

“What does it mean to live a resurrected life?”

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Text: Acts 9:36-42

I sat with Roger in my office. Although he was in church every Sunday and I talked with him often, he had something heavy on his mind, so he had made an appointment. Roger looked down at the ground while he told me of his death experience. He had an operation. It should not have been complicated, but something went wrong during the surgery, and Roger flatlined. The doctor said that he died.

Roger had an awareness that he had died. He felt cold, he saw a white light, he begged God to keep living, and he came back. His heart stopped for a few minutes, and then he miraculously began breathing again. And all of this brought Bob into my office, as he tried to sort out why he was granted another chance. Being that close to death, made Bob aware of his life. Feeling his breath slip away, made him even more thankful for each time he inhaled. In a way, Bob lived a resurrected life, and he wanted to make sure that it had meaning. That it counted.

As a minister, I hear these stories pretty often. A near-death experience occurs. A car accident should have happened. There is the inexplicable medical miracle that goes against all odds. There is the white light. There is a prayer.

When I hear these stories, I sit, nodding my head. I never try to figure out what happened medically or scientifically. I never ask questions that inject any sort of suspicion into the events. I just accept the words. After hearing about a dozen of these stories now, I realize that life is mysterious, and it is tenacious. People have these resurrections much more often than we know.

It reminds me of what we read this morning. It's a short passage, with a lot to unpack. Tabitha, who is known for doing good deeds and helping the poor, dies. All the widows come to her home to mourn her. They cry over her lifeless body as they wash her flesh, rub her with spices, and lay her in the upper room. As they gather to grieve, they do something interesting. They bring clothing with them. Extravagant purple clothing that they present before Peter. Then Peter asks everyone to leave, he tells the dead woman to get up. Tabitha gets up.

They're in Joffa, which is a port town near modern-day Tel-Aviv, but it is under Greek rule when this story is written. And many cultural circumstances remain in play here. We may not understand them all in the first reading.

To begin, the fact that Tabitha was known for her charity is odd. In ancient Greek culture, women could not attend public assemblies, they could not vote, and they could not hold public office. In fact, people were not even supposed to utter a woman's name in public. And yet, in this story, the author remains defiant. He not only mentions her name, but he mentions her by *two names*—Dorcas and Tabitha—her Aramaic name and her Greek name.

Under ancient Greek laws, women could not own property or inherit. And so, when a woman outlived her spouse, she lost everything. There were no provisions for an unmarried woman, so the widow was supposed to marry the next closest male relative. But if she was older, that wasn't always possible. Many scholars think that Tabitha was a widow herself, and we know that Tabitha took care of these women.

So how could this possibly be?

Well, there were two forms of property that women could own all for themselves. They could have clothing and jewelry. And so Tabitha became a business woman who made highly valuable purple clothes. I imagine that she employed other widows and gave the clothing to her widow friends. She gave them one of the few valuable things that no one could take away.

And then, Tabitha died.

The thing that the author doesn't mention in this short story is what happened after Peter tells her to get up. What happens when Tabitha has her second chance? What happens after the bright light, and the prayer to God, and the blurred waking? What does it mean, for Tabitha, to hear the wailing and singing of the women downstairs and to smell the oil and spices that have been rubbed on her body? What does it mean to live a resurrected life? Maybe it's because of my time with Roger, but when I read this story, I wonder if Tabitha was somehow changed by that second chance.

During this Easter season, these questions burn for us now. I know that most of us have not been raised from the dead. But when we are baptized, we come to an understanding in that act. It is ancient and mysterious, and there are different ways to understand it, but we say that in baptism, we die to ourselves and we are resurrected with Christ. Early disciples related to the myth of the phoenix, the bird who was burnt up and then rose again from the ashes. All of that feels very real to me this year.

I daresay that many of us see the count. We have friends who have died. We are close to the grief. And we know that when we leave our doors, we will have our second chance—for ourselves and for our society.

In the history of this country, our culture has transformed in times of difficulty. Around the Great Depression and World War II, there seemed to be a shift in attitude, as we saw a generation of builders. We made our social safety net stronger. People began to construct roads, bridges, and parks. We began to see more hospitals and educational buildings. We

treated our veterans with dignity, with a GI bill that had lasting impact on our society. Many social institutions grew up—institutions like churches became sturdier, and they built up their communities. I talk with older people about this time and they admit that there is some nostalgia that makes these Greatest generation memories rosier. And there were people of color who were left out of the GI Bill and some of our great social structures. But still. There seemed to be a re-set. People began to appreciate their families and the small things a bit more.

When we come out from behind our closed doors, I wonder, could we have the vision of Tabitha? This incredible businesswoman, who was able to work within the oppressive constraints of the ancient Greek culture to make sure that she cared for the women around her?

I think we might have a chance to imagine something similar. We have the ability to practice resurrection. Not only as we breathe deeply thank God for the gift of life that has become so clear to us. Not only as we hold our families and loved ones close. Not only as we emerge from this crisis with a greater appreciation for our church community and our town. But also, as we imagine how to re-build our society. How to care for one another in this country. How can we care for God's creation?

Can we begin to set aside our political differences, and learn to love one another for the complex humans that we are? Can we learn to transcend the manipulation of the media that surrounds us and teaches us how to have constant tension with one another? Can we learn to trust scientists and experts? Can stop using religion to fuel our culture wars and beat one another up?

I have a particular dream for our congregation. We have so many incredible business experts in our church. I wonder if we could start something, like a business incubator, to help women, minorities, and other people when we come out of this crisis and begin to rebuild the economy. Can we help people think through their business strategies and apply for grants? Can we consult them? It's my resurrection dream.

So, what is your dream? What do you hope will come out of this? Is there something personal or something you can imagine for society? Can you spend a couple of minutes in the chat naming what a resurrected life would like for you?

May God hear all of our hopes and our dreams of a resurrected life. Through God our Creator, God our Liberator, and God our Sustainer. Amen.