with that terrible illness. For another, it might be that time you sent the last child off to college. For another, it might be that time you decided to get sober. For another, it might be the time you transitioned into retirement. Or, it could be any other countless ways in which we are called to transformations.

Some transformations are welcomed. Others are not. Some, are a curious mixture of both - like the parent helping their child move to college with a mixture of excitement and sadness.

Transformations, by their very definition, *form* us into different things. They *mold* us into the form which God is calling us to embody given specific circumstances.

There is perhaps no greater example of transformation in the bible than our good friend Peter. At the beginning of his journey with Christ, Peter was just your average fisherman, fishing the waters of the sea and minding his own business. He had no desire for an "exciting" life. Like Bilbo Baggins, Peter was content to merely live the quiet life of a normal person with no inconvenient adventures like the ones that make you late for dinner.

But Jesus came and told Peter that he would still be a fisherman, only the kind that fished for *people*.

Peter followed Jesus and joined in his healing and teaching ministry. All was going well until Jesus was arrested a few weeks ago and Peter denied him three times by the charcoal fire. It was the low of Peter's discipleship. Warming his hands by that charcoal fire, Peter probably wished that all that transformation had just left him alone and that he was still by the seaside fishing for regular fish.

And then, three days later, Peter heard about an empty tomb and had to go run to see it for himself.

And then, a few weeks later, Peter was restored back into the good graces of Jesus by another charcoal fire, this time by the very sea by which Jesus called Peter to ministry in the first place. Only this time Peter was not a simple fisherman. This time, Peter was being positioned by Jesus to be the very rock upon which he would build his church.

And in today's passage, we see the completion of Peter's radical transformation. Today, Peter is not fishing for fish. He is not denying Christ. He is not swimming to see his Risen Lord. Today, Peter is raising someone from the dead.

That's quite a transformation, indeed!

Today's story tells us of a woman named Tabitha, a disciple of the Risen Christ. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity, we are told. The narrator of the Book of Acts tells us that she was quite gifted in the art of making clothes because, at the event of her death, all of the women gathered with the clothes that Tabitha had made for them. Such was why there was great grief at the event of her death. This was not your average person. This was your 10 time Shelter Island Citizen of the Year Award winner. She had died and the tears began to flow.

So they called Peter. I suppose they called Peter because what they needed was a resurrection. What they needed was transformation. So they called Peter because he had had a front row seat to the greatest transformation of all. Peter had been gifted with resurrection to share and perhaps some of the abundant life he had been gifted by Christ could spill onto their deathly circumstances.

So Peter arrives and tells everyone to leave him alone with Tabitha's lifeless body. He knelt down and prayed. You and I are not privy to the words of his prayer but one can only imagine that he prayed for life where death's grasp had tightened its hold. It's a prayer I'm sure most of us have prayed from time to time.

After Peter finished his prayer, he turned to Tabitha's body and said two simple things - her name and a command. "Tabitha, get up."

And, just like that, she rises. Tabitha, who had so long been a giver of grace, was now receiving it in the most tangible of ways.

He then invited everyone back into the room and what they found was life where before there had been death, hope where before there had been despair. And the story spread; pretty soon everyone believed in the Lord because of what had been done in his name.

What I find most fascinating about this story is that transformation begets transformation. The transformation of Jesus from death to life continued a dramatic transformation in Peter's life. Peter, then, shared that transformation with Tabitha and, then, that transformation turned that surrounding community into a community of believers. The Book of Acts, as a whole, is a collection of stories of the growing concentric circles of transformation begun by the spark of the resurrection. Like a pebble that is thrown into a still body of water, the resurrection of Christ is a singular event with exponential ramifications. These "waves of resurrection" wash away the death of Tabitha and restore hope to a broken community.

I also find it fascinating that an entire community came to believe in the Lord with so little words spoken. Think about it, the only words spoken were “Tabitha, get up.”

How many people need those simple words spoken to them? How many people simply need to be addressed by name and invited to embrace hope? Every single one of us in this room has the capability of calling another person by name and inviting them to the light of the resurrection. Now, we might not have the ability to restore life to dead people, but what we do have the ability to do something that is needed much more than that; and that is *hope* and *transformation*.

If it is true that transformation begets transformation, then there is hope for even a small church such as ourselves that we are called and equipped to share hope in hopeless places and life in lifeless places. Each and every one of us goes from this sanctuary every week into our little corners of the world and engage with people - friends, family, coworkers, complete strangers. It is our task as disciples to be attentive to the people we come into contact with who need to hear their name spoken in love and hear an invitation from someone who cares about them.

That is really all that Peter did. He cared enough to be present with someone in their distress and then invited them to rise. God did the rest.

That is our job. To be present with people in their brokenness, to be present with each other in our brokenness, and to invite one another to share in the life of the Risen Christ - life that is shared with all regardless of color or creed, money or social status. There is much brokenness here on Shelter Island, much brokenness that prefers to be buried in efforts of self-image and privacy. Our duty as a church is to be a safe place where people can share their brokenness without fear of judgement. Then, like Peter, we can call them by name and then invite them to “get up.”

Peter’s transformation began with the fruits of the Resurrection. So, too, is our calling rooted in the work of those disciples in the Book of Acts. The ripple effects of those deeds, done in Christ’s name, are still being felt today. You and I are called to continue those waves, to nurture them, and to speak words of hope and resurrection in Christ’s name.

We all have parts of our lives that, like Tabitha, have been left for dead. May we, with God’s help, be like Peter - who, though broken and scarred from our humanity, are nevertheless called to partake in the life-sharing work of the Risen Christ. There are “Tabithas” all around us in need of renewal. But the good news is we are all a congregation of “Peters” because we are congregation called to service in the name of the Risen Christ.