

“Death Will Not Win”  
May 11, 2025  
Scripture: Acts 9:36-43; John 10:22-30

I have to admit, I find stories like this one in Acts a little frustrating. It’s hard, sometimes, to hear a story like this and make sense of it in a world where we know that death is real, that good and faithful people die, people we love and cherish. And for the people who first heard this story about Tabitha being resuscitated by Peter the reality we know was no different. So, what is this story trying to tell us in depicting an event that no one hearing it has ever experienced?

Tabitha’s story is unique. She is the only example of a woman being named as a disciple in the New Testament. This is the only occurrence in Greek of the feminine form of the word for disciple. So, that’s important, I think. Also, she is a deeply charitable person. The clothes she made have helped many women in the area. When the widows mourning her death tell Peter about that, they’re probably pointing to what they’re wearing as evidence. Tabitha was someone whose sudden loss was devastating to that community.

We’ve all known people like that. Every church I’ve ever served had several people, men and women, who fit the description of Tabitha as a person whose “life overflowed with good works and compassionate acts on behalf of those in need.” And we know how hard it is to lose someone like that. It can feel as if the universe has turned against us when someone we’ve come to love is snatched away. Some people find it hard, when something like that happens, to maintain their trust in God, it feels so arbitrary and capricious.

But that’s the nature of death. It’s a reality none of us escapes and every time it intrudes on our lives it leaves us reeling. We tend to imagine, I think, that ancient people were more comfortable with death than modern people. After all, any person in that world was a scratch away from a fatal infection where there was no reliable antiseptic and no antibiotics. Infant mortality was extremely high and the average lifespan was only about 30. Under those conditions it seems like death would be easy to accept, being so common. But I think we’re mistaken to believe that.

We are part of a religion built on the belief that death will not win. And I think that’s the message behind this story about Tabitha. This is a story to illustrate the power of God even over the tragedy of death. It might also be used to establish the authority of Peter, but honestly he doesn’t really do very much. It doesn’t seem to be the power of his prayer or his words that revives her. Tabitha rises because God will not let her go. Death will not win.

That’s a message every generation needs to hear. It’s a message people living in fear for the physical safety of their bodies and for the wholeness of their spirits need to hear. Because, even though we live in a world where there are medical advances and longer lifespans than ever in the history of our species, still we are surrounded by death. Years ago, the Southern fiction writer Walker Percy observed that when you can go into a bookstore self-help section and find hundreds of books telling you how to live, you can be sure there’s a lot of death around.

But the gospel tells us death will not win. When Jesus is confronting his opponents in Jerusalem, he knows what really troubles them. The fear of death haunts us all. It's no accident, I suppose, that this encounter is set during the Feast of Dedication or Hanukkah, when the revival of the Jewish people is celebrated and light returns to the world. What does Jesus tell them? "I give them eternal life. They will never die, and no one will snatch them from my hand." A little later in John's gospel, at the time of Lazarus' death, Jesus tells Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die. Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." The message of the gospel, over and over, sometimes direct, other times implied, is "death will not win."

That doesn't mean we won't lose people we love. It doesn't mean we won't miss them and grieve them. The promise of resurrection is even those losses will not destroy us if we trust in the power of life over death. In the world God envisions life always wins.

Life wins even when it doesn't seem that way. Fear of death is an important tool for the forces of power in our world. In ancient Rome it was fear of death that kept people under control. That's partly why the Christian message was so threatening. Today the fear of death is leveraged in thousands of ways through advertising and politics. We're constantly being encouraged to consume our way to life with the right car or house or career or portfolio. If we fail to have them, death will overcome us; we'll be tossed to the curb, left behind. In the same way, political leaders play on our fear of death by inventing enemies around every corner, people we must hate and eradicate or they'll replace us or corrupt us. Our culture is steeped in the fear of death; we hear it from every corner, including the church.

But the gospel teaches us that life wins and there is nothing to fear in death. That's why a little later in Peter's story in Acts he can go to the home of Cornelius and welcome Gentiles into the circle of discipleship. It's why when Jesus faces death he refuses to cry out in fear and anguish. And it's why, in response to the voices telling us who we should hate, we can go with open arms to the world and welcome people who are rejected or neglected, who are shunned or shamed. Death will not win...if we are able to hear Jesus' voice and willing to follow where he leads.

This is the hope resurrection inspires in us. It's the hope that motivated Peter and Paul, Mary Magdalene and Tabitha. It's the hope that sustains us when we face losses too deep for words and sadness threatens to undo us. It's the hope that encourages people under threat from oppressive systems, people longing for a place of refuge and freedom and acceptance. Because we know death will not win, we are free to live with compassion and empathy toward people around us who are hurting; we are free to be generous and pursue justice without fear no matter how risky it becomes. We are free to rise and to follow Jesus in the knowledge that nothing, no matter how fearsome or strong, nothing can snatch us from his hand.

Amen