

“Still I Rise”
Acts 9:36-43
April 25, 2010

Recently, I stayed in a bed and breakfast. The owner said she could not check us in until around 8PM, because her husband had died a year ago to the day, and she had a memorial service that evening. The next morning, she sat down at the table and shared her story. She was from Mexico City. She had married her husband later in life. They ran the bed and breakfast for 12 years as partners and friends. When people are sharing from their hearts like that, you can learn things because you can ask questions, so I did. I asked what had given her strength to get through the past year with such a warm, positive presence! She did not have to think for even a second about her answer. “My faith and serving others.” She talked about how real Christ was to her and how he came to her in prayer. In the very next breath, she talked about her business as taking care of others. She talked about the joy of preparing a meal to feed others. She found the strength to arise, go forth, and conquer every day by tending to very simple things.

Now, we could buy any number of books on grief. We could watch Oprah and learn the keys to how to move on. We could read all the Cosmopolitan and Men’s Health magazines we want and they will give us steps to take and products to buy, but they cannot touch the strength of the bed and breakfast lady. As Maya Angelou has so eloquently said, “Everyone has gone to bed one night or another with fear or pain or loss or disappointment and yet each of us has awakened and arisen. Somehow made our ablutions, seen other human beings and said, “Morning, how are you?” “Fine, thanks, how are you?” Wherever that abides in the human being, there is the nobleness of the human spirit. Despite it all....we rise.”

I would argue that the nobleness of the human spirit, the strength of the human spirit comes straight from the Holy Spirit. One commentator says that instead of calling Acts “the Acts of the Apostles,” we should call it the “Acts of the Holy Spirit” because it is full of Holy Spirit activity. We see all kinds of risings from the Holy Spirit – the Holy Spirit rises above the boundary of speech and sends people preaching and teaching in all different languages. The Holy Spirit rises above the locked doors of the jails and sets the imprisoned disciples free over and over again. The Holy Spirit rises up on the Damascus road to convert a violent, mean man into one of the bedrocks of the Christian faith. The Holy Spirit rises up to heal and now the Holy Spirit rises up to make life rise out of death – the Holy Spirit is up to stuff in Acts.

So, it makes the book an exciting read – all kinds of razzle dazzle in the early church with those early disciples. In the scripture I just read, we’ve got Tabitha, or Dorcas, take your pick – obviously a great woman of faith. Did you notice what they call her? Don’t miss it now. There was a DISCIPLE whose name was Tabitha. A female disciple??? Surely not. But, that’s what it says – “a disciple whose name was Tabitha.” She was a leader in her community – extremely generous- devoted to good works and acts of charity. A woman of wealth. A woman of influence. A woman who provided for others not just with her tithe, but clothing crafted with love and skill – gifts for the widows – those who had nothing and no one, except for Tabitha.

Acts, of course, doesn’t tell us who those widows were – they are nameless to the Bible, but I’ll bet they were not nameless to Tabitha. That’s a safe bet because the description of the widows’ grief is gut wrenching. Their friend died, and they stood vigil by her body with her clothing in their arms, and they wept. They prepared her for burial and sent for Peter who could feel the heaviness of their pain. How do you measure the meaning of a life? How do you count its loss? When he got there, Peter sent the women from the room – not, I think, because he

expected a miracle but because he had nothing to offer in the face of their grief. So, he sent them from the room, and Peter, strong spirit filled Peter dropped to his knees and prayed. That must have been hard for him. Peter was not a sit around and pray kind of guy. He did not reflect on things - he jumped right into things. Jesus wanted to wash his feet – oh, not just my feet, my hands and arms also! The women told Peter that Jesus had risen, and up he jumped and went running out to see for himself. Peter was in a boat and saw Jesus standing on the shore – he didn't wait for the boat to reach land; he jumped in the water to get to him. Peter was a 'can-do' kind of man. He was highly motivated with a take-charge run-right-over-you personality. But, he saw those women and “I got nothing!” So, he prayed –and then, wow, did God break out.

It's a breathtaking miracle. But, it bothers me the same way all of the other healing miracles bother me. The problem is that these kinds of miracles seem outdated. Seriously. They don't happen today. People get sick or injured in 2010, and we pray and pray and pray with all the fervor of Peter, and more often than not, our prayers don't seem to change one thing. The problem with these kinds of miracles is that people die every day with us weeping at their bedsides, and why don't our prayers conjure up the same kind of power, the same kind of Holy Spirit power, that Peter's prayers so easily stirred to life?

The problem with these kinds of miracles is that we get mesmerized by them, focusing on the Holy Spirit's magnificent intervention, focusing on God's responsibilities to us and forgetting our own. Miracles like the ones Peter let loose also let us off the hook. They appeal to the part of us that is all too happy to let God raise the dead, save the world, do it all alone.

When God does not answer on our schedule, we get frustrated. In the movie, Bruce Almighty, Jim Carey plays a TV reporter named Bruce who challenges God like many of us do – “You're not doing your job!” he complains. In fact, that's about all Bruce seems to do – complain – wanting God to fix things, for crying out loud. Finally, God (Morgan Freeman) calls Bruce's bluff – “You want the job – you got it.” Bruce has the wondrous working power. But it doesn't help – it doesn't change the world. God tells Bruce, “Your problem, Bruce, is that you spend too much time looking up. All the things you've been doing with the power I gave you – they're not miracles – just magic tricks. A single mother, working two jobs and keeping her kids in school and off drugs – now that's a miracle!” (How many of our own examples could we add to the mix?) “Stop looking up all the time,” says God, “and stop looking to me all the time. Look at yourself – you be the miracle!”

OK – trick question here. Who decided to be the miracle in our story? The obvious answer is Peter. Peter is the one who dropped to his knees. Peter is the one who prayed. Peter is the one who stretched out his hand and said, “Tabitha, get up.” He was willing to be the living link between the power of God and humanity. But, I believe Tabitha was also a miracle – oh, not because of the usual things like walking on water or raising people from the dead. Tabitha was a miracle because she opened her eyes to face another day. She opened her eyes when the world called her dead. She opened her eyes.

Like the bed and breakfast lady – she had to make the decision to either stay down or rise up and serve again. That can be a spiritual crisis. Do I NOT trust that God can do a new thing or do I rise? Do I look around at the constant need and get depressed or do I rise? Do I give up the idea that my life can make any difference do I rise? Do we rise, or do we fall into a dead sleep?

The answer seems clear, but it is not always an easy decision. It's not always a safe decision and it is an important, defining moment. Do we rise? Or, to put it another way, do we let Jesus rise up in us? Do we host the resurrection? Or, do we fall back to sleep? I believe we are in danger of falling back asleep. On Thursday, Ginger gave me the church surveys to review.

The elders had already taken a look at them. And, there were some themes running through those surveys. One theme was that we want to reach out – as a church, we want to have the reputation of Tabitha – up and serving the community. But, this is where we run into another theme, at least on the surveys. Many of us won't get up. We open our eyes, oooh, but this bed feels so good. Somebody else will handle it. And, they do. But, when that happens, we as a church throw away the possibilities that the Holy Spirit places in our hands. God did not give us Spirit so that we could waste away sitting on a couch or even a pew. God expects us, I believe, to host the resurrection. Give it a little hospitality. Let it have the priority that we claim it should have. We talk about a lot. But the question the world wants answered and that I want answered is this: will we rise up to deliver what we claim? Will we get past the point of wishing and talking and hoping, and rise to the point of doing? ALL of us. Not a few, but all of us.

In a church retreat four years ago, the little group that gathered here said that our church needs more passion. And, our leader said, "pray for passion and then watch out." I think we are finally getting our answer to that prayer. It's different from what I thought it would be. I was expecting a bubbly enthusiasm that would make serving easy – but since when is "easy" the point of following God? No, I think the answer to the prayer for passion is "Wilson's Mills Christian Church, get up. You'll find all the passion you need. Get off the pews and get up."

I don't know what it's like to come back from the dead. But, it seems to me that God is tenacious, and he keeps challenging us to get up from the complacency that is killing us. It's not to irritate us. It is because God loves us fiercely. This is what the gospel's about - fierce love rising out of the grave; through the pages of the Bible, love rises again and again; it rises when history tries to squelch it; it rises when hatred tries to hang it; it rises every day – it will rise in you, if you open your eyes, get up, and let it take control. What might that look like if we rise up? It might look like sign-up sheets overflowing with volunteers which would look like smiling leaders who don't have to beg for help. It might look like a full sanctuary. It might look like a full yard of people next Saturday showing up to help out a neighbor. It might look like any number of things. It's up to you, but I know that when we get up and love in his name, when we get up and speak up for the beaten down in his name; when we get up and worship in his name, when we get up and continue this Christian walk in his name, the resurrection happens over and over again. Through US, he rises. You can almost hear him, "they took my life blood and put me in a grave, but look at all of you, still I rise. They thought they had run me off for good, but through you, still I rise. They thought their cruelty had nailed me down and sealed me up, but through you, still I rise. They thought I was out of sight, out of mind, but through you, through all of you, still I rise." The resurrection is here. May we find the faith to rise to the occasion.