

Signs and wonders

Acts 9:36-41

May 12, 2019

Oh, my! That's what I said to myself when I saw that this was the lectionary text for this Sunday. Oh, my!

Peter said, "Get up," to the dead woman ... and she did.

Oh, my! What are we going to do with this?

There are two rather easy things to do with this, two things that a lot of us do with this. For some Christians, this story and others like it are proof positive that we too should have, and actually do have, the power to work miracles if we would only use it. The only reason, they suggest, that we do not see more miracles ourselves is that we do not ask. Whatever we ask, whatever we command, in Jesus' name, shall be done. If we had enough faith, we too could heal the sick and raise the dead.

If we had enough faith. If I had enough faith.

So does that mean that if I pray for my sick friend and she only gets worse, or if I pray for God to heal my dying neighbor and then he dies, does that mean that I didn't have enough faith? That I didn't pray in the right way? That I am somehow spiritually deficient?

No! Absolutely not! That's the problem with this all too simplistic reading of the story. It puts the focus on me -- my adequacy, my strength, my spiritual acumen -- instead of on God, on God's goodness and God's grace. It becomes more about manipulating God to do what I want than about trusting myself and those I love to God's powerful love and God's gracious intent.

And the tragedy is, rather than bringing comfort to a grieving spouse or child or friend, putting this unrealistic expectation onto them only adds guilt and shame on top of the unbearable pain that is already there. Now not only is the one they love dying, but it is somehow their own fault because if they had enough faith, they could save them.

People get sick and people die, not because either they or we failed, not because either they or we lacked faith, but because it is a fact of our existence. God is not cruelly waiting and watching to see if we will say the right words in the right way with enough belief, but instead God is sharing our grief, bearing our pain, coming to where we are, coming to be with us in the valley of the shadow of death.

The second all too easy response to this story is simply to dismiss it altogether as an elaboration, an embellishment, a fable told to bolster the apostles' reputations. It just didn't happen, because it can't happen.

It can't? The God in whom I put my trust and my hope raised Jesus Christ from death! The God in whom I put my trust and my hope spoke the worlds into existence and gave me life! All that we are and all we have and all that we will be is gift, God's gift. Would you want to put your faith in a God incapable of bringing life out of death, a God incapable of bringing anything to life, a God powerless to do or change anything?

No, it's not about magic or spiritual prestidigitation, but it is about miracle, about the miracle of life that is and life that will be, the miracle that there is life at all, that there is a world at all, the miracle that you and I are here today living and breathing, capable of knowing and loving each other, capable of knowing and loving the God who made us, capable of living in this world with purpose and with faithfulness and with hope.

No, I don't like either of these two easy answers. But what if, rather than rushing to judge this story with our own preconceived assumptions and biases, we let the story speak for itself? What is its meaning, its purpose, in its own context? Why is it included as part of the gospel record?

The story of raising Dorcas is intended to be a sign, a sign that Peter's message about Jesus -- Jesus the healer, Jesus our resurrected savior -- is real. It is a sign that what Peter is saying and doing comes from God, just as what Jesus said and did came from God.

You may know that Acts is actually part II of a longer book. Part I is the gospel of Luke. Part I, Luke's gospel, tells Jesus' story, the story of the one sent by God to "proclaim good news to the poor" and to announce "that the time has come for God to save his people." Luke's Jesus tells stories of God seeking out lost ones, ones overlooked and discounted by everybody else, and Luke's Jesus himself seeks out such ones, welcoming them and healing them and saving them.

Part II of the book, Acts, tells the stories of Jesus' followers as they continue his mission of welcoming and healing and forgiving and saving. Jesus is still alive, still at work, in them.

The story in Acts of Peter raising Dorcas echoes the story in Luke of Jesus raising the son of a widow. When people saw Jesus raise the widow's son, they exclaimed: "A great prophet has appeared among us! God has come to save his people!" The miracle is a sign, a sign to them that God has come near, a sign that God is on the move. In the same way, raising Dorcas is a sign, not just to those who witnessed it, but to the readers of Acts and now also to us, a sign that God has come near, that God is still on the move in and among us.

But it's more than that. Raising Dorcas is not just about Peter, not just a sign that God is with him. It's about Dorcas, a sign that her life matters. Her life, this life, matters. The ministry of Peter and the other apostles, just like the ministry of Jesus, reveals God's investment in our lives as they, in we human beings as we are, made in God's image, but also made of earth, of dust, of ground.

This life matters! This body matters! Why else would Jesus give sight to blind people or heal lame people or feed hungry people? Just to show off? It's about bringing life, fullness of life, to all God's creatures, to all God's dear ones. God desires shalom for us, for all of us: wholeness of life, fullness of life, goodness of life, here and now.

Peter is a sign of what God is up to, but so is Dorcas. Dorcas is a sign! Dorcas is a wonder! "She spent all her time doing good and helping the poor." She was busy, all the time, doing God's work, making shalom, loving widows by clothing their bodies, making the lives of people at risk better. She didn't urge them to wait and pray for the life to come; she did all she could to make their lives better here and now.

Peter saw that. He saw the widows' grief, saw the shirts and coats Dorcas had made for them, and he felt pity, pity for their loss of the one who cared for them, just as Jesus felt pity for the widow who lost her sole means of support when her son died. Raising Dorcas is a sign that her life and her ministry matter to God. Raising Dorcas is a sign that the lives of the widows who depended on her matter to God. And raising Dorcas is a sign that the power of resurrection is at work here and now among us.

The power of resurrection is at work. Do you see it? Resurrection is not some guarantee of a future life some day somewhere else. Resurrection is a sign of God's investment in this life, here and now, of God working to heal, redeem, reconcile, lift up, make right, make better, bring life here and now.

I don't get excited about heaven. I get excited about resurrection, about believing that God can bring dead things to life, that God can bring the dead things in me to life, that God can bring to life the dead things in this world -- people and nations divided against each other, people without food, people without purpose, people without love.

This is our hope: that one day God will make all things new. And this is our hope, too: that that work has already begun.

Dorcas was a sign, a sign of the power of resurrection at work, and my mother was a sign. I am remembering my mother on this Mother's Day. She died not quite a year ago, on May 21, in Iowa. Last July, we held a memorial service at St. Francis by the Sea Episcopal Church in Blue Hill, her church, and afterwards my sister and brother and I along with members of our families spread her ashes on Blue Hill Bay just as we had my father's ashes seventeen years before.

My mother was a wonder. She didn't make clothes, she made music. For many years, she served as a church choir director. I sang for her, in a high school youth choir, and later as a young adult.

She was a competent, well-trained musician, but for her, and for us because of her, music was about passion, about connecting both singers and congregation to the meaning and emotion of the music. Music was a means of proclaiming the gospel and a means of embodying the gospel, embodying (quite literally

expressing with our bodies!) the joy and hope and wonder of the gospel. We sang for her, not just with our voices, but with our whole selves, because we understood from her that we were not singing for her, but for God.

My mother was a wonder and a sign. She was raised in a very conservative Christian and Missionary Alliance church, taught a faith focussed mostly on don't's: don't drink, don't smoke, don't gamble, don't dance, don't go to movies, don't play cards ... you get the drift! She married my father, himself raised in a family of non-church-goers, but whose faith in Jesus was birthed through the campus ministry of Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship while he was an undergraduate at Michigan State University. During their life together, they were members of a whole variety of churches -- Presbyterian and Baptist, independent and Congregational, finally settling down in the Episcopal Church.

They moved from what would be commonly labeled an "evangelical" expression of faith to a more "progressive" expression of faith, but labels do not tell their story, cannot tell their story. Their faith didn't change, rather it grew. They never abandoned the fire of their first love, the evangelical fire of love for God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength,. They simply came to understand in new ways, deeper ways, wider ways, the implications of that love and of God's call to love their neighbors as God loves their neighbors, all of them, each of them. Faith for my mother and my father was always about righteousness and justice and love, but as their faith grew, it became more and more and more about grace.

Mom was raised a Nixon/Goldwater Republican, but her faith and what she saw through the eyes of her faith changed her. She saw prejudice and discrimination and white privilege. She saw abuse of power and disregard for the "other" and disregard for the earth and she became a civil rights activist and an environmental activist and a strong defender of her lesbian daughter.

My mother was a wonder and a sign, a sign that the power of resurrection is at work among us, changing our minds, changing our hearts, bringing to life the dead things in us, leading us from a life of "don't's" to a life of "do's," calling us into a life that brings life, a life not of judgment, but of blessing.

Dorcas was a wonder. My mother was a wonder. And you are a wonder.

You are! You are a wonder -- God's breath, God's spirit, is manifested in you as in no other. You are a wonder and you are called to be a sign, a sign that the power of resurrection is at work among us. Your words can heal. Your touch can heal. Your service can heal. You are called to sing and to dance, to love and to serve, to feed and to clothe, to make justice and to make peace, and by all of it to show that God is near, that God is up to something, that God is still in the business of bringing things, bringing people, to life ...