A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

*“Being and Belonging”*

Acts 9.36-43

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The death of Tabitha is unique in the book of Acts and the stories of the early church. It occupies a hugely important, though perhaps overlooked, role in the unfolding story of the church’s life. We don’t know anything else about this woman, though obviously people around her knew her very well.

It’s not that death was unusual in Acts. Even for those in the generation of Christ’s resurrection and ascension, there was death. In Acts 1, Judas dies a gruesome death. In chapter 4, Ananias and Sapphira are struck down for their lies to the church. In Acts 7, Stephen dies by stoning as the first Christian martyr, dying for his witness to Christ. In chapter 12, James the brother of Jesus is slain with the sword by Herod, who himself dies horribly in the same chapter. Death is all over in the stories of the early church. Not one story of a baby born, unless you count the church’s birth, or count the thousands of baptisms as rebirths, but many stories of death.

Tabitha’s death was unusual though just in the way it was not unusual. “She became ill and died.” This is the usual way people die. We grow ill, and we die, of something, sometime. Tabitha’s death was a natural death; she’s the only one in the book of Acts who dies in this way. She’s unusual in some other ways as well. She’s called a disciple, the only woman so designated in Acts. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity, which may not be unique, other people did the same, but it was at least notable, and it made a difference in the lives of others. She was loved.

That’s the poignant aspect of her death that we’re struck with when reading her story. She was loved. At her death, her friends cared for her body, washed her, and prepared her for burial. They took her to an upper room where they kept vigil in remembrance of her. They called for Peter who happened to be nearby. They wept over her and showed Peter all that Tabitha had done for them, the clothes she made for them with her own hands. She loved. And she was loved. Fiercely.

Who have you wept for like this? Like they wept for Tabitha. Tabitha’s death and the mourning of her friends brings to mind a grief that strikes everyone at some time. We love. We lose. We grieve. This grief is holy. For whom have you felt the agony of loss, the pain of separation, the loss of someone who meant this much to you?

The author Matthew Salesses wrote recently about his wife’s death. “This summer, when my wife died, I held her lifeless hand and thought: *Let me go back just one minute*. I thought:*Don’t leave me yet. Stay here . . .* A *moment* is all that stands between life and death. Time was the only distance; life felt *close by*. <https://longreads.com/2019/04/22/to-grieve-is-to-carry-another-time/amp/?__twitter_impression=true>

He expresses what broken hearts feel for mothers and fathers, for loved ones and friends, for people you never knew, but you felt like they knew you just by the words they used and lives they lived. You carry grief for them as witness to your love. Grief is not immutable, it changes with time, but grief becomes a house-guest, welcome or not, that never really leaves. On the fabulously underrated comedy show The Good Place, Eleanor confront her tormentor/ (slash) guide to the afterlife Michael in a moment of his crisis: “Do you know what's really happening right now?” She asks. “You’re learning what it is like to be human. All humans are aware of death. So... we're all a little bit sad.” “I don’t like that,” Michael responds. “Well, yeah, but we don't get offered any other deals. And if you try to ignore your sadness, it just ends up leaking out of you anyway. I've been there - everybody's been there. So, don't fight it.”

Today is a day when we might be thinking about love and loss, not just because it’s a Sunday in Easter season or about Tabitha, but about Mother’s Day for some people and for recent losses for many people. Besides what is most personal and poignant in any of our lives, many are mourning the deaths of author Rachel Held Evans and founder of L’Arche Communities Jean Vanier this week. I am sure these two deaths have touched the lives of many people among us. Rachel was a witty, earnest voice that spoke for some and challenged everyone, but her shocking death at age 37 is mourned by both her friends and interlocutors. Of her, Beth Moore said straightaways, “In an era of gross hypocrisy, she was alarmingly honest.”

A friend of hers wrote, “The public legacy that Rachel leaves is the gift of seeing a 2000-year-old religion with fresh eyes. She did not fall prey to the cynicism that beleaguers so many former evangelicals when their faith changes. Instead she cultivated hope. “Cynicism may help us create simpler story lines with good guys and bad guys,” she wrote in her book *Searching for Sunday*, “but it doesn’t make us any better at telling the truth, which is that most of us are a frightening mix of good and evil, sinner and saint.” <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/lauraturner/rachel-held-evans-death-doubt-evangelical-christianity>

Christians are also mourning the death of Jean Vanier, who also died this week at age 90. Vanier may be a mixture of sinner and saint, but dare anyone to find the sinner, but him who likely would be humble enough to never consider himself a saint. Everyone else did. Vanier as a young man, in 1964, learned what many people with disabilities suffer in psychiatric hospitals and other institutional settings. He bought a small, dilapidated house outside of Paris and invited two people with severe intellectual disabilities to live with him. Vanier said, “Essentially they wanted a friend; they were not very interested in my knowledge or my ability to do things, but rather they needed my heart and my being.”

He had no real plan, just a Christian anthropology that was more than for a class essay. He believed every human had sacred dignity, created in God’s image, and is worthy to be loved and shown compassion. Vanier lived out this belief in hope for all people. From his little house outside of Paris where three people lived, now over 10,000 people live together in more than 150 L’Arche Homes*. L’Arche* means Ark in French, and Vanier was its Noah, guiding the movement of able-bodied men and women coming to live with those with severe challenges, sharing life together in mutual love.

Vanier, who always had a little hunch to his back looked like he was bowing before everyone he met, once wrote, “If we deny our weakness and the reality of death, if we want to be powerful and strong always, we deny a part of our being, we live an illusion. To be human is to accept who we are, this mixture of strength and weakness. To be human is to accept and love others just as they are. To be human is to be bonded together, each with our weakness and strengths, because we need each other. Weakness, recognized, accepted, and offered, is at the heart of belonging.”

Both are dead now, Evans and Vanier, and so many others. Many are huddled around these two deathbeds in vigil this week, remembering their lives and their witness. And you may very well have someone else you’re mourning today, remembering and for whom you are giving thanks. You are not alone.

I have no idea what Tabitha’s friends thought they were doing when they summoned Peter to come quickly to Joppa. But wouldn’t you? Peter was already recognized as the leader of the church of Jesus Christ. He had a power in him you wouldn’t have suspected if you’d known him earlier, but something changed in him, or opened up in him after the death and resurrection of Jesus. The aperture of his spiritual power opened wide enough that Peter’s shadow passing by could heal you, and Peter’s word spoken was enough to bring life or bring death.

Until this time, Peter had never travelled so far. Here and there he went, and along the way, he wandered a long way from Judea, Jerusalem, and home base for the church. He was in Lydda, where he healed a paralyzed bed ridden man named Aeneaus. A short distance away in Joppa, the women hear Peter’s in the area and call him to come: “Come quickly. Do not delay.” What did they think was going to happen?

Peter comes to Joppa. The seaside port town was as far as he has ever been and as far as he can go without walking on water. Joppa is on the edge, geographically, culturally, spiritually, metaphorically. It’s on the ocean, it’s a mixture of Jewish, Greek, and Roman. Peter’s on the edge now too, in Joppa, in this upper room with these women and the body of Tabitha. It’s one thing, I suppose, to heal like Jesus. But to raise the dead like Jesus? But Peter had seen this before. This whole scene must have felt like déjà vu. Upper room, mourners, someone’s daughter lying dead. Back then it was Jairus daughter with Jesus praying over her and raising her to life. Now it is Tabitha, on the edge of empire, overlooking the sea and the unknown. He sent the women out of the room and knelt to pray. What did Peter think was going to happen?

“Death is a thing empires worry about, not a thing resurrection people worry about,” Rachel Held Evans said. “As long as there’s somebody baptizing sinners, breaking the bread, drinking the wine; as long as there’s people confessing their sins, healing, walking with one another through suffering, then the Church is alive, and it’s well.” <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/05/rachel-held-evans-death-progressive-christianity/588784/>

Still, though, what did Peter *really* think was going to happen? Did he not know what we have learned: not all prayers get answered in the way we want them to be, and you can’t go back in time? Maybe he knew what we don’t know. Maybe by this point, after everything he’d seen, he would cease to be shocked at almost anything, though God wasn’t done yet surprising him by grace.

What I do know is this. We should have never gotten this far in the story. Acts could have ended a few verses earlier, and this would have been a whole lot simpler. Even though this is a raising of the dead story, this is not even the most well-known story in Acts 9. The most well-known story in Acts 9, perhaps in the whole book of Acts, and in most of the Bible, is the story of Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus. That’s in this chapter, just before Aenaus and Tabitha, and just about as unlikely, maybe even more so than a raising from the dead. We’ve seen life from death before. We’ve never seen someone like Paul converted before. But he was. Which, as it happened, made a mess of everything. He who was hunting Christians, now is one of them. And those who used to be his friends are now hunting him. He escapes from Damascus in a basket lowered over the city walls at night and Paul’s reign of terror was over.

Then there’s this verse (9.31) that sure looks like it’s the end of the story: “So, the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.”

That’s a great ending to a great origin story for the church. The fire-breathing persecutor was changed and welcomed in to his new family and everyone lived happily ever after. The end.

If you wanted to put an epilogue on the story, the two stories of Peter’s healing Aenaues and raising Tabitha would be nice. Then, then end. The end of the story with the church at peace, being built up, multiplying, all in the comfort of the Comforter, the Holy Spirit.” It’s a beautiful story. After 9 chapters of convulsing, chaotic growth and challenge, the church finds a steady-state and stays there, comforted, peaceful, growing.

But the story doesn’t end there. We still have a lot left: visions of unclean animals, arrivals of unexpected visitors and the mission to the Gentiles. We have left a Jerusalem council to try to sort out disputes about what God actually intended in Jesus. We still have left missionary journeys, storms, shipwrecks, and miracles; we have arrests and prisons, martyrdoms, and missionary journeys to the very ends of the earth. We have a story that will demand and capture every fiber of every being of everyone who takes part of it from their lives unto their deaths and the hope of life that remains after their death.

Tabitha’s death serves as a reminded that nothing stays the same. Something is born. Something dies. But in God’s grace, something rises. Time keeps moving and people keep changing and times keep changing. Tabitha’s death is more than a poignant moment of empathy. It’s place in the telling of Acts is the sign of an ending of a chapter. And her raising from the dead by Peter is the sign of the beginning of a new one. The first chapter of the church’s life now rests in peace. The next chapter in the church’s life is about to be born. The first chapter was born in (Jewish) Jerusalem in an upper room at Pentecost. The second chapter is about to be born in an upper room way out in Joppa, in an upper room overlooking the distant horizon on the sea.

Jean Vanier wrote with timeless wisdom for then and for us now: “But let us not put our sights too high. We do not have to be saviors of the world! We are simply human beings, enfolded in weakness and in hope, called together to change our world one heart at a time.” *Becoming Human*

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