

“Putting out Fires or Putting on Crash Helmets”

Acts 9:36-43

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I have told some of you about a predecessor of mine in another setting who had come back to the community many years after his retirement. Some in this church actually knew him. He was a feisty soul and an old-school liberal with whom I had much in common, yet our styles were quite different. He was far less subtle than me.

One day at a minister’s meeting, someone shared a cause for praise in his life. The man said he had been in financial difficulty and thus had prayed for help. Specifically, he needed something like \$200. This was a long time ago. The man said the very next day four letters arrived in the mail, each containing \$50 to help with his need. It was an answer to prayer, he said, at which point my predecessor said, “That’s a lie!”

Well, others in the room might have questioned the story. Even if God heard the prayer and prompted people to respond, how did the checks get there the next day? I’m not sure God could make the mail move that fast... but to call it a lie seems less than gracious.

Yet, even if we are not quite as blunt as my predecessor, we do question stories like this. We are products of our time. We are blessed and cursed with the assumptions of modernity, one of which is that if something cannot be understood in rational terms, it did not happen.

I tend to function this way and I am not suggesting that it is a bad way to approach life or faith. In the biblical calls to love God with our whole being, one of the mandates is to love God with our minds. It’s just that there are some things that defy understanding. If we close our minds to the possibility of anything other than the rational, we may establish barriers that cut us off from a great deal of reality.

In his book *Who Needs God*, Harold Kushner says that one of the things modern men and women seem to do best “is to put out sacred fires, extending the domain of men and shrinking the domain of God, and I suspect that we are the poorer for it (p. 51).” Indeed.

I say all of this today because this kind of thinking may shape the manner in which we read the story from Acts 9. It is a story about a much-respected member of the church in Joppa named Tabitha or Dorcas in the Greek, a name which means *gazelle*. This woman, who we are told is devoted to good works and acts of charity, and thus is a model of Christian faith, becomes ill and dies. Everyone is upset, quite understandably, but someone hears that Peter is in nearby Lydda, performing miracles, and they send for him.

It is not clear whether they want him to bring comfort at a time of loss or expect some kind of a miracle, but they send for him, he comes, and he sends everyone out of the room, a common detail in miracle stories. He gets on his knees and prays to God and Tabitha is raised from the dead. Everyone is overjoyed! It is wonderful to have her back and this miracle will surely aid the church's witness! Who wouldn't want to be part of a religion where the dead come back to life?

But as we read this story in this enlightened age, we have to wonder what is really happening here. Has the Night King from *Game of Thrones* shown up? Is this story a lie? We know that the dead do not come back to life, and even if they do, if they have been dead for long, they will not have any memories left. The brain cannot function without oxygen. So, either this story is made up, or perhaps God intervenes in the ancient world in ways God does not today and thus the story has no value for us, or perhaps they just think the woman has died.

There have been many mistaken decisions over the centuries about matters of life and death, some with tragic consequences and some with humorous ones. I returned from a vacation in another setting to an office full of people who seemed to have all the color drained from their faces. Something was obviously wrong. Eventually someone told me that while I was away, they had sent out a newsletter in which it was noted that a dear older lady in the church had died, but she had not.

I had the unenviable responsibility of going to see her and offering an explanation. I hoped she had not seen the newsletter, but when I got to the home, which was near the church, and the caregiver took me into her room, I saw the newsletter open on her bedside table. I offered a heart-felt apology, but she said to me, "I'm not dead." "I know," I said,

“I rarely talk to dead people and when I do, they never talk back.” She laughed and thankfully her daughter was a retired church administrative assistant who had committed her own office faux pas.

Anyway... maybe they just think Tabitha is dead. This is perhaps the most generous explanation from the perspective of modernity. The trouble is that while all of these questions make sense to us, they impose our worldview on a first-century story and thus distract us from the message(s). First-century hearers are not distracted. Miracles are not uncommon. Whatever we might make of such experiences today, for these early believers, they are a part of life. God’s holy interactions with human experience are a part of life. So, they don’t dismiss the possibility of the miraculous. They don’t put out the fire.

We would do well to suspend our judgment long enough to see what is going on in this story. There is much to benefit us in the parts we can understand, and in regard to those we cannot, perhaps there is more to this life that we can explain.

One thing we see in this story is that women play a critical role in the early church. We will encounter another significant woman of faith in a couple weeks, but today we meet Tabitha or Dorcas, Gazelle. It is a beautiful name for a splendid example of Christian faith. All we are told is that she is devoted to good works and acts of charity, but these acts lie at the heart of faith, and people are distressed at her passing. She is a respected leader and thus it is appropriate that many Sunday School classes have been named for her. Indeed, her name lives on long after that of many people thought to be more powerful.

It is just one of many examples of a reality that is well-established in the Christian Testament – women are key leaders in every area of service. They are deacons, they preach, they follow Jesus, they spread the Gospel. So, why do many churches to this day exclude women from leadership roles? Only by selectively reading certain passages of scripture and ignoring others can one justify exclusion, but the motivation is cultural, not biblical. And the truth is men have attempted to keep women out of many leadership roles that have nothing to do with religion, largely because when given a chance, women tend to do better.

This church has affirmed women for a long time - ordained women as deacons since the nineteenth century, ordained women to ministry for over a half century, called women to ministerial roles. But no woman has sat in my seat yet, not in the 207 years of our existence. That remains a future challenge. And many churches still refuse to allow women to do what they did in first century.

We had a visitor in my last setting who had moved from Dallas, Texas where she had been a member of a large Baptist church. She was unsettled when she saw a woman walk into our sanctuary in a leadership role. So, with a measure of disgust, she asked someone near her, "Does this church have women deacons?" "Yes," the person said, "In fact, if you look on the dais, the deacon is female, the liturgist today is female; our pastor is the token male." The visitor was not amused nor did she come back simply because we followed Jesus' practice of including women. One wonders what it will take to change some minds, but I do have some thoughts about that.

Years ago, in Danville, Virginia, we ordained Selma Cole as the first female deacon at Moffett Memorial Baptist Church. She was the mother of Doug Cole, whom many of you know. She had taught Sunday School for forty years. She was a universally respected saint in that church. So, it just made sense that we ordained her, but it was a front-page story in the local paper, and after reading that story, a friend of Selma's, who was a member of an independent Baptist church in town, started by an organization out of Lynchburg, called her and said, "Selma, you know I don't believe in women deacons. The Bible doesn't allow for them. But if you are called to pastor a church, I will join it!"

That's what changes minds that can be changed - the life witness of women like Selma Cole and Dorcas, like Sallie Baily Jones and Fannie Heck, like Molly Marshall and Barbara Brown Taylor, like Mary Alice Seals and Lynn Lingafelt and Leah Anderson Reed. It shouldn't require anything special in the twenty-first century, but since it does, thank God we have nearly 2,000 years of witness to help us, beginning with stories like today's from Acts 9. Let's not miss this message because we question the validity of the miracle.

But speaking of the miracle, another thing we see in this story is that God is at work doing new things in the Easter community — many new things, not just what we see in this story. No matter how we understand this particular miracle, God is at work bringing new life out of dead places. And this is a message that we not only need to hear, but that we can affirm in some way as a current reality.

God may not bring someone back to life, whether God ever did in the past or not, but God is at work in miraculous ways. I have known people who had no chance of getting well who did – a woman who received Hospice care for two years until the doctors decided she wasn't going to die; two men who had metastatic melanoma who had almost no chance to survive but lived decades after being cured; a man who was in a coma for a month with a 0% chance of waking up, according to his neurologist, who greeted me with a shrug when he awoke.

0% and 100% are two forecasts I dismiss. Very few things are certain in this world. Who can say what happened in these medical cases and many others, whether God was involved, and if God was, why God didn't provide a miracle in other instances where one was needed? There are no easy answers, but this means there are no easy answers. Thus, we cannot rule out God and the miraculous, even if we want to... We just don't know. And this doesn't even consider an array of other inexplicable events – the broken relationship that is healed, the meaningful work that is finally found, the church that is almost dead but comes back to life (like this one in the 1830's).

We don't know for sure what is going on in the early church. It may be that as a whole new era is beginning with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God acts in ways that are limited to this early era. It may also be that the faith of early believers plays some role. Some scholars note that Peter may send the others out of the room - as other miracle workers, including Jesus, do - because it is important that everyone in the room embrace the possibility of something good. The others are all mourning bitterly. Peter needs to be focusing on hope.

We don't know for sure. All we know is that God is at work today doing new things in our lives if we will leave room for the possibility and have eyes to see, if we will just not put out the sacred fires.

In her book *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, Annie Dillard makes this fascinating, unsettling, hopeful observation.

Why do people in churches seem like cheerful brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute?... On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should use life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.

It is a provoking insight. If we understand the power we invoke in this place, if we really believe what we claim to believe about God, we will not be bored with what is going on, we will not put out the sacred fires, we will need to wear crash helmets!

I have no desire to swallow a bunch of lies. Wishful thinking alone is not a good thing. But nor do I want to close myself off to wonder and possibility. How could we ever think that we could understand it all? The best scientists acknowledge the limits of scientific inquiry and the validity of other forms of inquiry, especially spiritual inquiry. The God who raises Jesus from the dead, the God who raises Dorcas, is alive and at work in our world today! We can put out the fires or we can put on our crash helmets. This choice is ours.