

Our reading from the Acts of the Apostles this morning is one of those which needs a bit of context put around it so that we can understand the full meaning of it.

We are in chapter 9 of Acts which, remember, is the second half of Luke's account of the life of Jesus and the early church. Acts covers the ministries of Peter and Paul – with a fair amount of overlap between the two in the middle. We start off with Peter, and the coming of the Holy Spirit, and the first believers organising themselves into what I guess we would call church today. We then, all too briefly, meet Stephen, who was the first martyr – and at this stage we are introduced to the young man who witnessed the stoning – Saul. We then hear a bit about another disciple Philip who preached in Samaria and is probably best known for meeting the man we know as the Ethiopian eunuch. Last week we heard the story of the conversion of Saul who a bit later was known as Paul.

But then Luke in his book switches back to Peter and the two healing stories of Aeneas and Tabitha. So let me read you the Aeneas story, which comes immediately before today's reading in the book, as it is helpful to look at the two stories together.

“As Peter travelled about the country, he went to visit the Lord's people who lived in Lydda. There he found a man named Aeneas, who was paralyzed and had been bedridden for eight years. “Aeneas,” Peter said to him, “Jesus Christ heals you. Get up and roll up your mat.” Immediately Aeneas got up. All those who lived in Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord.”

At this stage Peter is still preaching to the Jews in Judea, particularly in a place called Lydda. Here Peter heals a man named Aeneas who everyone there would have known had been paralyzed for ages – and, presumably, Aeneas would never have expected to get better. And because of this healing we are told that all those who lived in the area turned to the Lord. But there are a couple of really significant things worth noting in this story.

First, after the healing, Peter said, “Get up and roll up your mat.” This is not exactly an original line from Peter. You may remember that in the story of Jesus healing the man by the pool on the sabbath Jesus said, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” Similarly when Jesus healed the paralytic lowered through the roof he said, “stand up and take your bed to your home.” The point here is Peter is copying Jesus.

The second thing is Peter did not heal Aeneas. He makes it very clear, “Jesus Christ heals you.” That subtlety would more than likely have sailed over the heads of those witnessing the healing – they had watched Peter – and the man was healed – so Peter was, all of a sudden, the big celebrity in town who could heal people.

So, then we come to today's reading. 10 miles down the road in Joppa, and there we meet Tabitha – or Dorcas in Greek (this is one of those strange things in the bible where we are sometimes given an extra bit of information but we don't really know why. Apparently both Tabitha and Dorcas mean gazelle – I think we'll just stick with Tabitha). There was already a group of believers in Joppa and Tabitha was one of them – described as “a disciple”. What else do we know about Tabitha – she was devoted to good works and acts of charity, so she was probably fairly well off. She supported the needy by making tunics and other clothing. So she wasn't someone who was a much loved disciple because she preached, or healed the sick – but she was much loved because she cared for other people, particularly those who were much worse off than she was.

And then she became ill and died. So before we look into the actual details of the story it is worth thinking about what was Luke's aim in including this story in his book – after all there must have been many many miraculous events that are not included in Acts.

But he chose to include this one – a story about a disciple who did good works, but perhaps was not a particularly remarkable disciple, as the whole basis of the early church was to share what they had amongst each other. So let's look at the story - trying to work out what that reason was.

So, the first thing we are told is that after she had died they washed the body and laid her out in a room upstairs. If there was a room upstairs that also indicates that she was fairly well off. In those times, there were two stages in the post mortem Jewish custom. First the body would be washed and we are told that happened before the body was laid out in an upper room. What is going on here is the preparation for a visitation, where people come to pay their respects as they would file past an open casket containing the body during the next day or day and a half. What has not happened is the second stage of the preparation of the body where they anoint the body – with spices and other sweet smelling ointments: it was a way of paying respect but also taking care of the smell. And the question we should ask is why not? Why had that second stage not happened?

And this is why I wanted us first to look at the previous story of the healing of Aeneas. The people in Joppa had heard about what happened to Aeneas down the road in Lydda, and therefore assumed, as they were people of faith, that if they fetched Peter he would come and do the same thing for Tabitha. As they believed Peter could raise Tabitha from death they did not want to anoint the body – after all the body of Jesus was not anointed – Jesus had already been raised from death when Mary Magdalene arrived on the first day of the week to anoint his body.

So that is what they did – they sent two men to Peter with the request, “Please come to us without delay”. It had to be without delay because of the practicalities of preserving the body and the short timeframe in Jewish custom between death and burial. And Peter came and went to the room where Tabitha was.

What happened next was another unoriginal act by Peter. “Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed.” Do you remember the story of Jairus' daughter? When Jesus arrived at where the child was, the first thing he did was put everyone outside. And when Jesus arrived at the tomb where Lazarus was lying dead, he allowed no-one into the tomb – and then he prayed to his Father. So again, what Peter is doing is copying Jesus. And we'll come back to this.

Then Peter turned to the body and said “Tabitha, get up.” Then opening her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up.” Quite a scene. The body of Tabitha laid out, Peter still kneeling in prayer at the side of her, and Tabitha opens her eyes and looks at Peter, who is at her level. And Peter helps Tabitha up and shows her to the other followers. And we are then told that this, Tabitha being raised from the dead, became known throughout Joppa and many believed in the Lord.

So, yes, this is a quite remarkable story, but why did Luke choose to include it in his book? I think there are two reasons.

First, to teach us about death. There are, excluding the rather vague reference in Matthew's gospel that after the resurrection, “godly people who had died earlier were raised to life and appeared to many in the city”, 9 occurrences of 'raising from the dead' stories in the bible. Some of these may come to you straight away but, this is the list:

In the Old Testament we have three

The son of a widow in Zarephath – by Elijah

The son of the Shunammite woman by Elisha

The unnamed man killed by Moabite raiders who then threw his body into Elisha's tomb and when the body touched Elisha's bones he came back to life

We then have Jesus' three

The widow of Nain's Son

Jairus' daughter

Lazarus

And then of course comes

Jesus himself

and finally

This, the story of Tabitha

and the almost humorous, if was not so sad, story of Eutychus who listening to a particularly long sermon by Paul, fell asleep and fell out of the window and died – before being raised to life by Paul

So, what does the Tabitha story teach us about death? I think it is this. It is Luke reminding his readers of what Jesus said, in John 3 v16. "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son Jesus Christ that whoever believes in him shall not die but will have eternal life." Tabitha is described as a disciple. She is a follower of Jesus Christ. She believes. She will have eternal life, and the reason for this story is to remind us of this fact – that when the believer dies, they are promised eternal life.

In our gospel reading Jesus spoke very plainly to the Jews who were questioning whether he was the Messiah and said, "you do not believe because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish."

Going back to the list just briefly, though, I must point out the one difference between Jesus' resurrection, and the other 8. Jesus died, and God resurrected him, and he will not die again. The other 8 would all have died again, and not brought back to life on this earth, but would await the resurrection to eternal life promised to the believer.

But I said there were two reasons for Luke including this story in part 2 of his book. That is it teaches us how to become disciples. When Peter healed Aeneas, he copied what Jesus had done when he healed people. When Peter asked God to raise Tabitha back to life he copied how Jesus had done the same thing.

We are often told that copying what other people do is not always a good thing, but in this case there is no better way to learn how to be a good disciple of Jesus Christ than to copy what he did.

Now, what I am not saying is that I expect all of you to leave this place this morning with the instant ability by copying what Jesus did, to heal the sick and raise the dead – although, particularly in the case of healing the sick it is really important that we leave this place with the belief that what some would call miraculous healings can, and do, happen in these modern times.

Readings: Acts 9: 36-end
John 10: 22-30

Title: Peter demonstrates discipleship

St Mary's, Fowlmere

What is also important is that we copy Jesus in other ways. Jesus spent much time studying the scriptures – as should we. Jesus spent much time praying to his Father, as should we. Jesus had a real love for the poor, the downtrodden, the sick, the apparently helpless, and so should we. And Jesus advocated that we should love our neighbours as we love ourselves – and that is what we should do. Jesus loved everyone – the Tabitha story showed he loved and cared for a relatively well-off woman, and other stories showed he loved the down and outs. Copying Jesus is how we become better disciples. In his letter to the Galatians Paul said this. “Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the laws of Christ.”

Amen