

160416 sermon notes on Acts 9:36-43

Last Sunday night as I walked over the Telford bridge, a large spaceship landed on the terrace car park, a couple of little green creatures with eyes on stalks got out, took some photographs of the church and then flew back off into the galaxy. You don't believe me, do you? And that's OK because it didn't happen.

But it is interesting that you couldn't bring yourself to believe me, and yet if I stand up here and say that a bloke was dead and buried for a few days but then he came back to life again, nobody says I've lost the plot.

This morning we are going to think a bit about what we will and won't believe and how we deal with the stories in the Bible that, if they were anywhere else but the Bible, we wouldn't believe.

The story of the raising of Tabitha is one of those stories that we wouldn't believe if it wasn't in the Bible.

We've never known anyone to be seriously dead and then come back to life and we would never expect it to happen. And so we find a story like this rather implausible. It can't happen now because in our experience it has never happened before. But plausibility is not necessarily a good criterion on which to judge the value of things.

There are lots of things that sound implausible, until they happen, and we get used to them.

Lots of wonderful things that happen have never happened before. Maybe God is doing a new thing. Maybe the importance of this passage is not just as a piece of history. Maybe it isn't even history but it is true in another way.

One of the things that Luke does consistently is to shape stories so that they call up the memory of older stories.

Here in the book of Acts we get a number of stories that cry out to be compared to stories in his earlier gospel, and a number of those stories echo back further to stories from the Hebrew Scriptures of ancient Israel.

This story of the raising of Tabitha begs us to compare it to the raising of Jairus' daughter by Jesus.

Have a look at the details. Luke writes in Greek, but in this story he takes the unusual step of giving a translation.

We are told that this disciple who died at Joppa was named Dorcas in Greek or Tabitha in Aramaic. So what? Back in the story of the raising of Jairus' daughter Luke translates some Greek into Aramaic for us too.

Jesus said "Little girl, get up" and Luke told us that in Aramaic that was "Talitha Cumi." And now here Peter, whose native language was Aramaic, says "Tabitha, get up," which in Aramaic is "Tabitha Cumi." Almost the same.

Luke's original readers, being familiar with the language and stories would have recognized the echo of one story in the other. Luke wants us to know that the Jesus story is not over.

Jesus might not be physically present anymore, but his influence in the world is undiminished.

The power of Christ to bring new life is undiminished from one story to the next.

Many of us struggle to believe that life can come from death. Death always looks so powerful, so complete.

And the forces that produce it seem so inevitable and so unchangeable. Its approach makes many feel weak and helpless and depressed. And as often as not, words of resurrection and hope have a hard time getting through to us through that.

There was another reading set for today from the book of Revelation.

In it John sees a great crowd of people singing and dancing round the throne of God.

One of the angels of God explains it to John: *"These are the people who have come safely through the terrible persecution. Never again will they hunger or thirst; neither sun nor any scorching heat will burn them, because the Lamb, who is in the centre of the throne, will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of life-giving water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."*

God is doing new things. God is bringing life from suffering and death. Christ promises us that death is not the final word, that Easter happens again and again as Christ breaks through the boundaries of our belief, and creates life in new ways.

Part of the good news is that God does not require us to have a 100% unshakeable faith before we can be accepted as God's children. God does not require that we have it all together and feel confident about everything before he will do anything good in our lives. Resurrection is happening.

The Holy Spirit is active in the most deathly situations to bring about hope and life. The story of the raising of Tabitha gives us reason to hope even when we think that there is no possibility of restoration:

We live in a "Humpty Dumpty" world in which we are convinced that things cannot be put back together again, but the book of Acts tells a different story, about people empowered to 'turn the world upside down'. I heard someone say it was about turning 'the world right-side-up" In either case, the world is not as it should be, and God is at work, often through us, putting it right again.

Doing that might indeed turn it upside down from where it is now, and all of that is mysteriously grounds for hope. Stephen Jones provides a wonderful description of the early Christians that makes us want to be church in the same way: "*They were unafraid to wade into each other's lives in transforming ways.*"

I believe the telling, the sharing, and the hearing of our stories of faith, the stories of ancestors long ago, not so long ago, and even our own stories, have the power to transform lives, individually and communally. Hearing the witness of others, we can each of us learn and be strengthened and sometimes, even rise up when life presses in and trouble has us down. Like Tabitha rising again to her ministries of compassion and generosity, we are invited to begin again and to taste the sweetness of new life.

It's one reason we don't travel alone on this journey of faith.

For what do you hope?

Is it some future event?

Something that can be planned, researched, engineered or financed?

Like a cure for cancer?

Or a way of regenerating brain cells destroyed in dementia?

Or marvellous DNA repairs for confused chromosomes?

For what do you hope?

Is it some notion that tomorrow will be better?

That the benefits system will serve those in need?

Or that Food Banks will no longer be necessary?

That no one will sleep rough on our streets but that all will know shelter?

For what do you hope?

Is it for signs of world peace?

The dismantling of refugee camps?

The sharing of clean water?

For what do you hope?

The promise of God

for God's people everywhere

is to know resurrection

in the unlikeliest places

with the least likely people

May our hope be found

in new life all around.