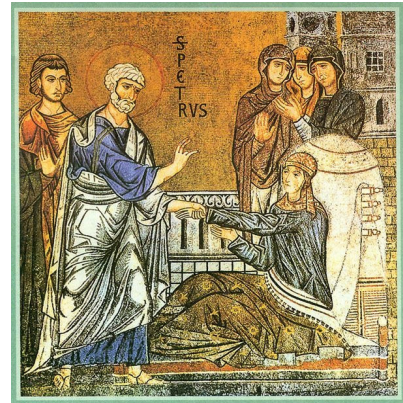


NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
SUNDAY 21 APRIL 2013
Rev. Anneke Oppewal
Acts 9: 36-43



“Rise!”

On the surface, the story we read from Acts this morning is a beautiful, intimate story about loss, grief and the life giving, miracle working power of the gospel, at work among the earliest Christian community.

We hear about a lovely Christian woman whose life abounds in good works and charity. Yet, within two verses, she is dead, and her community is plunged into deep mourning. Against tradition and custom they don't bury her straight away, but lay her, and her work, out upstairs, suggesting it is just too hard to part from her.

They send not one, but two people to get Peter, emphasising their urgent need for support and encouragement. Just anybody is not enough, Peter has to come over and conduct the funeral!

Upon arrival they show him her work and her body. And share their grief and consternation at the loss of this exemplary disciple. Peter then does what he has seen Jesus do before: He sends them from the room and prays. The words he uses are almost synonymous with the words Jesus uses to raise a young girl from the dead in Mark 5. Tabitha rise!

And she rises, and is restored to her community, turning a dead end into a new beginning. And many join the Christian Community as a result of it. All is well that ends well, and the expansion of the gospel continues.

That's the surface. But, you probably guessed it, there is more. Looking a little bit deeper we discover Luke crafted those seven verses with incredible skill. Infusing them with deeper meaning, insights and understandings about the gospel and God's journey with his people than one might think at first glance.

The story starts with a reference to a certain man and a certain woman. Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist, who lived pious and righteous lives, just like Tabitha does at the beginning of this story. And whoever knew their story, would have expected Tabitha's to mirror theirs: for her to be blessed by God's grace.

Through this introduction Luke makes the shock of her sudden death even more palpable. In the story as he has been telling it so far, this is not what is supposed to happen to the pious and righteous!

Then there is her Jewish name Tabitha, and the Greek translation of it, Dorcas. They are both no-names really. They both mean woman, or gazelle. Nothing specific, no names that tell us anything about her character or history or future as some biblical names do. She is just a woman, any woman, who is involved in good works and charity and is deeply loved by her community. By translating her name from Jewish into Greek, however, Luke indicates that she is a woman living on the boundary of two cultures, two language domains, Jewish and Greek.

Straight after this story Peter will have his vision about the kosher and not kosher animals on a sheet coming down from heaven, telling him all are welcome in God's Kingdom. But here we haven't made that transition yet, we are still in between.

Those with ears to hear will, at this stage, already hear echoes of the prophets, and their words about all nations coming to the mountain of the Lord. It is happening, Greek names are turning up alongside the Jewish ones, but there is still uncertainty about how that is to happen.

They lay her in an upper room. Now where did we hear that before? Wasn't it in an upper room where Jesus got together with his disciples before his crucifixion? And, wasn't it also in an upper room where he was suddenly "with them" after the resurrection? Cleverly Luke keeps us in suspense: Is it the upper room of death, or the upper room of resurrection where we are attending the wake for Tabitha's dead body? And even further back we may hear echoes of a story about Elisha, raising a boy, laid out in an upper room.

They go to get Peter. Against custom and tradition they wait with the burial until they have had a show and tell session with their most revered leader. Is it Luke's way of telling us that she is well and truly dead? That enough time has elapsed to make sure she is dead? Or is it a literary tool to build suspense? Or is it just really to help us see their mourning runs so deep they can't part from her?

Peter arrives and does what he has seen Jesus do. Telling us here is another model disciple, imitating the way of Christ in almost literal detail. But, and there surfaces another layer, in imitating Jesus, he imitates Elijah and Elisha as well, when they performed miracles praying and speaking with confidence in God's name. Connecting his actions back to way before Jesus ever appeared on the scene.

What Luke indicates is that Jesus' life and work, and the faith and work of his followers after him, are not a one off, and nothing new. They are connected to the history of God with the world from the beginning.

From the moment living water arises from the springs of Creation, this is what this God does: He brings life where there is death, hope where there is despair, healing where there is brokenness. Many in Joppa believe after Tabitha is restored to life. The expansion of the gospel continues. Even death can't stop that from happening.

And here is another layer. From the beginning of his two part story, the gospel and the Acts of the apostles, Luke emphasises that God's work affects the whole world. From the emperor Augustus and his men, to the descendants of the line of David which has been sidelined by history. From mighty rulers who live in the limelight and whose every whim commands the world, to the poor and down and outs who are forced to live in the more shadowy recesses of the world. Joseph, Mary, shepherds in a field. From priests like Zechariah, to pious girls like Mary.

From the start the gospel, the good news about God's presence reaches out to everyone. And as the gospel proceeds it becomes clear it even reaches beyond the boundaries of life, into the realm of death.

Tabitha lives on. She did not die. There are signs of that all around us, even in this community, where many follow Tabitha working in faith with hearts, hands and minds. Tabitha is raised time and time again where people, like Peter, refuse to resign to the facts, and pray, trusting God is still, as God has always been, bringing life and healing where death and brokenness break in.

The upper room where death casts its shadow can still change into an upper room where resurrection makes its power felt. Through our faith.

The story has not finished yet, God's journey with us has not finished yet. As from the beginning, God is still at work, bringing life and healing where we share the gospel and open our hearts and minds to the miracles it can work. Amen.