

**JESUS IS AT WORK**

**A sermon by the Rev. Mary Marple Thies  
First Presbyterian, New Canaan, CT – May 8, 2022**

**PLEASE READ:**

**Acts 9:36-43  
Psalm 23  
Revelation 7:9-17  
John 10:22-30**

The parents of my best friend growing up ran a florist shop. In the weeks leading up to Mother's Day, their living room floor would gradually be filled with mounds of corsage bows. Everyone in the family and sometimes even guests were pressed into action, tying bows, because Mother's Day was one of their busiest times of the year. In the town where I grew up, corsages were not limited to mothers. Nearly everyone wore flowers on Mother's Day to honor their mothers—red, if your mother was alive, and white, if she was deceased. Corsages have fallen out of fashion, it seems, except for proms. By the way, the senior prom for New Canaan High is next weekend, so now would be a good time to get your corsage order in. I see very few corsages this morning, but after worship everyone is invited to take a flower in honor of your mother or someone who has been like a mother to you. Pick any color, it doesn't matter; whatever best celebrates her influence on your life.

As I remember the red and white corsages of my childhood, it makes me wonder what the children of Tabitha-Dorcas-Gazelle would have worn. White in the morning when she was dead? Red in the afternoon after Peter's visit? Pink to show their confusion? Of course, we don't know if Tabitha-Dorcas-Gazelle (shall we just call her Gazelle to make things easier?) had any birth children. Luke doesn't tell us anything about her family life, but he does tell us that she had a family that she had created out of her compassion and generosity. It was a family of widows. In those days, and sometimes in our own, widows were among society's most vulnerable. They were often left destitute when their husbands died, especially if they were without sons to provide for them. The plight of widows was of such concern to God, that the Hebrew Scriptures are sprinkled with commandments to care for widows and rebukes from the prophets for not doing so.

Gazelle was one of those people who, when she saw a need, did something about it. She cared for those needy women out of her resources, providing them with clothing, creating a supportive community and doing other works of charity. She was the Dorothy Day, the Mother Teresa of her day, caring for the poor and homeless. When Gazelle died, it was the family she created that was devastated.

So they did what any one of us would have done. In their grief, they called on someone they thought might help, might offer some hope, some comfort. That someone was Peter, perhaps, Jesus' best known disciple. When he arrived, they told him about Gazelle. They shared the stories about how she, with her own hands, had fashioned tunics for some of them. They told of the meals she prepared and the extra cot she set up in her house so yet another needy widow could join their community. They told the stories that we all tell when someone we love dies, the stories that explain why we loved that one and how that life intersected with our own. In that telling,

they also told the stories that defined who she was as a disciple of Jesus, one who had responded to his call to serve others, to bring new life to them.

Peter witnessed their weeping and he listened to their stories. I like to think that over time, Peter got better at listening, that he developed a listening heart, an understanding mind. Early on with Jesus, Peter often acted first and listened later, but on this day, he listened and then acted. He listened to those women and then, alone in prayer, in the room where her body was laid, he listened to God. When he finished praying, he turned to the body and said, "Gazelle, get up." If this sounds familiar it could be because Jesus used those same words when he called the young daughter of Jairus to life and when he ordered Lazarus to come out of his tomb.

By now, Peter had received Jesus' gift of the Holy Spirit, filled with that power, he had been on the move, teaching and healing. He was coming to trust it, to rely on it, to give himself over to that power. So maybe he wasn't surprised when Gazelle did just that. She sat up and, taking Peter's hand, she stood to begin her new life. Perhaps it looked like the old life—carrying out her acts of charity—but surely her life was different. Imagine, how her own story informed her understanding of the resurrected Christ. Imagine how many who heard, not only her story, but God's story through her, and came to believe.

It is an amazing story, but did you notice that Jesus' name does not appear anywhere in the story. Do you find that surprising? It reminds me of the story of a pastor who began her children's sermon on Easter by asking the kids who had long ears, a powder puff tail and delivered colored eggs. One boy, who obviously had heard other children's sermons, raised his hand and responded, "I know the answer has to be Jesus, but it sure sounds like the Easter Bunny to me."

We surely expect this story of Gazelle being raised from the dead to be about Jesus, but it sure sounds like it might be about Peter. However, this story is about God and the power of risen Christ. It is about God's promise that all things are made new. Like Jesus' own resurrection, the story tells us that death is not the final word, that because of the resurrection, nothing is quite the same. God's promise is hope and shalom and new life. It is a story of Jesus at work raising the dead.

And this is what else the story tells us—that those who carry the name of Jesus Christ are bearers of the promise and the power to bring new life. Gazelle, who was a disciple of Jesus, brought the gift of new life to the widows she served. Peter, carrying nothing but the name of Jesus, brought new life to one who was dead. Through Gazelle and Peter, Jesus was at work raising the dead. Gazelle and Peter remind us of our calling and the power that is given us to carry it out.

Two contemporary stories of Jesus at work to add to this ancient one. The United Church of Christ recently announced that since late 2019, it has purchased and paid off more than \$104 million in medical debt for residents of Ohio, where that denomination is based. Here is how it works. The church buys the debt at pennies on the dollar from providers who want to recoup some of the cost of unpaid bills. Then the church abolishes the debt with no tax consequences or strings attached for the recipients. They have wiped out spirit-crushing medical debt for 10,757

households. That is the gift of hope and new life on a grand scale.<sup>i</sup> Jesus, through that denomination, is at work raising the dead.

The other story is told by Pastor Paul Palumbo of Chelan, Washington. It is about Steve, a Vietnam vet, who showed up at a program of his church. The program is a ministry for veterans called Honorable Welcome Home, a gift of four days on a kind of retreat at a beautiful lake. There the vets are fed and housed and listened to. Most importantly, they also hear a word of forgiveness for what they were convinced was unforgiveable.

Steve attended that program and some time later, he ran into Pastor Palumbo and told him how much his time at Chelan had meant to him. “After coming to Chelan, I have felt better than I have in forty years,” he said. “We had friends over for dinner the other night.” The pastor, waiting for the story, nodded, “Yeah?” “You don’t get it, do you?” Steve said. “Paul, that’s the first time in forty years that I have had anyone but my own family in my house. And next week, we are going to their house.” Raised from the dead, freed from a mountain of guilt and shame, a lifetime of not trusting others and feeling undeserving of even a simple shared meal with friends. Jesus, through the people who hosted and listened and proclaimed forgiveness to Steve, was at work raising the dead.<sup>ii</sup>

I saw a headline recently that read, “Episcopal Church Releases Jesus in America Study, Data Shows Wide-Ranging Views.”<sup>iii</sup> This much too long headline, had to be spread across two lines, so that the first line read, “Episcopal Church Releases Jesus in America.” Let me assure you that it isn’t just the Episcopal Church who has released Jesus in America. It is God; but through our Episcopal brothers and sisters, and you and me, Jesus is still at work raising the dead.

In the ancient city of Joppa, vulnerable women were given the gift of new life by the disciple Gazelle. In a small room, a dead woman was called to life by a bungling disciple. So, too, in Ohio and in Chelan, Washington. In all those places, through all those people, Jesus was at work raising the dead. The risen Jesus is loose here in New Canaan, too, and invites us to live out the promise of new life and to trust, that through us, he is still at work raising the dead.

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<sup>i</sup> Emily McFalan Miller, “In Two Years, the UCC Paid Off \$100 million in Americans’ Medical Debt,” *Christian Century*, March 21, 2022.

<sup>ii</sup> Paul Palumbo, “Easter Sunday, 2021,” *Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2022, p. 38.

<sup>iii</sup> David Paulsen, “Episcopal Church Releases Jesus in America Study, Date Shows Wide-Ranging View,” *Christian Century*, March 21, 2022.