

Southminster Presbyterian Church 4/25/10 E-4 Good Shepherd

Acts 9:36-43

John 10:22-30

"Welcome Home"

Rev. Joseph Ripley

During this season of Easter we are exploring the question, "What does resurrection mean?" Last week we explored second chances: God's resurrected life is open to us the more we embrace it and are changed by it.

This morning I hear three messages for us:

1- As people of the resurrection, we believe that God is a living God, actively at work in our world. The story of Dorcas is making a clear statement: God's power, the exact same power that moved in Jesus' life, is still at work through the church. God's activity did not end with Jesus or Simon Peter, but is living still in you and I.

This story invites us to consider a broader question, How do we understand the miraculous events we read in the Bible?

Some people believe that all miracles have a completely rational explanation: something only seems miraculous because, way back then, their understanding of science or medicine was lacking. Other people see the wonders of the universe and conclude miracles are everywhere. Of course, this is true. Yet, some events in the Bible are written of as something particularly unique happened.

Still other people look at the miracles in the Bible and conclude that those were simply different times. God acted in different ways back then. In the same way, people no longer live 500 years, and rivers don't suddenly stop flowing, and a violent thunder storm is not immediately stilled with a word, even though these kinds of things used to happen.

But for me, none of these ways to understand miracles is satisfactory. I believe the Bible was written not to explain "facts" but reveal theological truths: about God and how God desires us to live. Therefore, changes in understanding do not alter their meaning. If people, or the world, or God, work profoundly differently now, then what happened long ago has absolutely no relevance today. Not on my life, my problems, or my faith. In this case, the stories of our faith become merely lesson in dead history.

However, I believe that God's intricately ordered world does work the same as it has always worked. And that the people of faith, struggle with the same issues. The story of the Bible, even from the beginning of Creation, is our story, too. In other words,

their experiences can help us, encourage us, and guide us today. "I'll live in you, if you live in me."

It is interesting to note that in John's gospel, Jesus' remarkable acts were called "signs." A sign is something to help us understand that the power at work in Jesus' life is none other than the very power of God. Jesus says, "God and I are one."

2- As people of the resurrection, we understand that God will help us do what seems impossible. Simon Peter did not know what he was up against before going to Joppa. Given what he was asked to do, that was probably a very good thing. We might want to know some specifics: where are we going ? how long is this going to take ? and perhaps most critically, what do you expect me to do ?

Perhaps if Peter had known they wanted him to raise Dorcas from death to life, he would not have gone. In the same way, the slaves in Egypt, as much as they wanted to be free from oppression and the pharaoh, might not have been willing to leave if they realized it meant wandering in a dry and thirsty land, needing to develop completely different rules for living together, trusting something they could not see. Crossing into the land of promise sounded wonderful, until the people of faith realized it meant they would face religious temptation and intense hostility from their new neighbors.

Jesus' apostles may have been unwilling to accept his invitation, if they had known the rejection, misunderstanding and hardships that lay ahead. I wonder what God is inviting us here at Southminster to do, that we are reluctant to start, because it seems unclear, or too difficult for us ? Could it be evaluating our daily thoughts and actions in light of our faith, to understand what is truly important in our lives ? Could it be the hard work of finding direction for our future ?

But just like Miriam and Moses, Joshua and Deborah, Mary and Peter, God will provide the resources we need. God is sufficient, and will never abandon us. We need to trust that God will guide us, and help us discover what needs to be done. This is not magic or wishful thinking, "God send more young families, with lots of children and plenty of money, to Southminster Presbyterian." Instead, the more we listen and discern what God is inviting us to do, no matter how impossible it seems, God will help us discover the resources and encouragement we need to move in that direction.

3- As people of the resurrection, we understand that God's invitation clearly includes, but is not limited, to us. Jesus understood that not everyone would believe. This doesn't seem to trouble him. Some who seem very unlikely candidates, hear. Dorcas is a Greek name, meaning she was a Gentile, not one of the people of faith. And this future saint of the church grew up in Joppa, meaning she was from another country: Samara.

So this person as a woman is already seen as a second-class citizen in the First Century. Not only a woman, a Gentile woman. And not only a Gentile woman, but a much-hated, religiously-questionable Samaritan. What does it mean, that Dorcas is not only included, but is used as a remarkable example and sign pointing to God's presence ? should we not remain open to those of other nations and other faith practices who may be "sheep belonging to other folds" ? After all, it is God who tunes their ears, as well as ours.

And for those who, for whatever reason, God has not equipped to recognize Jesus' voice ? I'd suggest we, like Jesus, not worry about them. Instead, let us worry about the log in our own eye, the brokenness in our lives, the sin in our own heart, and trust that God will use our example to draw those whom God has invited.

We have been adopted into God's family by our baptism, and invited to live as God's people sharing forgiveness and compassion, welcome and love, forbearance, reconciliation and hope to a world lost and struggling in desperate need. It seems we have enough to do.

As people of the resurrection we believe that God is alive and at work today, just as long ago, and as we learn the stories of our faith, we can learn about God and ourselves. As the resurrection seems impossible to our understanding, it serves as a symbol and reminder that God has always been in the business of the impossible. Creating hope out of despair, strength out of weakness, love out of hate, reconciliation out of enmity, life out of death. As people of the resurrection we are invited to share the joy we have discovered confident in our faith, not worrying about those not joining our dance.