

Something Happened at the Funeral

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St. Paul's United Church

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Psalm 23 Acts 9:36-43 Revelation 7:9-17

Something happened at the Joppa Funeral Home that made heads spin and mouths wag at the wake of Dorcas.

At first nothing seems to be out of place at this typical wake. Family, friends and widows assemble around the casket. As you and I know, caskets or even urns are nothing more than boxes or containers where we house the dead.

It's because of the bodies or ashes we put inside.

“The bodies of mothers and fathers, and sons, daughters, sisters, brothers, and friends, the ones we knew and loved, or knew and hated, or hardly knew at all, but know someone who knew them and who is left to grieve.”

(The Undertaking: Thomas Lynch” pg 183)

At Dorcas's wake, folks assembled to bid their farewell to their deceased sister Tabitha in Aramaic and Dorcas in Greek. Both names meant the same thing: Gazelle: a symbol of grace, beauty, swiftness and beauty.

Nothing seems to be out of place at this wake.

Dorcas body surrounded not by flowers but bolts of cloth, sewing needles, and threads of which are the tools of her trade. Widows weep as they gaze at crafted and crocheted Afghans, sweaters, and shawls that she had meticulously made. Others passing by on their way to the casket admire the pictures and artifacts of her life that was lived and had been interwoven in theirs.

Silence eludes the buzz of conversation tinged with the sounds of tears and sniffles of stories and antidotes about how Dorcas lived her life.

Luke informs us most if not all the conversation would have focused on Dorcas who was “full of good works and charitable deeds”.

“Good works” speaks of her general acts of kindness toward people while “charitable deeds” reflects her acts of mercy used to relieve the burdens of the poor and needy.

The nature of these good works and charitable deeds were seen as widows showed off their tunics and garments handmade by Dorcas

Wakes and visitations before the funeral are important.

Let us never underestimate the value of sharing stories about impact the deceased has had on our lives.

Eulogies provide the opportunity for family and friends to tell the stories.

For if, the truth be told about us after we are gone, we all wish for someone to say:

“I was a somebody. I was someone who touched a life and maybe made a difference.”

Nothing surprisingly happens when family or friends eulogize.
 Maybe a few tears are shed and a tickle that erupts into a loud laugh.
 But usually all they seem to do is cut the silence and postpone the stark reality that our loved one,
 friend, brother, sister, is dead.

Helping us confront the reality of death is a priest, pastor, a minister, or some holy person who stands upright, firm between the dead, and living.

Some who says: "Behold a tell you a mystery."

Those priests and pastors, affirm the need to weep and dance, to blaspheme and embrace the tenets of our faiths, to upbraid our gods and to thank them.(Thomas Lynch: The Undertaking pg 81).

Peter the big burly fisherman, known for his witnessing in the courtroom to the streets of Lydda with a resounding message of how God raised Jesus up, how God exalted him through the resurrection to be Lord and Savior, allowing him to possess glory, authority and power to grant repentance and forgiveness of sins has been invited to say a word or two at wake. Peter the preacher, who witnesses to the power and activity of God through the Holy Spirit to bring about new life is summoned.

Hearing Peter was on a preaching mission in Lydda (ten miles away); two men are dispatched to request him to come to Dorcas. Peter does not hesitate to drop what he was doing and come to the Upper Room where Dorcas' body lay in state.

Will Peter now standing between death and life, we able to do something at the wake?

Uncles, find nickels behind our ears, magician pull rabbits from out of hats. And good talker can preach pie in the sky or break out the warm fuzzies when the time is right" (Thomas Lynch: The Undertaking pg 81).

Can Peter standing in between the death of Dorcas and life of those assembled to speak to the dark night of the soul and create something out of the ordinary!

When Peter arrives at the funeral home and he climbs up the stairs to the upper room where Dorcas body lies in state. Once inside he notices the tears in the eyes of the mourners.

There is no curtain in the Joppa Funeral Home for Peter to say farewell to Dorcas like the one that is drawn at Needham Jay Funeral Home to allow the family to have one final moment with their loved one.. So Peter politely he asks folks to exit to another room.

Once the grievors leave, Peter kneels. Remember the old spiritual that mentions the truth about kneeling: "When I fall on my knees with my face to the rising sun, Lord have mercy on me." When Peter kneels, he is entering into the posture of prayer, humbling in the presence of the divine.

Looking at the lifeless and dead body, knowing what she has meant to others, Peter "turns to the body and says, 'Tabitha, get up.'

Something happens.

A miracle occurs.

Dorcas opens her eyes.

Seeing Peter, she sat up.

Dorcas is alive. She lives.

It is indeed a “miracle,” which means that it is hard to figure out, an inexplicable happening beyond all of our categories of explanation.

The most we can say about this is “that something happened that day “which witnessed to the concrete and visible sign of the wonder that God’s power and might is able to achieve.

Behind this narrative of resurrection are similar stories in the Bible.

In Mark 5:35-43 Jesus utters the commanding words, “Little girl, get up.”

Such an utterance similar to that of Peter changes the world.

In these strange stories, the “surge” of the power for life is entrusted consistently to human agents, to allow God’s own capacity to enter a world of death and usher in newness.

In between life and death, behold Peter reveals a mystery of which only faith can make sense out of it.

"They shall neither hunger anymore nor thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, or any heat; “for the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living fountains of waters. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

Standing between the dead and living, all any minister and priest can report is a God who once again takes the chaos of this world and brings order to it.

At the very outset, God said, let there be light and there was light.

At the very outset, the speech of Peter and Jesus allows the power of God to work to renew the brokenness and darkness of death by allowing Dorcas to have eternal life.

Clearly the narrative attests that Peter—the church—is entrusted with the resurrection

Peter representing the church is entrusted with the resurrection power of Jesus who carries the force of the creator God.

The church in Acts is entrusted as we are with the power to stand in between life and death with the offer of the hope of resurrection.

We shall go out with the hope of resurrection is the title of a hymn written by a theological professor and pastor June Boyce Tillman is found in Voices United and is one sang on Easter Sunday but ought to be sung as a processional for every funeral. The words are rich in meaning as it speaks about going out with strength and leaping and dancing the resurrection story

Something happened at the funeral that day. Something happened to Dorcas. She lived.

Something happened to the folks at the wake as it does to us. Our faith allows us to live in the presence of the resurrected Christ who is always there and comes in unexpected and mysterious ways to do spiritual surgery to a broken heart caring for us as Good Shepherd.

Amen