

Acts 9:36-43, Psalm 23, Revelation 7:9-17, John 10:22-30

In our passage from Acts this week, we get to continue following the adventures of Simon Peter. Last week we saw him share a breakfast on the beach with the risen Christ. And now today, through Him, God raises a woman named Tabitha from the dead.

It's really quite astonishing how much Peter has changed between that encounter on the shore of the Sea of Galilee and this moment we find him in today. Last week (in our lectionary), he was rather lost. Jesus had already risen and appeared to him and the other disciples, and he had told them "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." And yet there they were, gathered together back in Galilee, seemingly at a loss as to what to do next. So they decided to go fishing. And they caught nothing.

And now here we find Peter, maybe months later. A leader of the Church – one of the central leaders. And with Paul, Peter is one of the 2 great heroes of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. Here we find him today in what is not his first miraculous healing. And through his prayer and God's grace, a woman has just be raised from the dead.

What has changed?

Well, a lot. Probably the most central change of all is that the Holy Spirit descended upon Peter and the other disciples in the intervening time. At the end of John's Gospel, they seemed to feel rather alone, lacking guidance, and unsure of what to do next. But when Jesus sent the Holy Spirit down at Pentecost, the disciples felt the Presence of God with them again.

For me, this is the clearest way that I am able to understand what the Holy Spirit is. The name "The Holy Spirit" is how the first followers of Jesus expressed the reality and the incredible gift that even after Jesus was no longer with them in the flesh on a daily basis, no longer was God walking around with them and encouraging them and guiding them in human form, nevertheless, God was still with them, still very close – as close as their own heartbeat, their own breath.

And they still felt God's presence with them. His love, guidance, and encouragement. God wasn't gone. He was still near, as near as He was to the prophets and patriarchs of the Old Testament who said, "God, you have searched me out and known me" or "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." But now this sense of God's presence was strongly available not just to prophets and patriarchs, but to everyone.

That was a huge change in Peter's life. He felt God's presence with him again. He no longer felt alone, abandoned, directionless.

And so many other things had happened, too. First he had been reconciled to Jesus after his triple denial by telling Jesus 3 times "I love you."

He had been loved and supported in prayer by the Christian community, which was deeply healing and empowering for him.

He had preached his first sermon! And to a couple thousand people, no less. That's a big life moment.

And I think Peter experienced how people looked to him, an intimate friend of Jesus, for leadership. And their belief in him and their expectations for him helped him to rise to be that leader.

And one thing I love reading in the Book of Acts is that he and the other disciples "prayed for boldness". They prayed to be able to speak and act and not be too afraid – not daunted or intimidated into silence by worry about how people would respond, or about the hostility of the religious and political leaders. And since they asked, God granted their prayer and gave them boldness.

And all of these things are available to us, too. God is present with us, too – as close as our indrawn breath – we, too, have or can receive the Holy Spirit in baptism. We, too, can turn to God in repentance and find mercy, love, and reconciliation with Him. We, too, can ask God for boldness and receive it as a grace. We can be strong and courageous disciples of Jesus, able to invite others into discipleship with us.

But there's one thing I really saw and want to draw out in this story today and Peter's experience with Jesus as we heard last week. When the risen Jesus appeared to his disciples the first time, on Easter Sunday, he said, "I send you." But they remained confused, as if uncertain which way they were being sent – where they should go, and what they should do when they got there.

But when Jesus spoke to Peter on the beach, he put it a different way. He said, "Follow me."

And that worked for Peter. That was the guidance he needed. Just like those words had called him from his fishing when he first became a disciple of Jesus.

Peter knew the pattern of following Jesus. He wasn't going out to do something he hadn't experienced and was unprepared for. Jesus called him, and calls us all, to follow where he has led the way. Peter had been following Jesus for years – had heard him teach, and had seen him heal. And so, in his new life as a disciple of the risen Christ, he follows the patterns he had learned, even if they are in new places, with new people.

And look how closely Peter follows the patterns he had learned in our healing story today. Peter walked into a room where a woman named Tabitha (the Aramaic word for "gazelle") lay dead. And I think that name, "Tabitha", struck a link in his memory, and he knew what he should do.

Jesus once walked, with Peter just behind him, into a room where a little girl lay dead, with her family and friends mourning her all around. And He sent the crowd outside, and he took her by the hand, and he said "*Talitha, cum*" – "little girl, arise."

And so Peter enters, and sends the crowd outside, and prays to his master, and he says “*Tabitha, cum.*” And as he takes her by the hand, Tabitha arises.

Peter just followed Jesus. That’s what gave him the guidance and the courage he needed. He had seen so much with Jesus, he had learned so much. And he was ready to be a leader himself, when he realized that he would still be following Jesus. The Lord would lead him, as his shepherd. He was not alone, and everything he had learned from Jesus would guide him.

If you look at the end of the Gospel according to St. John, especially if you have a Bible with section titles, you may notice a pattern in how the risen Christ meets and guides his followers. Here are some of the titles in my Bible: “Jesus and Mary Magdalene”, “Jesus and Thomas”, “Jesus and Peter”, “Jesus and the Beloved Disciple”.

John shares with us all these one-on-one encounters with the Risen Christ. All these moments where Jesus finds each of his lost sheep, and calls them by name – “Mary”, “Peter”. And they recognize him. And they remember again how to follow him, how to keep living as disciples, even now that everything has changed.

Jesus says, “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.” And Jesus is our shepherd, too. And we can follow that same pattern of discipleship that we learn all through Scripture, and in the lives of the disciples around us, and in our own walks with God. Jesus calls us each by name, and reminds us how we can follow Him.

And He will give us the strength, the boldness, the mercy, the love – whatever we need – to be his followers. And to welcome new followers. And to spread the Good News of God’s life and God’s love. Amen.