

Sermon: Real Life!
Easter 4 Cycle C (Good Shepherd Sunday)
Texts: Acts 9:36–43; Revelation 7:9–17; John 10:22–30

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Today is the Fourth Sunday *of* Easter, and I know you're excited. In a couple of months we'll have the Fourth Sunday *after* Pentecost. And if you're especially alert you may wonder what's the difference between "of" and "after." Well, the whole idea is that Easter is not just a one-day event that was over three weeks ago. Yes, all the rest of the world who were here that morning got what they came for, and went home again. But Christians are still celebrating, still believing, still excited that Jesus Christ is alive; it's *still* Easter; and we still have a reason to be here as a worshipping community, Amen?

I'm not sure where I'm going this morning, but I will gladly tell you where my jumping-off place is. This is one of those "back story" sermons, I guess. And my starting place is the fact that Jesus is alive, not just on Easter morning long ago, but in our world and our church *now*. What good would it be—and who would care—if Jesus were really alive, but his people are dead?

That's what it really comes down to, doesn't it? The world will never know, and will never care, that Jesus Christ lives, if we remain asleep, lifeless, without animation, without breath, without purpose as his disciples.

In the readings appointed for this Sunday, we have living proof that Christ's people are alive. Tabitha, also known by her Greek name Dorcas, was living evidence of the power of Jesus Christ in her life. And when she became ill and died, her people didn't just grieve and cry. They said "no!" to her death because her faith, her good deeds of charity, had made their faith alive.

When I read this story I remember dear Esther, who was *that kind* of an alive lady in the church I served more than 20 years ago. Esther sewed and sewed, using an old treadle sewing machine, the kind you had to pump to make it stitch. Esther ran a sewing circle of Lutheran woman who gathered every Wednesday in the church Library to sew quilts to send through Lutheran World Relief overseas. Every year they made about 100 quilts, so you know they didn't just sit and drink coffee. Two a week. And one day, another of the woman said to me on the side, "Pastor, when Esther dies we are going to quit because we're getting tired of this hard work." That sounds like an awful thing to say, but Esther was 95!— and she was the one who pushed the other women to get out of themselves and to serve others! Esther was living her faith, and Esther's living faith that came through her fingers and her pins and quilts and stitches were all the proof people needed that Jesus is alive in our world.

So when I read of Tabitha I know what those women felt. Tabitha was the heartbeat of their community, and they didn't sit and moan and grieve. They immediately sent for Peter, who was staying in the next town over and said "You must come to us *without delay*." The power of the Resurrection is the faith that no Christian, not even the dead, should take it lying down. When Jesus lives, we live. When Jesus rose, we rise. Did this actually happen as it's told here? I don't know. Maybe she was in a coma, maybe she was at death's door, and the Apostle's faith and power brought her back. But is this relevant to what it means to be a believing, praying, acting, sewing, doing, sharing Christian? Yes, by God. Yes, by the power of God!!

In the Reading from that mysterious last book of the New Testament, the Revelation of John, we are "peeking in" on John's heavenly vision. It is the passage *immediately after* the famous one where 144,000 virgins are "sealed"—that passage that Jehovah's Witnesses love to think proves that they know everything about the Bible and that only a select number of them are going to go to heaven.

But in this passage, John writes, “After this I looked, and there was a *great multitude* that *no one could count*” and it was utterly inclusive—did you notice that?—“from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages standing before the Lamb.”

The other night at our Bible study on the Gospel of John, chapter 4, we saw Jesus having a *fine dialogue* with a Samaritan woman at the well, a woman who must’ve had *some* reputation ~ five times divorced *and* sleeping with a man who was not *her* husband. But the remarkable thing there (*talk about inclusive!*) is that she was an outsider, a foreigner, a Samaritan that good, religious Jews would normally have nothing to do with. *Nothing, especially* not share the same drinking cup at the community drinking fountain. That passage, my friends, is *all* about racism and how Jesus breaks it, cracks it, ends it. His living community is *all-inclusive*, and if anyone doubts it, you just turn to Revelation 7, right here, and you read them these living words: the *great multitude* that *no one could count* in heaven comes *from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages standing before the Lamb*. So if heaven is *integrated*, we may as well “get over” all our yes-buts and if-only’s down here. Jesus is living, and all people living can come to him and find life and be alive in our great, big, diverse, many-colored world.

But again, we often miss what’s happening in the Bible because we only get little bits and pieces on Sunday morning. If we haven’t looked carefully at this last book of the New Testament, we forget that the scenes John describes are *in heaven*, the place we think that all the good *dead people* go. We forget to realize that in his vision, John sees God’s people *very much alive*, and praising and blessing and glorifying the Lamb on the Throne. John tells us all this stuff, *not* because those people in heaven are dead, but because he thinks *we are*, and we ought to be *as alive* as the people he describes.

Even more, we ought to connect the dots here. John goes on to describe the great multitude of saints this way: “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb,” and “the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

The man who had this heavenly vision understood, and deeply felt, what he was talking about. Scholars call him John of Patmos because we don’t have his biography. But he tells us in his book “I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.” What’s that about? John was a prisoner, an exile, who had been sent to a desert island, not much more than a desolate rock like Alcatraz only without the cooling fog of San Francisco Bay. Patmos literally means “my killing” because prisoners sent there were virtually dead to the rest of the world. John knew what hunger and thirst and scorching heatstroke were about. He knew what having no shelter was about. He knew what imprisonment meant: it meant abandonment and death.

We don’t know how he got his vision, his letter, to the outside world. But we know prisoners today who are locked up, imprisoned, forgotten, dead to the outside world, who manage to get letters out to us if only we remember to send them the paper and the stamps. Our living faith to reach out to people serving time in a prison is our insistence that, No, they are not dead, they are very much alive, and when they are released, we will help them reclaim their lives and rebuild their lives as living witnesses of the power of Jesus to change lives, redeem lives, and empower lives. Amen?

Prison is not the only death, my friends, that living Christians can do something about. People who have been “sucked under” by life circumstances, by failures, by addiction to drugs and alcohol, all can suffer a living death. And our society (—you know, I talk a lot about our society, and how it is oriented to success and power and money and fame and glamor; our society is an easy

target because its excesses are so blatant and so deadly—) and our society simply *writes off, ignores, kills people* that it doesn't want or thinks it doesn't need to be successful or powerful or rich or glamorous. Our society forgets the homeless and the hungry; it ignores the addict and the loser and the lost; it gets angry about the immigrant and the foreigner and people who don't look like they were born here; it cries big tears about abortions but does little for unwanted children and orphans; it wants to forget that people get old and need help and compassion and shelter and refreshment.

If—and this is where the Christian rubber hits the road of this world—if we are following a living Christ, then we are going in the opposite direction of our society. Our society leads to death: it exploits and uses up and discards millions of people, but the people of God are here with a living faith for one purpose, my friends: to give the life back to those people, the power of life God gives to all in Jesus Christ, Amen?

Today is called Good Shepherd Sunday. Every year on this Fourth Sunday of Easter in that funny Christian Calendar, there is a reading about Jesus as the Good Shepherd, the one who *takes the place of the sheep*, who becomes the Lamb of God and lays down his life for the sheep, so that they might live!

In today's Gospel Reading, the super-religious folks of Jesus' day wanted proof or documentation, or some clear evidence whether or not he was actually the Messiah. "If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly," they said. It couldn't be more plain, he told them, if you pay attention. "The works that I do *in my Father's name* testify to me," he said. If somebody comes along and heals and helps and feeds and care and brings people back to life *in the Name of God*, that should plainly tell us that God is alive in that person, .. ya think? But "you do not believe," he says. Today we'd probably say, "You don't get it" because you aren't really God's people, the sheep of his pasture. For the sheep of God's pasture know the voice of Jesus. They know the power of God in Jesus Christ. They know that he lives and that because of him they live and nobody can change that or stop it or bring it to an end. "No one will snatch them out of *my* hand," he says, because they belong to him. And these are the ones—ordinary people who have lived through the "great ordeal" and suffered the pain and the loss and the heatstroke and prejudice, persecution and even hatred—these are the ones who are most aware that Jesus lives, because he lives *through them*.

Are you with us, my friends? Are you living? Do you get it? Do you see and feel and know the power of life that God gives us through Jesus simply by trusting his goodness and staying connected to his flock? This isn't really about the "*after life*", the life someday, but God's life living in us today, here and now. That's what we have in the Easter faith: the power to really live *in him*, and for him, so that his gift of life might be given away to that great multitude *through us*. Amen?

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