

4 Easter C - 28 April 2010  
Acts 9:36-43; Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30  
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A story is told of a law firm. The Houston headquarters has just opened up a new set of offices here in Austin. The head office sends over flowers; and when the Austin office receives them, they cannot help but notice the ribbon attached to the arrangement. It reads, "With Deepest Sympathies." The Austin folks call the home office to thank them for the flowers. And they just happen to mention their curiosity about the ribbon. "It had to be a mistake at the florist," comes the reply. And it is a topic of mild amusement as people at both offices wonder together what might have happened on the other end of this mistake.

"With Deepest Sympathies." There are times in the life of most any Christian, and of most any community of Christians, when he or she or they will face the challenges and grief presented by the death of someone whom they love. This community of ECR has experienced something of this recently. Beloved members of this community, and beloved family of members of this community, three people have died in relatively quick succession to one another. The families and close friends of each of these dear ones so recently departed know these losses in ways very personal and acute. Meanwhile, the rest of us, knowing that the families suffer in a particular and acute way, are all the more confronted with the challenges presented by these losses that we experience in our individual lives and in the collective life of our community.

And this is as it should be. It is important to recognize that the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is God's response to the challenges presented by death. God never claims, nor should the Church, that Jesus' resurrection eliminates these challenges from the lives of Christians. From the beginning, these very challenges are present in the Christian community. And despite its sensational aspects, today's first reading confirms that this is so.

I once knew a fellow who was fascinated with the depictions in scripture of the miracles of Jesus and the disciples. I suppose there is for most Christians, including most Episcopalians, a fascination with the miraculous expressions of Jesus' ministry and of his deity. I think, though, that this fellow of whom I speak was more

fascinated than most. I recall that those of us who knew this fellow came to be convinced that he would never be satisfied in his own ministry unless and until he literally raised someone from the dead.

In this reading from the Book of Acts, Peter raises a fellow disciple of Jesus from the dead. Tabitha, also known as Dorcas, has been in her life a charitable person, 'devoted to good works and acts of charity,' as the scripture puts it. Dorcas was a tailor and seamstress of a kind, having created clothing and, presumably, she used these in her acts of Christ-like generosity and good will. That Peter raises her from death is sensational. There is no question. In fact, it is so sensational that it captures the attention of many people around this community of Christians in their day. And some of them, based on the news of what Peter has done, decide to become fellow Christians along with the risen Dorcas and her fellow disciples of Jesus.

So, if we are looking for a formula for numerical growth of the Christian community, here is a sensational one. And if this sounds like I am making too light of the gravity of death and dying, then please know that my intention is to suggest quite the opposite. My suggestion is that interpreting the sensationalism of such miraculous doings as Peter's ministry with Dorcas as though they are the Christian norm, or are God's expectations for every Christian individually, and for every community of Christians, takes too lightly both the gravity and the blessing of so-called "ordinary" daily life itself, both in this age and in the age to come.

Objectively speaking, ordinary Christian life is not, sensational. At least not until one compares what is ordinary among the community of Jesus' disciples with what is ordinary among those that are not. Then, perhaps, the differences between the two may well suggest some distinctions that, if not sensational, are at least significant, and blessedly so. Ordinary daily Christian life for the community around Dorcas does not involve their expecting Peter to show up and raise their friend from death to life. Ordinary daily life for her Christian community means grieving their loss of their friend and fellow disciple of Jesus. It means facing the challenge of her death with a

call to fellow Christians, with a reaching out to Peter, since they hear that he is staying nearby, so the he might come and weep with them; so that they might share with him their memory of her presence with them, and might show him the witness and gift of the life of this beloved one with them for too short a time.

The ordinary life of the ordinary Christian community is the simultaneous grieving of their loss, our loss, and the celebrating of the presence of those we love, God willing, among that 'great multitude,' as John puts it in the Book of the Revelation, who are in nearer clearer proximity to God praising God with a joy that the rest of us can barely imagine.

Nobel laureate, early 20<sup>th</sup> century poet and author, Rabindranath Tagore wrote that, "Faith is the bird that feels the light when the dawn is still dark." and, that "Death is not extinguishing the light; it is...putting out the lamp because the dawn has come." What Jesus tells his disciples, and what he is likely reminding them now after his resurrection, is that the people who know him are those whose faith hears his voice. They are those who recognize his voice, if not always his name. Though we Christians do well to revere the name in song and prayer, we do well also to recognize the plain fact that in the wider community into which we Christians are called to go, there is nothing inherently sensational, nor even broadly common, about this name of Jesus.

And for some people in the world around us, the name of Jesus has been used in such a way that it brings to them memories of hurt, of abuse, of judgment and condemnation, so that the name itself is almost an obstacle now in the lives of some people to their relationship with God's Love for them given in the person of Christ. Maybe this is why Jesus tells his disciples, and likely now reminds them, 'My people hear my voice, and I know them.' Do the disciples hear the distinction? Do we?

'Even if they do not yet know me, I know them. It is my works,' he says, 'that they know. If they do not me in person, yet, they know me in principle,' he is saying. 'They know and they honor the virtues of honor, of truth, of integrity. They long for love, and they give love to others. And, if not in such terms,' Jesus says, 'yet these whom I know as my own are people who know these things to be holy.'

And it such as these who will come when they hear the voice of Jesus. Yes, they will come when they, like others, hear it of it in the exciting and the sensational. But more important, these are the folks who will remain because they hear, or they know, God is speaking to them in the ordinary.

The law offices in Houston and in Austin know that an ordinary mistake had been made. Someone called the florist. "Those flowers you sent over to our new Austin branch were beautiful," they tell the florist. "But the ribbon you attached read, 'With Deepest Sympathies.'" "Oh no!" cries the florist. "You're right. This was quite a mistake. Not only did you get the wrong ribbon," the florist says; "this means that the flowers that we sent over to the funeral arrived with the message, 'Congratulations on your new location.'"

Ordinarily, if they were here with us, Hazel, Annette, and, I think Matthew, too, and all those now largely lost to us, would be smiling along with us. The extraordinary thing is, in a quietly sensational way, they are. In you, in me, in us together, they heard those principles that could be given voice best and only by the voice of the Love of God. And we heard Jesus in them. In those whom they loved dearly, we still do.

In the ordinary work and prayer of this community, their community, our community, we continue speaking what we first heard others speaking to us. And In the sensational celebration of new life in Christ recently begun by a number of young ones here at ECR, and purposely laid claim to here by a number of others, we continue speaking. We speak of this community that faces together the challenges of ordinary life. And we speak of this community who listens to it in one another and in wider community around us: the voice of Christ Jesus. We speak of an extraordinary community who follows that voice to the blessings of an extraordinary life that is ours together both now and for ever.

And so may Almighty God, whose beloved Son gave himself for the world, so inspire our witness in deed and word, so that more may come to know the reach of his saving embrace; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with the Father and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, One God, always and evermore. Amen.