

SERMON April 25th

Psalm 23. Acts 9: 36-43: Associates in Accomplishment:

It is in the Acts of the Apostle we find for the disciples there was 'life after Jesus'. This reading takes us to the early years of Christianity and show us what 'the disciples did next' as we read their response to the post resurrection appearances of Jesus as filled with zeal and love for the Risen Lord they commenced to share the good news beginning in Jerusalem. In the Acts of the Apostles, we read the result of their following the command of Jesus to go and preach the Gospel. In the early pages of this book by Luke, the focus is particularly on Peter and the apostles and the impact of the message they are preaching and the life they are living. Later it is Paul who will take centre stage with his missionary journeys.

Our reading and the preceding chapters, show us Peter and the apostles as they start to preach, Christianity starts to grow, and begins to spread across the land and then to the Gentiles.

This reading about Peter and Dorcas is quiet an amazing story as we are taken into the world of Peter, the evangelist, and the evidence of his trust and belief in the Risen Christ. Gone are the days of denial, of wondering what was happening. The words Jesus spoke at the conclusion of the Gospel of John as he and the disciples shared a breakfast of fish and bread around the fire on the beach post resurrection are being fulfilled now in the lives of Peter and the other disciples. Remember, Jesus said to Peter three times - in keeping with the three times Peter had denied him: Do you love me: and in response, Feed my lambs, do you love me, tend my sheep and finally the third time: do you love me, feed my sheep.

And so the work of feeding - the mission - begins. Many faithful witnesses within and without the early church were carrying on the work of Jesus including as we find in this reading - a band of widows regarded as saintly women and known for their acts of charity.

But before we go into their story, we should look at the preceding verses leading up to this visit by Peter to Lydda and then Joppa

and the band of widows. The previous verses inform us that Saul who had been breathing threats and murder against the disciples had been converted to the Christ and had ceased his actions against the Christians and, what undoubtedly was a shock to everyone, was starting his new work, as Paul, in the name of the Risen Christ. **At this time**, and we could say because of Saul's conversion, the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria knew peace; the church was being built up, walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit - it multiplied.

During all this, we are told that Peter - and I just love this description of the man - Peter, was here and there among all. I cannot help but get the impression of a very busy man - Peter was here and there among all the Christians eventually, in his 'hereing' and 'thereing', coming to Lydda, on the Plain of Sharon, twenty-five miles northwest of Jerusalem at the intersection of highways from Egypt to Syria and to coastal Joppa. If you visit the Land today, Lydda still stands but under its Hebrew name of Lod and so does Joppa, under the name of Jaffa.

Lydda was home to one of the earliest Christian communities and Luke points to the great impact this miracle has for the advance of the church with the news of the paralytic Aeneas walking again through Peter's healing. The town's location certainly helping this spread of the good news.

Now eleven miles farther northwest, in Joppa, lived Tabitha - Hebrew or Dorcas - Greek - both meaning Gazelle. Dorcas, known to be a true believer in word and deed, became sick and died. Funeral arrangements began with the cleansing of the body with oil and rinsing it clean with water and she was placed in an upper room. Knowing Peter is so close and what had just happened in Lydda, he is sent for and when he comes, he is led to the upper room, where the widows, crying in their grief and showing him all the garments made by Dorcas, meet him.

When we look at Peter's actions, we see his total dependence on God. Ordering everyone out of the room and falling on his knees in prayer, he asks the risen Lord to apply his resurrection power to this corpse. Then turning toward the dead woman, he issues the simple command *Tabitha, get up and* opening her eyes, seeing

Peter, she sits up.

What joy would have pervaded that room and then the household as Peter, helping her to her feet, calls through the door to the believers and especially her friends, the widows, to whom he presents her alive. News of the resurrection leads many to saving faith in the Lord, and Peter remains quite awhile in Joppa, in the house of Simon the tanner.

It is important for us to take note that Peter does not rely on his own power but turns, through prayer, to ask for the presence of God and for the power of the Risen Christ at that time, in that place and in that situation. It is his faith in the Risen Lord that is central to this story.

And It is faith in the Risen Lord that is central to our story - to our individual and collective story. In our situations, individually and collectively, we should not rely on our own power but turn in faith to God asking for the power of the Risen Christ to be at work in our lives. Prayer, trust in God, belief in the power of the Risen Christ must be central to every situation we face and in our desire to share the good news that is ours through the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth the Risen Lord

Peter, the disciples, the early church rested in that knowledge; embraced that Truth and in that given Power stepped out to be 'associates in accomplishment': 'associates in accomplishment' with God and 'associates in accomplishment' with one another. Lives were being transformed through the message they were living out - their own lives and the lives of others. We only have to look at the transformed life of Peter and the transformed life of Saul to see resurrection power in action. Peter, Paul, the disciples, the faithful witnesses, the early church, Dorcas and the band of widows, they believed, they acted and others came to believe because of what they saw in these lives. In a phrase we use here in our congregation: **These were people prepared to get off that bus.** They had the courage, the strength, the lack of fear. And where did that come from. Faith in the God of Psalm 23!

Let's go back to Psalm 23. These beautiful words confirm for us that God is with us. READ 23 In God is our strength; our hope;

our fears are removed - With faith in God and through the power of the Risen Christ we too can be 'Associates in Accomplishment'.

As I conclude, let me read this poem and, as you listen to the final lines, you will hear where my phrase of the day has come from ...

It is a poem sent to me by Beth...
Middle Time
by Lona Fowler

Between the exhilaration of Beginning
and the satisfaction of Concluding
is the Middle Time
of enduring, changing, trying,
despairing, continuing, becoming.

Jesus Christ was the man of God's Middle Time
between Creation and . . . Accomplishment.
Through him God said of Creation,
"Without mistake."
And of Accomplishment,
"Without doubt."

And we, in our Middle Times
of wondering, waiting, hurrying,
hesitating, regretting, revising;
We who have begun many things—
and seen but few completed;
We who are becoming more—and less;
through the evidence of God's Middle Time
have a stabilizing hint
that we are not mistakes,
that we are irreplaceable,
that our Being is of interest
and our Doing is of purpose,
that our Being and our Doing
are surrounded by AMEN.

Jesus Christ is the Completer
of unfinished people
with unfinished work

in unfinished times.

May he keep us from sinking, ceasing,
wasting, solidifying—
that we may be for him
experimenters, enablers, encouragers,
and associates in Accomplishment.

Lona Fowler

AMEN