

Safe Hands

St Leonard's Denmark, Alison Kershaw

Fourth Sunday of Easter, 11th May 2025

Acts 9.36-43, Psalm 23, Revelation 7.9-17, John 10.22-30

Through the written word and the spoken word may we know your Living Word, Jesus Christ our Saviour, Amen

Themes of shelter, blessing, guidance, and life – life restored, overflowing and eternal - are woven through today's texts. We have the familiar and comforting words of Psalm 23 The Lord is my shepherd – so often sung at funerals as it speaks of the perils and joys of life's journey and beyond. We have the strange cosmic vision from Revelation of the Lamb on the throne, who paradoxically is also the shepherd of the multitude who have come through the "great ordeal" to a place of safety and plenty. This is also a text that is commonly read at funerals – those times when we consider the whole arc and mystery of existence. And we have Jesus once again confounding his inquisitors who demand answers but have no ears to hear, or eyes to see, the answer. To those who are open to hearing their shepherd's voice, however, is given the sanctuary of being held forever in God's strong hand. "No-one," said Jesus, "will snatch" my followers "out of my hand" or "the Father's hand. The Father and I are one." (John 10.29-30)

There is much here to give us strength and hope as we navigate our troubled war torn, rapidly heating world – or in the great tests and ordeals of our own lives and hearts – through experiences of illness and depression, grief, conflict, and heartaches and dilemmas of all kinds. How we long to be led gently to a safe place of soft grass, sheltered by dappled shade, and refreshed by a quietly flowing stream. How we long for someone to wipe away our tears or hold us so close that nothing can snatch us away.

It is out of the heart of these yearnings that we might hear Luke's account in Acts of Peter raising Tabitha from death. Both Tabitha and Peter are among the sheep that have heard the voice of the risen Christ and followed him. This takes place in the early days of the church: "Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha which in Greek is Dorcas." Tabitha, in Aramaic, the language spoken by Jesus, or Dorcas, or Tabita in Hebrew was a common name and may be incidental, but somehow it is an endearing detail that it means gazelle, doe or young deer – a graceful creature with large dark eyes symbolizing in the Hebrew Bible lightness of foot and speed (2 Samuel 2 v 18; 1 Chronicles 12 v 8), and the beauty of a lover (Proverbs 5 v 19; Song of songs 4 v 5; 7 v 3).

We also learn that she was "devoted to good works and acts of charity" That such a darting, lively, bright eyed, and kind-hearted one should be cut down by illness is a great grief to her friends who attend to her stilled body – washing her and laying her in a room upstairs, instead of burying her or placing her in a tomb. Tabitha is clearly esteemed by the other disciples who cannot accept her loss – who out of love for her and the strength of their belief, send for Peter to come without delay.

We then glean a few more details about Tabitha / Dorcas – "All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other items of clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them." We might infer that she was also a widow and earned a living with her needle. (This association explains the vintage Dorcas brand of dressmaking pins – remember the blue tins? And Dorcas sewing charities in the 19th century and beyond) I find it moving that they show these clothes to Peter – is it because they carry a trace of her presence – something of her character in the skillful way they were made or embellished, or told a story of her hard-working existence as a widow? The effect is to make us reflect on the material life of this woman from so long ago – the small but eloquent particulars of her life. Perhaps Peter intuits the life force of the woman by touching these cloths - perhaps he was moved as he did so, perhaps, in an echo of Jesus weeping before raising Lazarus, this is to indicate that such miracles are not mechanical in nature but of the heart and spirit.

Peter then kneels and prays beside her. "He turned to the body and said 'Tabitha, get up' – echoing another act of Jesus in bringing a girl back to life (recorded in Mark 5) with the similar sounding words 'Talitha com' (meaning 'Little girl arise' in Aramaic). Then she opens, we might imagine, those large dark eyes and sees Peter. In another small but eloquent detail "He gave her his hand and helped her up." In this holding of hands, I see us being called more deeply into the resurrection experience. Jesus raised Lazarus and a little girl from death, and himself rose

after three days in a tomb, but resurrection does not end with this – the spirit of the risen Christ is with us. So here, in this post-Easter story, a follower is raised by Peter, a fellow mortal. “Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive” – the raising of Tabitha takes place in a domestic setting among companion disciples or saints as all Christians are called in the New Testament. Our lives are witnessed, supported, and celebrated in communion with others. They can also be transformed.

Now Luke may be describing an age of miracles – or the legends that spoke to the powerful movement of the early church – but what can we, at this point in time or at this point in our lives, glean from this beautiful account of Tabitha being made alive? No matter how fervent our belief in healing, resurrection in this literal form is not something we now expect to happen beyond skillful CPR. Yet the story of a woman, a young widow and seamstress, coming back to life gives us not fanciful, but real hope.

We can come alive in so many ways, even after prolonged periods of numbness or despondency. New life can still spring up in defiance of desolation and loss. Depleted lands can come alive. Peace can come alive in warring hearts. Things that seem utterly broken can be restored to wholeness. As I say these things, however, I am painfully aware that such rhetoric can sound a little hollow in the face of the piles of rubble, massive death tolls, and ecological collapse, or in the face of great personal grief and pain. It’s important to not gloss over all this with bland statements because for so many people there has been no rising – and tender new shoots have not taken root in their lifetime.

At this point, we might take another glib turn and start talking about escaping all this death and disaster in heavenly places. This runs the risk of talking and acting as if this life did not matter very much at all because we are destined for a better place hereafter. But our treasured stories of incarnation and resurrection, so detailed in the material particulars of times and places, people’s names, wounds, tears, sewn garments, and open hands - tell us differently. This place, this earth, this human life is not just preamble – it is where human and eternal life intersect – it is where each of us, whether broken or whole, full of despair or hope, are held in divine and loving and sheltering hands that will not let us be snatched away. And, if we can hear and see and believe, the spirit of life is also in our hands as we hold the hands of others and help them to their feet.

Let us pray:

Eternal God,
from whose gentle hands none can snatch us away:
give us faith to believe that we are known and loved
with a passion strong enough to bring the whole world back to you;
through Jesus Christ, who is one with the source of life. Amen

Prayers for an Inclusive Church, Stephen Shakespeare, 2008