

Text: Acts 9: 36-43
Title: Stitched Together
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If you don't know about this ~ you should. This is a story to be told, a practice to be celebrated, and a grace to be shared. If you don't know about this ~ you should.

Every other Wednesday morning a group of women gather at Hope to quilt. They slip in quietly, lug in sewing machines, set up tables, and bring sensible treats. They spread out colorful fabric and talk about how patterns clash and complement. As near as I can figure, they usually have a couple quilting projects going at one time. There are big rolls of bating and small squares of fabric. There is conversation, collaboration, occasional kvetching, and a mid-morning coffee break....

I mentioned treats. The young moms' group on Tuesday morning ~ bigger group, larger spread, more doughnuts, egg casseroles, fruit, and pastry with goo. The quilters ~ older, wiser, more sensible ~ they have tea and plain simple cookies.

The quilts are beautifully detailed and carefully crafted. The angles and lines connect with a precision born of patience. Each quilt is a kind of utilitarian art made with love. Now, I know that some of these quilts are made for relatives and grandbabies, or as just the right touch for that bed in the guest room, but most of them are made for others ~ for the old, for the sick, for the dying.

Again and again I've walked into their work space to discover that they were trying to finish a quilt for a saint in a nursing home or one recently entering hospice care. They have selected fabrics with the recipient in mind and there is often a line or a passage or a prayer that is somehow included. There is attention to detail, attention to personality, and attention to kindness.

Then, with little fanfare, without drawing attention to themselves or the practice, they deliver the comfort of a handmade quilt. In hospital rooms and nursing homes, to men and to women, they give the wonderful gift of a quilt, stitched together out of a shared compassion.

Hope's quilters are part of a long tradition of women who stitch together life for others. And, Dorcas is their patron saint.

We don't know much about Dorcas ~ in Greek, Tabitha ~ in Aramaic. The name means gazelle in both languages. There are no other references to her in scripture, and the details here are sketchy. We know that she was a woman, and therefore pushed to the margins of first century Palestinian life, tossed aside by a culture that valued her primarily in relation to men and marriage and children. There is no mention of a husband or children ~ tradition has it that she was a widow, and therefore was voiceless,

The Hebrew word for widow comes from the root word "unable to speak."
or hopeless.

The Greek word for widow comes from the root word "forsaken" or "left empty."

And yet, she stitched together life for others.

The details here are sketchy, but imagination is easy.

She listened to the broken hearts of other widows. She knew that gifts spark hope and so she sewed coats to give as gifts. She wasn't one to toss out cheap answers or chipper platitudes but she was present and encouraging and quick with a smile. Tears came easily for Dorcas, but so did laughter. Courage and compassion came by the bucketful. She refused to be defined by loss but she made her mark by love. She stitched out of the pain in her own life so that she might do good for others....

She was called a disciple ~ the reference here to Dorcas is the only use of the feminine form of disciple in the whole New Testament. When she died the widows came weeping in the wraps she had woven. And, when Peter came he raised her from the dead.

Why Dorcas?

Why a resurrection story of a woman who made coats for widows?

There is an obscure essay by Frederick Buechner entitled: "Adolescence and the Stewardship of Pain," that was recently reprinted in Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons. In this essay Buechner writes about the inevitability of suffering in this world and suggests that the parable Jesus told of the master, the three servants and the distribution of the talents could be read as a parable of pain. And that *to bury your life is to have it wither in the ground and diminish. It is to be deeply alone. It is to be less alive than you were when you started.*

In Buechner's words:

To bury your pain is a way of surviving your pain and therefore by no means to be dismissed out of hand. It is a way which I venture to say has at one time or another served and continues to serve all of us well. But it is not the way of growing. It is not a way of moving through adolescence into adulthood....

Read that way the parable also suggests, again in Buechner's words:

Being a good steward of your pain involves... being alive to your life. It involves taking the risk of being open, of reaching out, of keeping in touch with the pain as well as the joy of what happens because at no time more than at a painful time do we live out of the depths of who we are instead of the shallows. There is no guarantee that we will find a pearl in the depths, that the end of the pain will have a happy end, or even any end at all, but at least we stand a chance of finding in those depths who we most deeply and humanly are and who each other are. At least we stand a chance of finding that we needn't live alone in our pain...

Maybe Dorcas was a good steward of pain.

Maybe she was alive to her life, and rather than bury whatever pain she knew in this world she invested in the lives of others. Rather than be an object of ministry she chose to be an agent of ministry. Maybe she gathered with friends on Wednesday mornings and

laid out squares of fabric and stitched together life for others. Hers is a story to be told, a practice to be celebrated, and a grace to be shared.

But, there must be something more.

Surely this isn't the story of one raised from the dead because she was a good egg. Surely resurrection isn't reserved for those who do the right thing with their talents. The only prerequisite for resurrection is death and therefore the moral of this story can't be ~ be like Dorcas in order that you too might be raised from the dead. There must be something more....

What if we come at it this way?

Luke links the story of Peter raising Dorcas with the healing of a paralytic named Aeneas. And, both of those stories mirror stories Luke told earlier of Jesus healing a paralytic (Luke 5:17-26) and raising the daughter of Jairus (Luke 8:41-56). In fact, to the dead daughter of Jairus Jesus says, "*Talitha koum*" and to Dorcas Peter says, "*Tabitha koum.*" The difference of one of letter.

So, part of what Luke is doing is demonstrating that the "Acts of the Apostles" are an extension of the gospel. What was essential and true and possible in Jesus is essential and true and possible in following Jesus. From the first few lines spoken by Jesus in the temple, to a widow named Dorcas in Joppa, God is in the business of

freeing the prisoner,
releasing the oppressed,
giving sight to the blind,
bringing good news for the poor,
and raising the dead.

And, this is the first story of that new community following the way of Jesus in raising the dead. They are participating in the power of Jesus, in the extension of Jesus, in the business of Jesus. The business of God/Jesus is raising the dead.

Dear friends I'd suggest that this vignette of Peter and Dorcas captures the heart of God. Compassion means to suffer with, to put yourself in the place of another, to enter into their experience. Compassion is a primary characteristic of the incarnation. The compassion of God finds shape in the incarnation. It is what God was doing in Christ ~ he didn't bury pain but he entered in and bore it. He loved so deeply that he emptied himself and stitched his life into ours, joining us even unto death. He wrapped himself in all that it means to be human that he might be resurrected; that we might live. The power of death had no hold on him.

And, as he is wrapped in the incarnation so too we are wrapped in the resurrection.

As we are stitched together with God in death, so too we are stitched together with God in resurrected life. This text is one fabric: life, death, and resurrection. Incarnation and resurrection ~ threads that hold it all together.

Maybe Dorcas became a symbol of resurrection life in the Joppa church because her simple acts of compassion and caring expressed, in a visible and tangible way, something of the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

So, this morning how then shall we respond?

How can we in visible and tangible ways express the incarnation and resurrection?

How can we be good stewards of the pain in lives?

Age or stage has no bearing.

Retired or restless,

widow or orphan,

gay or straight,

broke or rolling in the dough,

polished or rough around the edges,

divorced or dating,

sailing or struggling.

How is the incarnation and resurrection stitched together in our lives?

For, if it means anything to follow Christ, it means not burying life with its pain but entering into it, even for others. And, somehow in that finding a fullness of life that is of one fabric – life, death, and resurrection.

May we be strengthened to make quilts for widows.

May we be good stewards of our pain.

May we be encouraged to use whatever gifts we've been given for the good of others.

May God bless.

Amen.