

“My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me. . . No one will ever snatch them out of my hand.”

Peter has been on a whirlwind of a journey over the past few weeks. During Holy Week, we heard of his brash confidence promising to follow Jesus unto death and his three-fold denial of his closest friend in the hour of his death. This is the last we heard of Peter. It is almost as if he faded into the background, with his shame and embarrassment for denying Jesus. That is until last week, when, as Mother Anne shared with us, Jesus restored him and gave him a charge: if you love me, feed my sheep and follow me.

We meet a very different sort of Peter this morning, don't we? We have been hearing about this new Peter through our readings from Acts since Easter. His brash confidence has been replaced by boldness; he foolhardy courage with steady faith. Two weeks ago, we heard him proclaim to the same authorities who crucified Jesus: “God exalted him at the his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.” There has certainly been a change in this man.

But our text from Acts finds Peter once again facing the foe that defesated him once before: death. It was, after all, his own fear of death that led him to deny

Christ. Now death is not a popular topic any time of the year for us modern Americans, but it seems especially ill fit for a sermon in Easter season. Saying the word in Eastertide feels a bit like saying alleluia in Lent. And yet, our reading from Acts this morning puts it right at the center of its narrative. In the book of Acts, Peter has been going around with the other apostles preaching the gospel and healing in the name of the Risen Lord.

Two disciples come to Peter and ask him to come with them immediately. He does not even as what is going on. He just goes. We learn that a disciple, a woman named Tabitha, has died. The impact of her absence is clear in the community Peter finds when he arrives in Joppa. The widows of the community are gathered around her body, weeping. Grief has stolen their words, so they cannot even tell Peter what Tabitha meant to them. All they can do is point to the clothes they wear that Tabitha made; each garment an expression of her love, care, and faithfulness. Hers was a life lived well, in service to others, hanging together beautifully as someone devoted to helping people. It is the life of a person who points beyond herself in her devotion to service, her care for others, her willingness to give of the work of her hands so that others might not be without. This is the life of a follower of Jesus, the Risen One, that has been lost. Death

touches not only her, but creeps its tendrils into the lives of those gathered in that upper room, and likely to the whole community of Joppa.

Death has a funny way of doing that in our lives, doesn't it? It is not content to take a person, but reaches into the lives of those around them, leaving its mark. And we know that death is more than the cessation of life. Death's power is felt in the impossible calculation many Americans make deciding on whether to buy food or medicine; it is felt in the life of the child survivor of abuse; it is felt in histories of generational trauma; it is felt in the suffering of those of us with mental illness. Its power is felt in the maddeningly persistence of irredeemable and meaningless suffering. One does not have to look far with open eyes to see its presence in the world. Death's power is felt in our lives. Easter did not erase it for Tabitha or the disciples in Joppa. Easter has not erased it for us. Death still seems to have so much power.

This story about Tabitha is a shocking counterpoint to the resurrection joy of the Easter season. How can this story of Jesus be true, if someone who embodies his love for her community can be taken so senselessly? It is tempting when we face this kind of loss or suffering to want to move right on to the happy ending, isn't it? Read a certain way, it can feel like that is the whole story of Easter: Sure,

Jesus had to go to the cross, but things got better! There was a happy ending! I wonder if questions like these were racing through Peter's mind on his way from Lydia to Joppa.

But I think that is a cheapening of what this season really means for us and the world. We heard two weeks ago about Jesus' appearance to the disciples. He proved to Thomas and to them that he was risen by pointing to his wounds: Look, see my hands—touch my side. This the Risen One, bearing the marks of death's work. The past does not get erased in that moment. And yet he appears to them in the flesh, living, breathing, touching, teaching.

And when Peter prays, Tabitha raises to serve Christ in resurrection power. She has passed through the veil and is raised to a new life that rejects death's all-consuming claims. Tabitha lives in defiance of death. She remains to tell the story of God's presence even from the depths of death. Tabitha's restored life becomes a witness to the resurrected Jesus and leads many in the city to join their number.

And with that, the story ends. We are not told why God has done this or what it means. We are left a bit like the widows who gathered were, I am sure, unable to make sense of this incredible happening. After all, this feels so far from our lives today—we who are all too familiar with the terrible reality of the fragility

of human life. How can this resurrection power matter for us? Like Simon Magnus, we might be tempted to ask what we could pay to get this incredible power. And were we to ask this of Peter, I think he would tell us that the price would be our whole selves.

This is the lesson that he had learned the hard way. But we see in our text today that it was a price well worth paying. It filled him with a life that itself was infectious and brought life to those around him. But it was not something that was Peter's to own. This life was the life of Christ himself, working and active in Peter and bringing Tabitha to new life. What God had done in Peter's soul; he did in her body.

This then, is the promise of our Easter faith. It is not that it erases the pain and suffering that fills the world. The Resurrection is not wool for our eyes that allows us to look away from injustice, evil, and pain because we know it will all day be okay. No. Easter's promise is that precisely at the place of our deepest fragility, our most profound alienation, our most desperate circumstance, when all we are is simply not enough to overcome the challenge before—that is where God will bring new life out of nothing. Peter must go to the place of death in order to find God bring new life to Tabitha.

Like him, Christ's resurrection gives us the courage to face those things which others turn away from. It calls us to go to the places where it seems death has had final victory and bring life and hope. It frees us to live our lives as those who know the voice of our Good Shepherd and are assured that nothing can ever take us from his hand. It gives us a life that is greater than death, so that even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.

Amen.