

Great expectations

Acts 9:32-43

April 25, 2010

Paul got the call. I have received that same call many, many times.

Hurry! Please come! She's died.

Peter was in a town nearby, so he left where he was and went to Joppa and arrived at Tabitha's house. He went upstairs to the room where her body was stretched out on the bed and all those mourning her were gathered around her.

He saw among them all the widows who showed him the coats and shirts Tabitha had made while she was alive. Do you know where those coats and shirts were? They were wearing them! These were the coats and the shirts she had made for them.

Widows in that day, once they had lost their husbands, had no one to take care of them, no one to provide for them. The church often stepped in, because that was the Lord's command: to take care of widows and orphans. Tabitha apparently was one who took the lead in making sure the widows of their community were well cared for, and now they were mourning her because she was gone.

Many times I have been in a room like that, seeing the body of the one who has died, joining the family members and friends gathered there. We do not say a lot, but we share a few memories or tears or words of consolation.

Then Peter knelt and prayed, just as I have prayed many times in that situation, placing my hand on the body of the one who has died, perhaps joining hands too with a member of the family. Sometimes I pray with other family members and sometimes I am alone when I pray, just me and the body there in the room.

Peter was alone when he prayed, because he had sent everybody else out of the room. He knelt and prayed. Then he got up, looked at the body stretched out on the bed, and he spoke:

Tabitha. Get up!

I am going to ask you a question, and I want you to think carefully before you answer. What were the essential elements of Jesus' ministry? As we look at the record in the four gospels, what were the key features of Jesus' ministry?

He was a teacher. Teaching was a key feature of Jesus' ministry. He taught a law "written on the heart."

He was a healer. Healing was a key feature of Jesus' ministry. Jesus helped blind people see again and lame people walk again. He ministered to bodies and spirits. He cast out demons. He forgave sins. He raised Lazarus from death.

He shared God's love, in very tangible ways. Enacted grace was a key feature of Jesus' ministry. He welcomed outcasts. He ate with sinners. He showed in very concrete ways what God's grace, what God's welcome, meant.

So, at least these three were important elements of Jesus' ministry: the ministry of teaching, the ministry of healing, and the ministry of welcoming, of enacted grace. To these we might add a fourth: the ministry of hope, bringing a message of hope both for what God was doing in that moment among them and for what God would do, a message that we are not stuck where we are but that God brings healing and restoration and new life into our lives.

These are the key elements of Jesus' ministry. Then, of course, once Jesus died, all these things came to an end. Right?

Wrong! Jesus was raised to life! Jesus was raised to life!

That's the primary reason the church came into being in the first place. The church would not exist had Jesus not been raised to life. The church was formed of believers who were witnesses to the living Lord.

The fact that Jesus was raised from death is the primary reason for the existence of our church. Jesus was raised to life. His ministry is not over. It continues. We serve, not a dead teacher, but a living Lord.

Do you see that the things Peter and the other apostles were doing were exactly the same things Jesus had been doing? They were teaching, teaching about the Way, the way of love. They were healing, healing bodies and spirits. They were providing in the church the ministry of welcome, the ministry of grace. That's what was happening and that's what they expected to happen.

Now, let's go back up to that room in Tabitha's house. Peter is alone, alone with the body on the bed. He gets up from praying, and says to her,

Tabitha, get up.

That gives me goosebumps! When I read the lectionary lessons this week, I didn't want to do this text. It would be too hard, too hard to preach. Because I tried to put myself in that position, in Peter's place. But I'm not going to say that. I'm not going to say, "Tabitha, get up!"

What is remarkable is what Peter expected to happen! But I realize, in those situations, I am not going to expect that to happen. Now I do believe, with all my heart, that God will raise us up with Jesus one day ... as bodies. I do not believe in disembodied spirits going to heaven. I believe in resurrection, that God restores us to physical life, that physical life is what God intends for us and what God will make new for us. I don't know how that is going to work. It is a mystery, but I believe it. But I don't expect a dead body to rise now.

What bothers me, as I think about this text, is that sometimes we, the church, you and me, expect God to do ... nothing.

What do we expect Jesus to do now among us? Do we expect there to be healing? Do we expect that when we pray, Jesus will actually do something -- heal a broken body or heal a broken spirit?

Do we expect that people's lives will be transformed, like Paul, lives turned around 180°? Do we believe that Jesus can get hold of somebody, help them see themselves in a new light, and change their life entirely, move off in a new direction? Do we expect that still to happen?

Do you expect Jesus to touch you, to change you, to change the way you think about your life and what it is for?

Do we expect there can be real reconciliation, that people who are not speaking to each other, that people who have been lifelong enemies, can actually have that enmity broken down by what Jesus does?

Do we believe that peace is possible, that God can make peace in the world? Do we expect that?

What do we expect from Jesus? What do we believe? Do we believe that Jesus was raised from death, that he is alive? And if he is alive, what do we expect him to do? If we don't believe that, if we don't believe Jesus is alive, if we believe there is nothing he can do ... what are we doing here?

We call ourselves followers of Jesus, which means that we believe in a hope that is real, in a God that has already done things to bring healing and truth and light and hope into our lives, and that our job in some way as the church is to embody that, as frail and as weak and as imperfect as we are.

Because we do not believe in what we can do. We don't believe in ourselves, We believe in Jesus, the one who is alive. It was not Peter who raised Tabitha from death. It was not Peter who was healing. Jesus was doing it ... for them, in them, through them.

May that be true today, that Jesus will use us to bring healing, to bring a message of reconciliation, to bring hope, to bring truth, to embody love. May the ministry of Jesus continue in us.