

Life-Giving Acts

Acts 9:36-43

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*Fill us with your Spirit, O God,
and help us serve our neighbors through life-giving words and deeds,
to the glory of your name. Amen.*

In the Easter season, the great fifty days between Easter Day and Pentecost, we talk frequently of new life – the new life that Jesus experienced in the Resurrection, the new life the community of apostles experienced as they experienced and shared the good news, and the new life we are promised as his followers.

New life. It just fits with spring, and it sounds good at any stage of life. A new beginning, a second (or seventh) chance. We want new life to be breathed into us, into our daily existence, into our world. And certainly God promises us this. But God also calls us to be a part of that transformation, that good news, that something new. God calls us not just to believe, and not just to talk, but to do. To perform life-giving acts in service to those around us and to God's glory.

Life-giving. What is life-giving? Sometimes when my colleagues and I try to discern what is right in a given situation, we ask ourselves and sometimes each other – is it life-giving? By this we mean, does the thought or doing of it bring a positive energy? Are we excited and enthusiastic about the process? Will it bring hope, or joy, or good news, or consolation to me or someone else? This is one piece of discernment – that which is faithful is life-giving. It might be hard, or thankless, or demand a sacrifice. It might call upon our best effort, or be natural and easy and almost unnoticeable. But does it bring life?

The writers of our Seasons of the Spirit curriculum which we use in church school, title this session "Life-giving Acts." It focuses on the passage we hear from the Acts of the Apostles, about Tabitha, also called Dorcas, who ministered lovingly to the poor widows in her community. When she dies, her friends and neighbors are very upset. They do their regular mourning and grieving things, and they send for fellow disciple Peter, who travels to be with them. Peter calls upon

God to heal Tabitha, and she is brought back to life, much as Jesus was able to raise Jairus' daughter – in fact much of the language and imagery is the same. So this miracle story echoes the miracle stories of Jesus, reminding and celebrating the fact that this was done in the name of Jesus and by his power.

Of course, this is an amazing story – even difficult to believe. And it raises so many questions about God's power, and Peter's too, and when people come back from the dead and when they don't and why. But the curriculum writers remind us that the reason this story is important to the Christian community is because it testifies to the life-giving acts of both Tabitha and Peter. Yes, it is a miracle story, told to give God praise. But it also speaks of the power of the life-giving acts of the apostles – those who ministered in Jesus' name all across the countryside. It speaks of action and compassion. It speaks of ministry. Jesus had a ministry. Tabitha had a ministry, Peter had a ministry, and you and I have ministry to do.

This theme of faithful acts of disciples is echoed in the Gospel reading we hear today. In the Gospel according to John, we hear a lot about Jesus being the Good Shepherd. Often this is viewed as some sort of theoretical metaphor – some imagery to describe some attribute of Jesus. But in the passage we hear today, it is to make a point. The point is one of action – when asked to state clearly that he is the Messiah, Jesus says, “The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me.” He is saying, “If you want to know who I am, look at what I do.” Actions speak louder than words. Jesus is as Jesus does. Then he goes further to describe his “sheep” as those who follow him. A disciple is as a disciple does. It is not enough to claim to follow Jesus, one must actually get up and go and do it. It is not enough to claim to be a Christian; one must act upon their faith. Life-giving acts of courage and compassion. Acts which in their very action spread the good news and bring comfort and healing. Acts which continue the ministry of Jesus. Acts which make a difference.

The crafters and revisers of the lectionary – the assignment of scripture readings for each week in church – they were very smart indeed to have us read from the Acts of the Apostles during this Easter season. The book of Acts helps us move from theoretical considerations of resurrection and new life into the real world of acts and deeds. Jesus has been resurrected – so what? People claim to

believe, now what? The Acts of the Apostles raises the So What and Now What questions for us, even as they tell the story of how the first Christians responded to these questions. As we hear the stories of Peter and Tabitha, Paul and Silas, Philip and the Ethiopian, we consider the ways in which we are called to act in response. What life-giving acts are you called to perform in response to the Good News of Easter? How is your life lived in response to the questions of “So What?” and “Now What?” What ministry is God calling you into now, today?

Sarah Miles, author of “Take This Bread,” and “Jesus Freak,” tells it like it is. She reminds us “It might be comforting, to those Christians who doubt the current indwelling of the Holy Spirit in our damaged, compromised selves, to tell ourselves our failures are because Jesus is now far, far away....it might be reassuring, she says, That we can’t do much anymore about our lives, or the lives of other people, except gaze at the sky and pray to a disembodied spirit....But Jesus is right here with me and the crazy guy: the lowly and unprepared, as the prophets foretold. Among the weak, faithless, and doubting, as his disciples proved, then and now. He doesn’t look for the most “religious,” the most doctrinally correct, or, for that matter, the smartest of his beloved people to build his Kingdom, but hands over authority to anyone willing to suspend self-doubt, and simply trust Jesus’ faith in us... Jesus is real, Sarah tells us, and so, praise God, are we. Every single thing the resurrected Jesus does on earth he does through our bodies. You're fed, you're healed, you're forgiven, you're pronounced clean. You are loved ... Go and do likewise. “

In the spirit of keeping it active, I want us to get specific. I want you to think of a life-giving act that you commit to performing during this season of Easter. What is one thing you will do before May 23 to continue the ministry of Jesus and share hope and love with someone else? Something specific. Now, before you leave church today, I want you to tell someone else your chosen action. In this way, we will be the Church together.

For the lives of Peter and Tabitha, and for the faithful actions of your disciples right here, O Lord, we give you thanks and praise. Amen.