



Celebrating God's Gifts of Change

#2 "Healing Change"

Sunday, May 12, 2019

Acts 9:36-43

Jesus' resurrection brings hope and new life to the communities gathered in his name.

I'm sure you have heard those old jokes about change. Most of them have to do with lightbulbs:

How many Pentecostal Christians does it take to change a light bulb? Only one since their hands are in the air anyway.

How many TV evangelists does it take to change a light bulb? One. But for the message of light to continue, send in your donation today.

How many mainline Protestants does it take to change a light bulb? At least ten, as they need to hold a debate on whether or not the light bulb exists. Even if they can agree upon the existence of the light bulb, they still may not change it to keep from alienating those who might use other forms of light. Also, they are divided over whether not the bulb actually needs to be changed.

How many Catholics does it take to change a light bulb? None. They always use candles.

How many summer camp leaders does it take to change light bulb? One. But soon all those around can warm up to its glowing.

How many Episcopalians does it take to change a light bulb? Four. One to change the bulb. One to bless the elements. One to pour the sherry. And one to offer a toast to the old light bulb.

How many Presbyterians does it take to change a light bulb? At least 15. One to change the light bulb, and three committees to approve the change and another to decide who brings the potato salad.

How many Amish does it take to change a light bulb? What's a light bulb?

Fifty years ago, Alvin Toffler wrote that change is not merely necessary to life, it is life. To live is to experience change. At times that change happens slowly, but most frustrating is the sort of change that is pushed upon us at once. Then we see change as upsetting, chaotic, disorienting. I got a new prescription in my glasses on Friday. That was not the sort of change I needed!

My training to become a ministry and life coach has taught me something else, however: change, even in chaos, can be a pathway to transformation. That sort of change invites us to become more of who God wants us to be.

In those moments, change becomes a pathway to transformation. That is the message Luke is trying to convey in the Acts of the Apostles. He writes stories of resurrection to Christians who yearn to experience power, wonder, transformation in their lives. In many ways, Luke could be writing to us.

Tabitha has been a member of every church I have ever known. Everywhere I have worshipped, I have seen her at work, quietly working away in the background, her life “overflowing” with good works and compassion. I have seen her cook dinners for hundreds of people. Once she brought diapers to a single mother without any money who had just put the last clean diaper she had on her baby. Another time I saw her organize a food drive for low income seniors. Several times I have seen her picking up people for church, checking on those who were alone, giving of herself time and time again.

Luke writes to Christians, like us, whose lives have been etched by grief, who have experienced the disruptive force of death and mourning. He offers the hope of healing change. He offers the promise of faith: “You shall see the face of God and live...be not afraid.”

It is the story of resurrection, the hope of the Good Shepherd who calls out to his sheep, and who says to them, “I give them eternal life.”

Luke’s words broaden our imagination by speaking of healing as God’s gift of life, and he does it by telling a story of a woman of faith named Tabitha.

Her name means “Gazelle” in Aramaic. She was a hard-working pillar of the church. A woman devoted to good works, acts of charity and compassion. Her life – her faith – were essential to the church at Joppa. She was particularly involved in caring for the widows of the community – a marginalized population whose needs often went unmet. Tabitha was a life-line for these women.

But then she died.

This is not an easy passage to understand. There are no easy roads through this scripture. How do we understand these sorts of miracle stories? What are we to make of Peter reviving a corpse? We have lost friends and loved ones, even those for whom we have prayed. Were are prayers unanswered?

Or, perhaps healing came not as a cure that we dictated, but as a gift of wholeness.

Of all the changes we experience in life, death is perhaps the most challenging. It is a curveball that flies toward us, hitting us between the eyes, often arriving with an unimaginable blow. We’re thrown under by waves of grief and sadness, cut off and isolated. That is what happened at Joppa, and it is what happens to us.

Death rocks us. Like the Christians in Joppa, we who are grieving are left yearning for comfort.

We have known those heart-breaking moments. Each of us can name the moments, times, and places when waves of grief and sadness fell over us. We know the chaos and disorientation that brings. Like the Christians at Joppa, we cry out for spiritual comfort. “Come to us.” “Hear our prayer.”

But we also know something else. We have also been touched and shaped by stories of resurrection, stories that fill us with hope, the sort of hope that John Dunne observed “awakens an entire life.” We become fully alive, we open ourselves to a hope of the spiritual adventure offered to us in Jesus Christ.

That is the hope of healing change, and it is my prayer for us – that we would tell stories of resurrection, stories of what it means to live and believe in Jesus in such a way that we experience eternal life.

If I may, I'd like to share a very personal story. Most of you know that my brother, Cliff Keating, died recently from complications related to a devastating degenerative disease known as "Frontotemporal Lobe Degeneration," or "FTD." Its effects are cruel, and especially for my brother, who was a gifted musician. As the disease progressed, he gradually lost the ability to keep track of rhythm. The evening that he passed away, my niece recalled that he had once told her of his great appreciation for Samuel Barber's solemn "Adagio for Strings." So they played a recording of Barber's magnificent work as his breathing became more and more labored. He was surrounded by his family and the music he loved. As the piece began, my sister in law noticed that Cliff's foot was keeping time with the music, moving steadily beneath the sheets of his hospital bed.

"I felt as though God was already healing his body," she told her pastor.

That is the promise of resurrection. Peter says to Tabitha, to the widows of Joppa, to the Christians gathered at her door, to us... "Rise." Get up. Feel the rhythms of resurrection pulsing in your body. Rise to serve those who are vulnerable, afraid, and poor. Rise to the sound of your name being called today.

Get up. Rise. That is our good news.