

Tabitha, Rise Up

Mark 5:35-43, Acts 9:36-42 by Patty Friesen (June 24/18)

In today's story from Acts, Peter is up north in the modern Israeli city of Jaffa on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea where he performs a miraculous healing of a paralyzed man in Lydda and then he is called or paged to Joppa to attend the death of a beloved disciple named Tabitha in Aramaic or Dorcas in Greek. We'll use Tabitha since Peter addresses her in Aramaic. Tabitha was a seamstress and devoted to helping widows. He is not called to perform a miracle or resurrect her. No one is asking for that. He is simply called in as a chaplain, to be present to those who have lost a loved one. Tabitha's loss is keenly felt because of the people who rely on her. The community is responsible for the welfare of widows. There is no social welfare program in the Roman Empire. The early church has taken this on as their call to imitate Christ. This is an opportunity for Peter, leader of the church, to see what the women of the church, like Tabitha are doing, how they are imitating Christ.

We know Tabitha is truly gone, has truly died, because she has been washed and laid out in a room upstairs. It's a chaplain's cold call for Peter - he's never met Tabitha before. He is thrown into the chaos of grief and loss. He listens to the widows tell what Tabitha has done, as they show him the clothes she made for them. He is obviously moved by the lamentations of the widows. He asks them to leave so he can kneel and pray in silence. I appreciate that in the Tabitha death story, Peter sits with her body alone and in silence. He doesn't tell Tabitha's friends that she's in a better place. He doesn't tell them, Oh, you'll see her again in heaven. He doesn't offer platitudes and thin comforts. He listens to them and enters their grief and sits with the dead - not predicting any outcome or waving a wand for magical resurrection at that point - just sitting. Jesus also sat with Jarius' daughter in her death and mourned over his friend Lazarus' death. We need these stories of Jesus' vulnerability with death.

Peter must be remembering Jarius' daughter in Mark 5 who died and was lying in state in a room upstairs. The parallel of these resurrection stories is striking. In Mark 5, Jesus tells

everyone to get out of the room, takes Talitha by the hand and says, Talitha, cum or little girl, get up. Peter gets everyone to leave the room, takes Tabitha by the hand and says, Tabitha, get up. Tabitha opens her eyes, looks at Peter and sits up. He takes her by the hand, helps her stand and calls in her friends. We can only imagine their shock and joyful surprise at receiving their friend back but the camera lens quickly pans out wide to include the whole town who came to believe in Christ.

Tabitha's death and resurrection story provides a framework for us to talk about death and what we need to do to say a good good-bye to our loved ones. This story would make a beautiful funeral sermon. Funeral sermons need to be the best sermons we ever hear. They are the most important opportunities we have pastorally to preach hope and comfort and making sense of death. We've all heard enough bad funeral sermons, unfortunately, wasted opportunities for families and communities. When I don't know the person who has died, it's up to family to tell the story of their life and it's my job to remind us of God's presence with us in the loss. In his memoir *Confessions of a Funeral Director*, Caleb Wilde talks about his life-changing encounter with death. Even though he was a third generation funeral director, he collapsed one day from mental and spiritual exhaustion in dealing with death.

He writes, "It wasn't my closeness with death that was destroying me, it was how I viewed it. I saw death as a certain kind of darkness that needed religion and some degree of flat-out denial to make it ever so slightly lighter and brighter. We paint God as having no need, a God who is immortal, not mortal like us, who isn't dependent on others and who can stand alone unhurt and untouched by relationships. In a word, God has no vulnerability. If we are ashamed that we are mortal because of our view of a perfect God, wouldn't it be interesting if instead of a perfect God, we talked about a God who was vulnerable? Wouldn't it be interesting if vulnerability lies at the very core of God? What if we talked about a God who stands, maybe even kneels, with us in weakness and vulnerability. If God is really love, if God sees us and feels with us; it means that at God's core is this vulnerability, an interdependence that allows

God to feel our pains, to know our sorrows and our joys. Maybe it's okay to have sorrow. Maybe it's okay to weep. It's okay to be vulnerable, for when we do so, we aren't becoming unlike God, we are, in fact, worshipping God." (P. 79, 93-94 Confessions).

When I last saw Katrina Funk at Marge Braun's funeral, I said, "Have you read Confessions of a Funeral Director?" She said yes. I said, we need to talk about death more and our grief journeys after the deaths of our loved ones. She said, I agree. She said, I send out condolences and readings about the grief journey at the 3, 6 and 12 month anniversaries of the deaths of our clients' loved ones. Fantastic, I said. I said, I wish instead of Humboldt Strong, we could have held Humboldt Sad for at least 30 official days of mourning. We don't allow sad. We think we have to be strong and somehow by-pass the grief process. She said she thought so much of our addictions and anger were about our denial of our grief: grief suppressed that turns into depression and outward rage. I love Katrina Funk. She's going to do my funeral!

Tabitha's friends washed her and laid her out, a loving physical expression of touch and goodbye. Funerals are where we tend to the body of the one who has left it, where family members or community gather around the open casket at a viewing. Some families wash their loved ones now, or dress them, or build their caskets or fill in their graves as we did in the old days. Currently we pay others to do that for us but it may help our grieving process to do some of this ourselves and some funeral homes are willing to work with families in this way.

Again, Caleb Wiebe in Confessions of a Funeral Director describes how we care for ourselves in the deaths of our loved ones. He encourages death sabbaths, where families take a week after a death to not go to work or school and to focus on loss, tears, pain, needs, tiredness, silence, laughter, love and each other as a necessity of healthy self-care. We all grieve differently and there is no right or wrong way. What death asks of us is to pause. It doesn't tell us what we need to do when we pause because there may be nothing to do at all but it asks us to be in its presence. To sit with it. Listen to it. To embrace the death moment.

Death sits at the heart of what it means to be human and we may just find ourselves when we practice death sabbaths.

Tabitha's friends and family received their loved one back from the dead. Most of us will not. Most of us will walk around with holes in our hearts left by the deaths of our loved ones. We keep our loved ones alive in our thoughts and actions by active remembering - being intentional in remembering their death days as we would remember their birthdays and by telling the stories of their death even if they were difficult and sad just as we tell the stories of our children's births because these deaths and births are the most significant moments of the lives of the living. We remember our loved ones favourite foods and favourite activities. We wear their clothes and use their cookware and tools. We hopefully talk about them and use their names even though others may be reluctant to do so.

May we not be afraid to lean into what death and our loved ones who die teach us. Let death show you goodness. Let death break you open, not break you apart. Let death make you pause, and reflect, meditate and take inventory of your life. Let death show you what is good about your life in the here and now and appreciate that. Let us embrace the silence that death creates. Let death invite us to be more patient with our family members and ourselves and we learn, grow and overcome. Let us lean into our communities that surround us in death and appreciate our relationships in these times. Let us in death, find love for those we may otherwise dislike. Let us practice active remembering, acknowledging that the dead never truly leave those they loved. Let us embrace death, realizing that the closer we become to our mortality; the more we confront death, the more we can embrace life. Amen.