

July 20, 2014
Church Planting
God's Unknown Resurrection
Acts 9:36-43

Opening words: My goal is to preach through the Book of Acts. I hope to do it in four summers. This is the truth. It may need a fifth. Each story is so rich. I have a long way to go. There are 28 chapters in Acts and we are only on chapter number nine. However, I am not interested in speed, I am interested in accuracy. This is sermon number seventeen in my sermon series, *Church Planting*.

In today's story, Peter is the main character. He will dominate the stories for the rest of the summer. It is important to connect the Peter found in the Gospels with the Peter found in the Book of Acts. We know a great deal about him. He was from the town of Bethsaida and was a fisherman by trade. He was introduced to Jesus by his brother, Andrew. In time, he would become part of Jesus's inner circle. Peter was the one who identified Jesus as the Messiah for the first time. Yet, he is also the one who denied Christ three times. His humanity speaks to us. Every branch of the Christian church remembers him as a great man of faith. The Roman Catholic tradition says Peter was the first pope. However, the only thing you need to know about Peter today is that he was a force in the early church. No story illustrates that for us more clearly than today's scripture lesson, Acts 9:36-43. Let me call this message today, *God's Unknown Resurrection*.

Acts 9:36-43 In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (in Greek her name is Dorcas); she was always doing good and helping the poor.³⁷ About that time she became sick and died, and her body was washed and placed in an upstairs room.³⁸ Lydda was near Joppa; so when the disciples heard that Peter was in Lydda, they sent two men to him and urged him, "Please come at once!"³⁹ Peter went with them, and when he arrived he was taken upstairs to the room. All the widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them.⁴⁰ Peter sent them all out of the room; then he got down on his knees and prayed. Turning toward the dead woman, he said, "Tabitha, get up." She opened her eyes, and seeing Peter she sat up.⁴¹ He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet. Then he called for the believers, especially the widows, and presented her to them alive.⁴² This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord.⁴³ Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon.

We are in the ninth chapter of Acts, verses 36-43. According to verse 36, Peter is in the town of Joppa. That community still exists today. However, today it is called Jaffa and is considered a suburb of Tel Aviv. Like many communities in that part of the world, it has a rich history. Archaeological evidence shows it was inhabited generations before Christ. The reason for her early inhabitation was her location. She is located along the coast.

When Peter arrives in Joppa, he is welcomed by long faces. One of the saints had just died, a woman by the name of Tabitha. Technology has changed the world, but human behavior remains the same. Just like today, the people were grieving because a loved one is lost. Tabitha's death is so recent, her body has not yet been buried. It is upstairs, washed in accordance with the customs of the day. Verse 39 pierces my heart. It says the widows were crying as they told Peter about Tabitha. They knew the painful truth. They will never hear Tabitha's voice again. They will never see Tabitha's smile again. If death is nothing else, it is final. Any logical mind knows the truth. When you are dead, it is over. However, there is nothing logical about God. According to the text, Peter dismisses the grieving women. Alone, he gets on his knees and prays. A few seconds later, Tabitha is resurrected. In other words, just like Jesus on Easter morning, Tabitha has returned from the dead. Her resurrection is God's unknown resurrection. Let's dissect this story together.

There are three main characters in this story. The first is Peter. He comes with a great deal of credibility. After all, he had spent all those years with Jesus. The second is Tabitha. Her life testimony is impressive. She was always doing good and helping the poor. The third character in the story is the widows. The only thing we know about them is that they are grieving. However, that is enough. It is easy to relate to them in their broken state. I can't relate to Peter because he is so perfect. I can relate to the crying widows because they are so much like me. They were victims in a harsh world. Have you ever felt like a victim in our world?

Today, I want to transform you from feeling like a victim to a victor. After all, you are a child of God. Tabitha's resurrection reminds me of Jesus's resurrection. I am going to use Tabitha's resurrection to illustrate my points about Jesus's resurrection. After all, Jesus's resurrection changed everything. Jesus's resurrection is not just something that is part of our past. Jesus's resurrection is not just a point of theology reserved for scholars. Jesus's resurrection is contemporary. It is practical. Because of the resurrection, you should not feel like a victim, you should feel like a victor. Just think about it for a second. Jesus, the only son of God, died and was resurrected, for us. How can you be a loser? So if you are ready for my three reminders, say, "**Amen!**"

Disappointments

You are a victor because the resurrection reminds us that our disappointments are premature. In the end, God will prevail. In the scripture lesson for today, the widows had been on an emotional roller coaster. Death is the end of a long ride. I do not know if Tabitha's death came at the end of a long illness. It may have come suddenly. The only thing we know for sure is that she is dead. She may be in a better place, but her loved ones are left behind. Those who were closest to her felt the worst. So to say the least, they were disappointed. Without the resurrection, it is over. However, with the resurrection it is just beginning. In the Christian faith, disappointments are always premature. In the end, God wins! And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

One of the great frustrations in my life are my eyes. I am not exactly sure what to call it. It is a form of dyslexia. When I read, my eyes don't focus on a single line. One eye focuses on the line above; one eye focuses on the line below. I have always struggled with this condition. I have painful memories of being in the fourth, fifth and sixth grade. When the teacher called on me to read that paragraph in reading class, I couldn't do it. My classmates laughed at me and called me "dumb". There were many days I felt like they were right.

I have spent my life compensating for this condition. I read and write in the morning when I am not tired. That is when my eyes work the best. I have someone else read the scripture because I struggle. I have Doug read the scripture on the screen at TOGGLE because I can't see it. I have eliminated nearly all responsive readings because I cannot distinguish between your part and mine. I deliver sermons from memory for one reason. I cannot read them. I will be the first one to admit it: I have a great life! However, if I could change one thing in my life, it would be my eyes. However, our disappointments are often premature. In the end, God will prevail.

I interviewed to be the pastor of this church during the spring of 1994. I met with the Staff-Parish Relations Committee. They asked me many questions that evening. One question stood out: When you preach, do you read from a manuscript? I didn't want to say that evening, "I can't!" I wanted the job. Instead, I answered, "I can honestly say, 'No.'" My first Sunday here was July 3, 1994. I remember walking out from behind the pulpit to show people I wasn't reading to them. I couldn't believe how people responded. Someone said, "When you left the pulpit you became one of us." Some said, "By not reading your sermon you are more sincere." "You preached from the heart, not a piece of paper." I was humbled by those words because I can still hear those kids laughing at me in fifth grade school. I am not Billy Graham, but I believe I am a better preacher because my eyes don't work properly. My poor eyes made me a better preacher. Our disappointments are premature. In the end, God will prevail. What disappointments did you bring to church today? And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

Relationship

Paul Allen is one of the richest people in the world. He is the co-founder of Microsoft, along with Bill Gates. Several years ago, he wrote a book called *Idea Man*. (Why does a billionaire need to write a book to make more money?) He was interviewed several years ago to promote that book. In the interview, he talked about the early days of Microsoft. To say the least, his relationship with Bill Gates is complex. At first, his money grabbed my attention. He is worth approximately \$16 billion. If he wants it, he buys it. He owns two professional sports franchises, a yacht the length of a football field, a submarine and various properties around the world. However, there are some things money can't buy. Money can't buy health. Allen has battled cancer twice. Money can't buy love. The interviewer asked him if he still wants to get married. He answered, "I hope there is someone out there for me." When I heard him say those words, I felt sorry for the billionaire. There was a loneliness about those words.

Just think about it for a moment. He battled cancer alone. If you were battling for your life, what would you want? A person next to you, or a submarine?

You are a winner because the resurrection reminds us that God wants to have a relationship with you! Tabitha's resurrection is great because the relation between her and her friends continued. Jesus' resurrection is better. It shows that God wants to have a relationship with you. The one thing that makes Christianity different from all the other world religions is the word 'relationship'. The storyline of the Old Testament is God trying to have a relationship with his Chosen People, the Jews. The storyline of the New Testament is God entering the world in the person of Jesus to have a relationship with all people. Jesus died on the cross as the perfect sacrifice. Sin no longer stands between us and God. On Easter we celebrate his resurrection. On Pentecost we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit. God is no longer limited to a single body; God has the ability to be in all places all the time. In other words, God is omnipresent. Christianity is a relationship. You should never feel like a loser, because the God of the universe wants to have a relationship with you! And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

Eternity

You are a winner because the resurrection reminds us that God wants to have a relationship with you for eternity. On that day, Tabitha was resurrected but she could not escape death forever. At some point down the road she died again. Jesus's resurrection was God's final answer to the problem of death. There was a mansion waiting for her in heaven. Let me say this clearly. There is a mansion waiting for you too. Never feel like a loser. Why? God wants to spend eternity with you! One of the perks of being a disciple of Jesus Christ is that you will never die. John 3:16 says, "*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, so that whoever believes in him may not perish, but have eternal life.*" And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

It had been a long week and I was ready to go home. The excitement of being in Haiti had faded, replaced by the reality of that desperate nation. Haiti is a country of 'no's. There is no postal system. There are no street addresses. There is no public school system. There is no health care system. There is next to no electricity or clean drinking water. The Haitians themselves have no hope for a better future, and I have no clue how to fix the mess. Money doesn't solve every problem. It will take much more. That island nation is like a big campground, where no one gets to go home. I was filled with emotions as I rode in the bus on the way back to Port-au-Prince. I was excited about going home, yet I felt guilty going home. There was only one difference between me and the Haitians. I was born in America and they were born in Haiti. If I won a cosmic lottery to be born here, then they were the losers. The Haitians are victims of life, itself. Can I ask you a question?

Do you know any victims? You don't have to go to Haiti to find them. They are right here. Their lives are hard. Sometimes, it is because they are forced to live with a poor decision. Sometimes, they have done nothing wrong. Something just happened.

Could it be you feel like a victim today? You have a broken relationship in your life. You have bills that will never be paid. You have a past story that will never be forgotten. You are squeezed between your aging parents and your growing children. You are battling a disease and you will lose. Does anyone here feel like a victim? If so, then stop whining and accept the truth. You are a child of God! That fact changes everything. And all of God's victorious people said, "**Amen!**"