

In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (which, when translated, is Dorcas), who was always doing good and helping the poor.³⁷ About that time she became sick and died, and her body was washed and placed in an upstairs room.³⁸ Lydda was near Joppa; so when the disciples heard that Peter was in Lydda, they sent two men to him and urged him, "Please come at once!"³⁹ Peter went with them, and when he arrived he was taken upstairs to the room. All the widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them.⁴⁰ Peter sent them all out of the room; then he got down on his knees and prayed. Turning toward the dead woman, he said, "Tabitha, get up." She opened her eyes, and seeing Peter she sat up.⁴¹ He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet. Then he called the believers and the widows and presented her to them alive.⁴² This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord. (Acts 9:36-42)

It's Still Easter

There's a church that I drive by regularly that has a sign, like ours, that you can put messages on. For the last few weeks, their sign has read, "Easter isn't over!" Now, I assume that they mean the same thing that I've meant the last few weeks when I've greeted you each Sunday and said that we're continuing our celebration of Easter. In the church, Easter isn't just one day. It's a whole season. But I also assume that the pastor of that church is trying to make another point: for us Christians, Easter is never over. It touches every day of our lives. In fact, Easter is all about life – it's about the victory of life. That implies something about the opposite. When I was a freshman in college, I took a survey course in ancient history. The professor introduced Egypt by talking about the climate. He said, "If you said to someone in Egypt, 'It's a beautiful day,' they'd answer, 'So what? It's always a beautiful day here.'" To appreciate the glories of sunshine and warmth, you have to know the cold and snow and darkness of winter. And to truly appreciate the life Christ won for us on Easter, you have to know something about death. Only then is the message on that church's sign rich in meaning. The account we have today from the book of Acts helps us to see what the victory of life means for us. My friends, no matter what your calendar says, **it's still Easter!**

I.

The sad truth is, I don't have to teach most of you about death. It's all around us and the older we get, the more we encounter it. Most of us adults, anyway, have lost people we love. Some of us adults and even some of us who are younger have been sick enough to realize that our lives could end quickly. We've had to wrestle with the loss and the fear that come with death. This morning, we see people from a different time and place dealing with death. While some of what they did seems unfamiliar to us, there is much here that we can identify with. Their experience reminds us that **it's still Easter. Easter gives us hope.**

In the word of God that we have before us this morning, we see people who felt loss and still had Easter hope. This reading tells us about a woman named Tabitha or Dorcas. Both of those names mean "Gazelle." Tabitha was a very faithful Christian. She lived in Joppa, a seaport in Israel. Today it's part of the Tel Aviv area. The book of Acts tells us that she spent a lot of time doing good and helping the poor. She was a model of Christian love. It's clear from the reaction of the members of her congregation that she one of those special people that you were always glad to see when you came to church. But she became ill and she died. In that time and place, suddenly falling ill and dying was not unusual. Yet, those who knew and loved Tabitha still felt the sharp sense of loss that death brings.

That feeling of loss doesn't surprise me. But how the members of her church reacted does. They heard that the Apostle Peter was in Lydda, about ten miles away, and they sent two men to beg Peter to race back to Joppa. This almost certainly happened on the day Tabitha died. At that time, Jewish burials happened very quickly. They lived in a hot country. They did not practice embalming. They washed and anointed the body and then they said goodbye within a day or two at most. So almost as soon as she died, they sent a message to Peter. Why? She was already dead, so they weren't asking Peter to come and heal her. Maybe they wanted him to come back and officiate at her funeral, but taking the words as God gave them, I have to conclude that the believers in Joppa asked Peter to come in hopes that he would do a miracle. They were hoping he would raise Tabitha from the dead.

What an amazing request! In all the years that I've been a pastor, I've never stood over the body of someone who's just died and asked God to bring that person back to life, right there. I've never had anybody ask me to do that. Yet, that seems to be what these Christians were hoping Peter would do. Obviously, that shows the depth of love that they had for Tabitha. But we shouldn't conclude that this is what usually happened. Peter served Christians for decades after Jesus ascended. The congregations he served were very large – much larger than any I've served. Dozens, if not hundreds of members of those churches must have died during his ministry. Yet, this is the only time we know of when Peter raised a dead Christian to life. There is no indication in the Scripture or in church history that this was anything like the regular practice of the early church. Peter simply did not raise every believer who died.

Yet, when this congregation asked him to come, he came. He put the mourners out of the room and he prayed. And the Lord communicated to him that this is what God wanted, because Peter turned and said, **“Tabitha, get up.”** Then she opened her eyes and lived! Why did God do that miracle? For one simple reason: to reinforce the gospel. Peter did not raise many people, but in almost every one of his sermons that is recorded for us, Peter says that Jesus was dead and now he is alive. It was a constant theme with him. And when he came to Joppa, he taught them what Jesus' rising means. It means that we will rise. It means that the dead in Christ are still alive in heaven and they will live upon the earth. It means that Easter never ends for us Christians because the sure hope of eternal life is ours in every situation we face here.

You can bet that when Tabitha came down the stairs alive, the members of her congregation had an Easter lesson they would never forget. Life has to be contrasted with death. Death is the end result of every one of our lives. Every time someone we love dies, that robs us of that person. And the tragedy of it all is that God did not design us to die. He designed us to live with him in paradise forever. Only sin could change that. Sin brings death. We are all sinners and we all deserve to die. All those that we loved were sinners and death is what they had coming. Sin ruins our happiness, it destroys the things that are most precious to us, it robs us and then it drags us down to the grave and yawning under that grave is hell, waiting for every one of us.

Tabitha died because she was a sinner living in a sinful world. But she rose because Christ defeated sin. He was the one person in all of history who was not a sinner so he deserved to live forever. But he died. He stepped into our place and died the death we deserve. Because he was the Son of God, his death counts for all the sins of all the sinners who have ever lived. And when he rose, he broke the power of death and hell. He freed us. Tabitha rose not because she was such a good church member, not because she was such a loving person and such a joy to have around. Tabitha rose because Jesus rose and God wanted to give her congregation an object lesson is that victory of Christ.

Today, of course, we cannot expect an object lesson like that. That's why I don't ask God to raise our members when they die, at least not before Judgment Day. But God gave us Tabitha, too. And God built his power into the message that these words record for us. In her rising from the dead, we see our own resurrection. We see God's promise that all those who have believed in him live even though they die. All those believers whom we have loved and lost are not lost at all. That is God's message of hope for us. When all that we can see with our eyes and touch with our hands and feel in our hearts says that death has won, God says Christ has won. So death has lost. Christ won, so we will win.

II.

That hope overcomes despair. Real hope is more than just a wishy-washy, “Gee, I hope we go to heaven” kind of feeling. When the Bible teaches hope, it's teaching confidence in a promise. We don't have it in our hands yet. We can't see it with our physical eyes on the day we close the lid on the coffin. But Christ has won and we will live. The person we loved will live, if he or she shared our faith. But the fact that it lies in the future means that right now, we're caught between two worlds. We Christians are sinners and saints at the same time. When it comes to grief, the believer God put in us clings to the promise and rejoices in what God is going to do. But the unbeliever inside us wallows in hurt and sorrow. So Jesus brings a promise that is power for the saint in us to triumph over the sinner. **It's still Easter! Easter heals our losses.**

When Luke describes how the widows in Joppa gathered around Peter and showed him the clothing Tabitha had made, I can't help but see our modern funeral customs. We gather at the funeral home. Usually, the body is there, dressed in their best clothes, just like Tabitha, right? Today, it's very common to have picture boards showing the life of the person who's died. I enjoy that because I didn't know most of you until I came to be your pastor. So I get a glimpse of your lives. And as I talk to you, I often hear stories about the one you

loved. That's what those women were doing. They were grieving. They were telling Peter about this woman that they loved and lost.

And much healing happens in those situations. The fellowship of the church comforts us in our losses. We gather as a body of believers, we become a family under God, because we are now brothers and sisters of Christ who died and rose for us. As one body, one family, we love each other. We listen, we hug, we counsel, we help. That loving attention – which Peter offered – helps our hearts to heal while we grieve. But there is so much more here than just fellowship here. In the end, even unbelievers could take the time to listen and hear about that loved one who is now gone. God offers us something more at those moments: the good news about Jesus. The resurrection of Christ means that the sorrows and pains of the person we loved are over. It means that everything that sin did to that person is now done and they now live now in joy with Christ.

That message reminds us that this life is not our goal. Tabitha was a wonderful Christian woman. That didn't keep her from getting sick or dying. But when Jesus takes us from this life, all the sicknesses and all the hurt of this life will fall away and we will rejoice with him in heaven. In truth, what we experience will be better than what Tabitha experienced. She had to live again in a sinful world. The Bible tells us about eight or ten individuals who were brought back from the dead. But it never tells what finally happened to those people. Some people have imagined that they never died again. That's probably not true. In fact, what a tragedy it would be if it were. If they didn't die again, then they would have to suffer all the things of this life until Christ returns. Almost certainly, they died again later. But that death was a gift because it freed them from everything that sin does to us here. While they lived, they had the same comfort that we have: Jesus is coming back to take us home. Jesus loves us – he proved it when he gave his life for us. Jesus won our victory – he proved it when he rose and defeated death and hell for us. Jesus will control everything here to bring us home.

When death claims those we love, we need that message. Through that message, God reaches into our hearts and heals us. But it doesn't always come at once. Sometimes, we need time to heal. We need time to find God's comfort in his word. When my grandmother died I remember being surprised by my father's tears at the funeral. You see, my dad doesn't express his feelings much. But at his mother's funeral, he wept. Pain is part of life in this world. Even we believers feel it. We grieve for those we love when they die. But God never leaves us. He gives us our brothers and sisters in Christ to comfort us. He promises life, now and forever. And he renews the hope and the comfort and the healing of Easter. When the grief comes, it feels like we've gone back to Good Friday. It feels like we're stuck under the cross. But always after Good Friday comes Easter. Our Savior rose. He gives us the love and comfort of Easter while we struggle here and he will give us eternal life. Amen.