

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER EASTER, C
ACTS 9:36-43
Psalm 23
Rev 7:9-17
John 10:22-30

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I once knew a woman who could turn old scraps into pretty table linens. Wilma was an elderly widow. She had a hard time walking, and she didn't get out of the house much by the time I knew her, but she stayed busy. She'd converted the garage behind her house into a weaving workshop. Piled high on shelves all around the room were bags of fabric and fabric scraps, donated or bought at yard sales. In the center was a large floor loom. Wilma would cut the old fabric into strips and on her loom she would weave these strips into place mats and table runners, coasters, even small rugs. It was amazing how many useful and attractive items she could turn out in the course of a year.

Wilma grew up in a simpler time when people made do with what they had. Her craft was an expression of old-time values, creativity, and generosity. She was forever giving things away to friends or people holding craft sales for one cause or another. When we had Wilma's funeral, just about everyone there had at some time received a set of coasters or placemats she'd made. In fact, I still have some of Wilma's placemats myself, and we're enjoying using them on our table at home right now.

I wonder if Tabitha, the disciple in our first Bible reading, was a little bit like Wilma. The Book of Acts says Tabitha had a talent for sewing, which she used to help others. Specifically she made clothing for the poor, including widows, who were among the poorest of all when they had no family to provide for them.

In the Bible reading Tabitha had just died, and her grieving friends sent for Peter in the hope — maybe even the expectation -- that Peter could bring Tabitha back to life. There's a clue in the fact that they had washed Tabitha's body, but they hadn't yet anointed her with oil for burial. These women were hoping they wouldn't need to say their final goodbye.

Why were they so reluctant to let her go? It seems like more than friendship and affection. Again, careful reading gives us a clue. When Peter arrives, the widows tell stories and show Peter the tunics and clothing Tabitha made. And the Greek literally reads, "they showed Peter *themselves*." That is, they weren't just holding up clothes Tabitha made for others; they were showing the clothes she'd made *for them*. So these widows themselves were among the people who received Tabitha's kindness when they were in need. And the garments she sewed were not just clothes-- they were symbols of someone who provided for them when nobody else would.

This is a story about resurrection, which gives us a clue about why we're reading it during this Easter season. Peter finally does raise Tabitha from the dead, through the power of Jesus Christ -- which in itself is pretty amazing. Yet I see the message and promise of resurrection extending even beyond this one miracle. I see the story of a whole community of people who have been transformed by the Risen Jesus, and whose lives reflect the qualities of Christ's resurrection. Jesus has raised these people to new life, and they are raising others to new life too.

There is Peter, the man who denied Jesus three times when Jesus was on his way to the cross. When the pressure was on, Peter's courage broke down. But after Jesus was raised from the dead, Jesus appeared to Peter and forgave him and restored his life and hope, and he called Peter to follow him again. Peter's power for raising Tabitha clearly doesn't come from himself but from the Risen Jesus. On his own, Peter is just a fallible man, but through Christ he becomes a vessel for good news and new life. Jesus has raised Peter up, and Peter lives the resurrection.

There is Tabitha herself. The miracles she works are not nearly as dramatic as Peter's, but they are still miracles, everyday miracles. In her down-to-earth, practical way Tabitha gives expression to the new life of Christ. She makes clothes, but more than this, she lifts people up, she restores them, she gives them dignity. Jesus has raised Tabitha up, and Tabitha lives the resurrection.

There are also the "saints and widows" our scripture mentions. In the early years of the church, there was a particular community of widows who were assigned the special ministry of praying, providing hospitality, and giving help to the needy. (You can read more about this in I Timothy 5.) The women in our passage may have belonged to this servant community. Having received help from people like Tabitha, they went on to care for others in Jesus' name. Jesus raised them up, and they in turn lived out the resurrection.

In fact, the early church as a whole was well known for the way it offered help to those in need. Even people who didn't believe in Jesus recognized his followers as generous and charitable people. An ancient historian named Tertullian quoted one pagan who exclaimed, "See how these Christians love one another!" And it wasn't their sentimental love but their practical love that impressed him. He was seeing Jesus' resurrection being lived out through them in down-to-earth ways. Christians were recognized for taking in orphans, feeding the hungry, and visiting people in prison. They provided burial for the poor, and when there was famine, earthquake or war, they used their own money for relief work. They helped both Christians and non-Christians alike, which was unusual in a day when general social welfare aid didn't exist.

The earliest Christians also lived out their conviction that all people are equal before God. Women and men were equal before God, so women were welcomed into the Christian community as full partners in Christ's work. Slaves and free people were

equal before God, and equal in the Christian community. And when it became known that a slave was living in an abusive or cruel household, it was accepted practice to use funds from the church treasury to buy that person's freedom. (See Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 1967)

This is what happens when people live out the implications of Easter. Easter tells us God is always on the side of life. In every place where death threatens, God is always at work to bring something new to life. God is at work to restore dignity, to lift up those who are bowed down, to heal the wounded, to rescue those in danger, to overcome hatred with love. God is at work to shape this world into a place of resurrection and life where all people can find hope.

Every generation of Christians has the opportunity to give expression to Jesus' resurrection. In fact, we can hardly avoid doing this. When we are saved by Christ, when we are claimed by God's love, when we are wrapped in Jesus' forgiveness, we can't help but let the goodness of Easter find expression through us.

You and I stand in a long line of saints who have been lifted up by Jesus and done their best to live out our Lord's resurrection in their own lives. That biblical word "saint" applies as much to you and me as people in Bible times. It includes every person who is forgiven in Christ. It doesn't mean we're perfect. Peter certainly wasn't perfect, nor was Tabitha, I'm sure. I know my friend Wilma who made these wonderful placemats wasn't perfect, and I'm definitely not perfect – neither are you. It's not about our goodness—it's about God's goodness in forgiving us and setting us apart to love and serve. We all have a share in Christ's Easter life. And we all have the privilege of using our energies and abilities to express Christ's Easter life today.

Today we welcome a new sister into the long line of saints – Cora. When she is baptized, she'll receive the Easter light of Christ, a candle lighted from this Easter candle, symbolizing the light of Christ's resurrection made real in her life. I have to say, baby Cora does seem pretty perfect to me this morning. In time, though, she'll face the same challenges all people face-- with one big difference. Because Cora is baptized in Christ, because she's claimed by God's love, wrapped in God's forgiveness, she will have the power of God's resurrection with her at all times. Marked with the sign of Christ's cross, she will always belong to the Risen Lord. When she is in need, God will lift her up. When others have needs, she will reach out her hand in Christ's name.

It's up to us as Cora's sisters and brothers to help her learn what it means to live the resurrection. To draw hope from Christ, and to be Christ's hands and feet, serving in Easter love. It's not just Ryan and Emily's calling but all of our calling to teach our young ones the ways of this long line of saints in which we stand, from Peter and Tabitha all the way to today– and to teach each other, strengthen each other in Christ, and invite everybody we can into beauty of God's resurrection love.

The God who raised Jesus Christ keeps on raising us up. And wherever new life is shared, we give God credit and praise, because we believe the power for that good comes from God. Thanks be to God. Amen.