

Easter 4C

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*A Congregation of Resurrection Hope*

Every year in the season of Easter we read from the Acts of the Apostles, hearing again the stories of those first Christians and how they lived together, worked together and shared the Good News of Jesus together. Of course many of these stories give us the inspiring accounts of the more well known saints of the early Church such as Paul and Peter. But if you read carefully there are just as many accounts of the mostly forgotten or unknown saints and their acts of faithful discipleship. Today's story is one such example.

Peter is a changed man since the day of Pentecost. He is on a mission: preaching, healing, baptizing with great gusto! Filled now with the Holy Spirit, Peter can't help but enthusiastically share the Good News with others. In this particular account Peter performs an impressive miracle, echoing Jesus' own earthly ministry by raising the widow Tabitha from the dead. If we are not careful, we can focus solely on Peter and overlook the quiet faithfulness of the others. It is clear that even from the few lines about her in this passage Tabitha was one of the Church's first living saints. She spent enormous amounts of her own time, talent and treasure caring for the needs of others. The congregation of Joppa had lost one of its beloved leaders, a pillar of the community. As I reflected on Tabitha's ministry, I couldn't help but think of our own Elizabeth Miller and what a similar legacy she left among us.

Tertullian, an early Church Father, reported that in regards to the Christians, the Romans would exclaim, "See how they love another!" In its infancy, the Church did

not grow because of any doctrine, theology, or practice, but because of the love its members showed to one another and to their fellow human beings. This was reflected in Tabitha's servant ministry; but it was also reflected in the compassion and care of those other widows who were with Tabitha at her deathbed. This group of women had kept vigil: sitting with their friend, praying with her, weeping tears for her. They lovingly washed her body and prepared it for burial. But they also were the ones who sent for Peter and waited patiently outside the door as Peter prayed over their friend's body, hoping beyond all hope for a miracle. I believe that the emphasis of this text should not be placed on Peter or even the amazing miracle he performed. It should be placed upon this group of women who dared to be vulnerable and unafraid to enter into another's life in such an intimate way. I believe that it was through their actions that healing and transformation was made possible for their friend. It was through their love that they became witnesses to the power of the resurrection. As one individual wrote about them, "They were a congregation of resurrection hope."

A congregation of resurrection hope. I just love that description. This is a trademark of being a community that follows the risen Christ- living in hope, dying in hope and being reborn in hope. This is how those early Christians learned to live as an Easter people and it is how we, some 2,000 years later are invited to live as Easter people. And yet, how challenging it is to be a congregation of resurrection hope! With our need for privacy and our sense of individualism, there is a part of each of us that does not want to allow others into those intimate places. When we face a crisis we are tempted to circle the wagons and hunker down, not allowing anyone in to offer care or even hope. We fool ourselves into thinking we can go it alone. Writer Frederick Buechner cautions us against this way of thinking. He says, "When it comes to putting broken lives back together-the human best tends to be at odds with the holy best. 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."

A story that was told to me about a priest returning to his parish after his beloved wife's death illustrates Buechner's words. The priest had been given a long sabbatical by his congregation after his wife lost her battle with cancer. On his first Sunday back the grief-stricken man was not ready to return to his congregation. The last thing he wanted to do was get up in the pulpit to preach the Good News, sing those familiar hymns, pray those familiar prayers and celebrate the Eucharist. He didn't know what he believed anymore. He certainly could not celebrate with his people. But he returned anyway. Later he would reflect on that day and say that it was the beginning of his long road towards healing. He couldn't sing with joy. So, his community sang for him. He couldn't believe those words he prayed. So, his community believed them for him. He couldn't celebrate God's grace. So, his community celebrated for him. It was in showing up to his church week after week, month after month, and allowing his people to carry the grief with him that he was able to embrace new life. Instead of steeling himself against the harshness of his reality, he had the courage to open himself up and be transformed by his community's resurrection hope.

I pray that we may we have the same courage to be vulnerable with each other, unafraid to enter into one another's lives, sharing both, our joys and sorrows, our blessings and brokenness. May we rejoice in being an Easter people, witnessing to the power of new life given to us in the risen Christ, and striving always to be for each other a congregation of resurrection hope.