

Today's scene from the Acts of the Apostles is all too familiar to us; many of us have experienced a similar situation with beloved family or friends who died and left us feeling hurt and helpless. Luke's description of Tabitha likely reminds us of others we've known both in the church and in other areas of our lives, people we've loved, admired, and depended on, who have enriched our lives in ways we might not appreciate until they're no longer with us.

Luke describes Tabitha as a disciple, a word that has been associated with the twelve throughout Jesus' ministry. We know their names; all of them were men and Tabitha's name is not listed among them. This is a subtle shift but it redefines the meaning of the word "disciple." Although it isn't stated outright, the twelve have moved into a different role now; we might say they've actually *become* the apostles as we so often call them. Tabitha and those at her bedside are now called disciples rather than followers, redefining disciples to include both men *and* women who believe in Christ and desire to live in his Way. Luke says that Tabitha was devoted to good works and acts of charity, which may be his way of telling us why he calls her a disciple. It seems that she has a special relationship with the widows; they surround her bedside, weeping, showing what she has made for them, and most certainly talking about what a wonderful woman she was.

For the most part the sequence of events following Tabitha's death hasn't changed in two thousand plus years. After they have washed her, the disciples send for the minister. Although the word "minister" isn't used to describe Peter, he *is* the person who has been trained—by Jesus himself—to be a minister, to respond in the name of Christ in a variety of pastoral situations. By this time, Peter has begun to make a name for himself; his religious authority is enhanced as he tends Jesus' sheep, doing exactly what Jesus has asked of him. As the disciples at Tabitha's deathbed had heard, Peter was in Lydda, where he found a man named Aeneas who had been paralyzed and confined to his bed for eight years. "Peter said to him, 'Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you! Get up and make your bed.' At once he got up," and everyone who lived in Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord.

We don't know if the news of that healing miracle had reached Joppa, but in these two stories we hear the words Jesus often spoke as he healed the sick. "Aeneas, get up!" "Tabitha, get up!" And we also remember the miraculous story of Lazarus, whom Jesus brought back to life before Peter brought Tabitha back to life. We might question how Peter, who has a knack for saying and doing the wrong thing at the wrong time, could have become the obedient apostle who finally understands what he's been taught, then acts on it. How he "got it" is revealed in the second chapter of Acts, a story we'll hear on Pentecost Sunday, when the flames of the Holy Spirit rested upon Peter and the other apostles. We believe that the flames of the Holy Spirit rest upon us as well in our baptism. Does that mean that we, too, should be out performing miracles, particularly healing miracles?

In the Episcopal Church, one of the requirements for seminary graduation and ordination is the completion of CPE, Clinical Pastoral Education. It gives priests-in-training real life experience in ministering to folks in the crises of chronic health situations, serious illness, or death, and is a kind of short course in chaplaincy. Once each week, the CPE students gather with their supervisor to check in and explore incidents that have impacted their learnings about ministry. In my group there were eight of us; four were assigned to small hospitals, two to hospice work, and two to nursing homes. One of the CPE chaplains at the nursing home was a young man we'll call Sam, who hadn't spent a lot of time with elderly people and whose life had not yet been touched by death.

One week during our check-in, Sam told us he had been present when a patient died, and that it had affected him so deeply that he stayed at home the next day. I remember that he got some push-back from the rest of us about that. We understood how profound the experience had been for him, but we also knew that dealing with death is a part of ministry and we would rarely have the

opportunity to tend to our own emotions when someone in our parish died. That was one of the reasons we were in CPE—to learn how to separate our own feelings so that we could care for others more effectively.

A few weeks later, Sam came to our group meeting with a story that left us all speechless. He told us that another patient at the nursing home had died while he was there, but it wasn't the death that affected him—it was what happened afterward. After the nurses had finished their work in the patient's room, Sam stayed, unwilling to leave his patient's body alone until the funeral home representatives arrived. He began praying for the woman's soul and spirit as we normally do when someone dies, and much to his surprise, she began to breathe again. There may have been some medical explanation for it, but Michael was convinced that her return to life was directly related to his prayers. The rest of us listened to his story with more than a little skepticism and afterward spoke about it only in quiet whispers with our closest confidants. None of us really believed Michael had anything at all to do with that woman's return to life. Now I wonder if we were wrong.

In a conversation earlier this week the subject of miracles came up. We were talking about one of those situations that seem to be changeable only by God. I had been thinking about today's passage from Acts and commented that we don't seem to expect miracles these days, a statement I do believe to be true. One of my friends responded that when we think of miracles, we think of big things. She wondered how many little miracles we miss because we're not looking for them. We save God for the incredible, improbable, inexplicable situations that we can do nothing about. Otherwise we don't expect much, maybe don't even hope for much. I wonder what that says about our faith, and our belief in God's power.

Today after the Prayers of the People, I'll invite you to come to the altar for prayers of healing and for anointing in God's name. All of you will see what happens from a different perspective than my own, and this morning I want to share my side of the rail with you, first by admitting that I always hold my breath a little bit waiting to see if anyone will come forward. I doubt that there are any of us who don't have situations or relationships in our lives for time to time that cry out to be healed, but I also know that coming forward for healing prayer requires us to give up some of our privacy as others watch us, so I'm thankful when you do. I'm touched when you come forward on another's behalf. And I'm especially moved to see those who came for prayers offer their hands of healing touch for others who also came. Yes, I know how hard it is to expose our sorrows and fears; but I also believe that just as we are called to rely on God's power to bring us through desperate situations, each of us is also called to be healers in a variety of ways. Sometimes that may be through healing touch; other times it might be through listening or acts of kindness; always it is through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Frederick Buechner writes, "When it comes to putting broken lives back together—when it comes, in religious terms, to the saving of souls—the human best tends to be at odds with the holy best. To do for yourself the best that you have it in you to do—to grit your teeth and clench your fists in order to survive the world at its harshest and worst—is by that very act, to be unable to let something be done for you and in you that is more wonderful still. The trouble with steeling yourself against the harshness of reality is that the same steel that secures your life against being destroyed secures your life also against being opened up and transformed by the holy power that life itself comes from." Buechner is saying that by opening ourselves to God's healing, we also open ourselves to be transformed by it.

Acts tells us that those who belong to the Way, women and men who are disciples of Christ, are empowered to disturb the peace, to turn the world upside down. Sometimes that can be as profound as bringing God's healing to horrendous situations; sometimes it means simply being a calming presence in the midst of chaos. It always means that we *believe* we have been called and empowered to act in the name of the living Christ, even when a miracle is needed. I believe in miracles. Do you? *Amen.*