

ACTS 9:36-43

36 Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. 37 At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. 38 Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, "Please come to us without delay." 39 So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. 40 Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, "Tabitha, get up." Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. 41 He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. 42 This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. 43 Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

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One of my favorite lines from a movie was delivered by Mae West, a woman with a big heart who made a living out of the notion that it's good to be bad! In this particular movie she was on a train and a woman seated nearby noticed her necklace and exclaimed, "Goodness, what lovely pearls!" to which Mae responded, "Goodness had nothing t'do with it."

St. Paul and St. Augustine and Martin Luther all struggled with the problem of righteousness or goodness. They had a sort of brutal introspection, the kind that takes no prisoners. For a period of time in their lives, they believed themselves lost with no hope of anything, any promises they might have heard about in church, or any promises coincident with anything they might have read in the Bible.

Nobody had to tell them they were going to hell; they already knew they were. The issue for them was how do you prevent that from happening? How do you make God's team? How do you demonstrate a life worthy of the words, "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Father's presence..."? Apparently each one of those men believed in a perfection one had to attain before being able to enter their "Father's presence." And each one knew that he would not be able to achieve at that level.

We know as well as they did that perfection is not something human beings are able to do, and if the words of Matthew 5:48, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect," are to be trusted, what hope can anybody have?

Unlike St. Paul, St. Augustine, and Martin Luther, we don't have to derive the answer to the problem of our imperfection, God's demand for perfection, and the sense of hopelessness that is born out of that unhappy marriage. We have been taught from the beginning that Mae West was right, and that "goodness had nothing t'do with it." Good news for sure. Neither you nor I can change the past, and we have very little control over the future. We are left with the ability to recognize wrongdoing and to correct it, and

if we cannot correct it we must apologize for the act and not repeat it. It does not completely blot out the stain, but we believe that God takes care of the rest of it. We go as far as we can on our own, and God carries us the rest of the way.

To believe that is to approach dying in the belief that neither your life nor mine was wasted or worthless, and-- equally important-- that what we have seen, felt, heard, thought, done etc. while we walked about the planet is not consigned to the dust when we are. Something wonderful awaits us not because we were deserving, for not one of us is, but because we believe it.

Now maybe we believe that because the alternative is far less palatable. This alternative I'm referring to is the one where one simply dies with the memory of his or her existence totally erased from the face of the earth by the time four or five generations have passed. Think about it, all those years of showing up, breath by breath, meal by meal: at school, at work, being with friends, being with family. All of the laughter and all of the tears completely erased by the time a century has passed. The wind of a hundred years has filled in your footprints, and there is no record. Neither you nor I have made any difference.

In one sense none of that should make any difference. By then we're dead. But on the other hand, from this side of the grave, it is hard to imagine. It seems so abrupt. It is hard for me to imagine, all we did being reduced to a few vulnerable footprints gradually erased by the breath of time. I know that we'd all feel better knowing that *some* of those footprints were erased, but all of them? Weren't some of them worth saving? Wasn't one worth saving?

I know Ecclesiastes was right and it *is* all vanity and that Job was right when he explained to himself, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

In the final analysis, it's all about faith, as in, "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." We have heard this explained by people who cared about us growing up. We have observed the role models in our lives and sometimes successfully imitated the way they live, or lived, especially if they lived a life of faith. Now it causes me no small amount of embarrassment to admit to you that I am not really sure what that looks like, because some think that I should know things like this; but the older I get and the longer I do this the less I know about any of it. God just seems to grow and grow and it's harder and harder to contain God within a book of creeds, or even within that collection of ancient Near Eastern literature we refer to as the Bible.

All of which brings us at long last to our lesson for today. Remember these words that fall in toward the end of it.

"This became known throughout Joppa and many believed in the Lord." Simon Peter had revived a woman thought to be dead. She had been a good woman, a Christian woman and when she died, a couple of men went to fetch Simon Peter who was known to be staying at a nearby village. She must have made her living as a seamstress or a

tailor because the form of the grief of her loved ones included showing off various articles of clothing that she had made.

Some must have thought that she was too good to die else why not just let her alone? But Simon Peter came according to the story and brought the woman back from death and, Luke reported, "This became known throughout Joppa and many believed in the Lord."

And I want to say, "Oh, really? Just many? Why not all? Why not none, nobody?"

Because the last time I checked, faith was still "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." And here we have an excellent example of things that were seen! I can't help but remember the words of Jesus to Thomas in the upper room, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Of course people believed, they had seen Dorcas brought back from death with their own eyes.

It wasn't faith at all because they reasoned that if Peter can do this for Dorcas, he can do it for me, or for my wife, children parents, friends. This is so cool, it's the best deal I've ever seen. Seen! And another thing, how come all of that miracle stuff seems to have ended some time during the first century? Where is Peter today? Where are any of the apostles. Show me where they are so that I can go see them, I've got a heart that needs some work, can I make an appointment? Will he accept Anthem? Blue Cross Blue Shield?

No, what's more important than the miracle here, in terms of the life and history of the church is, that Simon Peter (who last week won the battle with the beloved disciple to achieve primacy among the apostles) must this week win the battle with the apostle Paul in order to become the accepted leader of the First Christian Church of Jerusalem. Later on tradition would dictate that, as holder of the keys to the kingdom of God, Peter became the first bishop of Rome which from that day, or a little after, until this, was called the Pope.

So the passage wasn't really about the miracle of Dorcas'being raised a la Lazarus. It was about fastening additional credibility onto Simon Peter's reputation in order to help him become bishop of Rome.

And we are left with an interesting story and the reminder that it is faith in the unseen that makes all the difference and that goodness had nothing t'do with it.

But the hard part is admitting our imperfection (we are good but not good enough) in order to celebrate God's perfection. Until we can make that spiritual move we are still hung up on our righteousness and God's action in history and in our lives is perfunctory at best.