

MORE NEW LIFE; ACTS 9:36-43, REVELATION 7:9-17; EASTER IV, APRIL 17, 2016; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Today's lesson from Acts depicts Easter, like June, busting out all over. That's the way it is with Easter and the fifty days following – new life everywhere, new life where you least expect it; like the greening of Buffalo's streets and yards this April.

The reading from Revelation – also an Easter text – is an answer to the question asked earlier in chapter six, "For the great day of wrath has come and who is able to stand?" To which today's reading in chapter seven replies, "The great multitude who have come through the ordeal, robed in white, washed clean by the blood of the Lamb, who fall upon their faces at the throne and worship God singing praise and blessing."

Both readings proclaim the victory of life over the realm of death. These were, then, and are now, proclamations that bring hope and strength to the marginalized and oppressed.

Here it is week four after Easter; part of me wonders if we can stand that much good news, that much new life. We live in a world accustomed to daily doses of bad news. Witness the presidential campaign – a circus of audacious, offensive pronouncements by those vying for the highest office in the land.

Or news from the international front – we see the headlines; we hear the drum beat of terrorism and violence, corruption and fraud.

So here we are for the forth Sunday in a row hearing how all those forces of darkness get defeated, one after the other; tamed, put in their place; defanged; negated; silenced.

This is news either too good to be true or so good it has to be true. The arch over this chancel depicts the implements of death used to kill the first Christian martyrs.

Consider, for just a moment, what they were thinking when Dr. Holmes proposed that those symbols hover over the chancel and communion table.

The audacity, the confidence to post the worst of the evildoers; as if to say "is that all you have?" Reigning over the communion table in a Roman arch joined at the peak – by a cross – where the sign of Caesar would appear. A cross, used to execute the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, the risen Christ. The cross, transformed into a symbol of life – his body and blood freely given; as if to say 'there no limits, qualifications or conditions on God's love; not even death can thwart, stop, or turn it back.'

Tabitha is the only female in the N.T. referred to as a disciple; her resurrection announces that the risen Christ is alive and at work in the ministry of the apostles.

Tabitha was a Dorothy Day of the Catholic Workers movement; or Mother Theresa, or Rosa Parks, poor herself, standing up for the poor and oppressed.

Her loss was the loss of a folk hero; a Roberto Clemente killed in a plane crash taking medical supplies to Nicaragua suffering from the devastation of a hurricane.

The raising of Tabitha is amazing in a patriarchal world; this story of a woman who is honored and remembered for her leadership and activism on behalf of others in need is a dramatic exception to all other historical records.

What sort of community is this that breaks barriers, where women lead, and where people are cared for who are not members of one's biological family? Something strange and out of the ordinary must account for such a countercultural community. We know by now, in Eastertide, this strange, out of the ordinary something must be named "resurrection."

Tabitha's ministry? She makes clothes for the poorest of the poor; caring for those whom no one else cares for – those who were invisible to the rest of society but who, to her, were God's suffering, precious children.

Imagine if you were one of those poor ones; you could not afford clothes or did not have adequate clothing. Reed Taylor's aunt Dorthea Lange, one of America's great photographers of the early 20th Century chronicled them – the rural poor during the Great Depression.

Or James Agee and Walker Evans' Depression era book, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, that depicts in words and pictures poor white southern share croppers, families with small children, all of them – adults and children dressed in tattered dirty rags.

Agee describes in his searing prose a typical 'family' as he came across them in his Alabama travels; "This family must take care of itself; it has no mother or father; there is no other shelter, nor resource, nor any love, interest, sustaining strength or comfort, so near, nor can anything happy or sorrowful that comes to anyone in this family possibly mean to those outside it what it means to those within it.

It is, as I have told, inconceivably lonely, drawn upon itself as tramps are drawn round a fire in the cruelest weather; and thus and in such loneliness it exists among other families, each of which is no less lonely, nor any less without help or comfort, and is likewise drawn in upon itself.

Such a family lasts, for a while: the children are held to a magnetic center: then in time the magnetism weakens, both of itself in its tiredness of aging and sorrow, and against the strength of the growth of each child and against the strength of pulls from outside and one by one the children are drawn away."ⁱ

Imagine what a Tabitha would mean to someone in that family, someone who provided you with new, fit, clean clothes and who understood your struggle and plight and took pains to reach out to and welcome and comfort you and members of your family; and imagine the impact of Tabitha's community of like-minded folk, caring for one another like family, sharing all they had, but not blood relations.

It would mean life where death was making its slow and inexorable claim. It would mean waking up into a new day of less loneliness, less hunger, less fear. Death is physical but it is spiritual too. The loss of hope and energy and resolve; the end of vision, dreams and laughter.

Tabitha and her community were vigilantes against the darkness.

Or the loss of trust and faith in the system; whether the health care system or educational system or economic system. We saw *The Big Short* a few nights ago – based on the true story of the 2007 fiscal crisis.

That's a loss of life and hope that we can relate directly to; 40% of this church's invested funds gone; a budget cutting process in the years following that mirrored the ones going on in many households in this community and across the nation. Lost jobs, lost retirement, lost dreams.

Yet the message today is that death does not have the final word. Peter's "Tabitha get up!" reminds us of the way Jesus evoked the dead Lazarus from his tomb. Surprise! Jesus' disciples have the same power over death Jesus has. If you thought Easter happened once back in April, think again. The Easter commotion continues.

A woman in a small town church hears a local politician rant about American Muslims and invoke his Christian faith to condemn them. She writes a letter to two Muslims in the company where she works. She expresses repulsion at the words of the politician and says she knows how they must feel when they see hateful jihadists on television using her beloved religion to justify terror and death.

Or perhaps you remember hearing about the group of church women in North Carolina these women wrote letters to mothers in Iraq, expressing their sorrow at our country's actions, showing concern for the suffering that Iraqi mothers and their children were going through. 'We have no idea what difference our letters will make, ' said one, "but we are convinced it's what Christ expects and if we do what we can do, he'll take our offering and do the rest."

Another group of women in an upstate county regularly take freshly baked chocolate chip cookies to the county jail, hand them to people incarcerated there and watch as those cookies are miraculously transformed into an overflowing of God's love and life even in that house of hate and death. Easter commotion, Tabitha is alive and well.

We'll talk this afternoon about the text from Revelation. Yet another biblical account of new life; the heavenly choir referred to in the reading we heard this morning; they sing God's praise and glory for these were the ones who were persecuted and martyred under the reign of terror presided over by the Roman emperor Nero.

Talk about losing faith in the system; talk about the forces of darkness having full sway over the circumstances of life. These Christians were driven under ground into the Roman catacombs. And yet, they surfaced to serve and care for the sick, the poor and the hopeless. To be Christian then was to be a martyred; that was the definition of faith.

The opening of the seven seals in the book of Revelation is nothing short of a final victorious shout of Alleluia in the closing pages of the bible's sixty-six books and six thousand year history from the call of Abraham to the ascension of Jesus. I hope you can join us this afternoon as we hear a nearly 100 voice choir sing the Easter claim to resurrected life.

In the meantime, here's the message this morning:
the test of the faith of our congregation is not how glorious and impressive a
service we had on Easter;
the test is what happens here in our church and here in our
community for the poor and outcast because of our witness to
resurrection, just four Sundays later. Amen.

ⁱ James Agee, *Now Let Us Praise Famous Men* (Houghton Mifflin: Boston: 1939) 50.