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Easter 4C

Sermon notes on
Revelation Acts 9.36-43
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This story is one of many in Acts in which the ministry which Jesus himself exercised is now continued in the ministry of the disciples. It is a familiar story for Christians if, perhaps, a strange one. And the strangeness, of course, relates to the resuscitation of Tabitha (Dorcas) from the dead.

Now a story like this is easily explained away if it seems too far over the top – clearly she wasn't *actually* dead but only, to quote a favourite line from a favourite movie in our house, "mostly dead",¹ which means, of course, "slightly alive"! This being the case, she was therefore quite amenable to resuscitation with the right pill or a sufficiently stern word: Tabitha, *arise!* The story then becomes something of a beat up – the tale of a miracle wrapped around a historical mistake. Now, we are not in any position to adjudicate on the historicity, and just "believing" that it "happened" won't get us very far either.

But we might at least allow the text its own space and ask the open question: what if it were so, if it were as the text relates to us? What difference would it make? Last Wednesday night in our current Faith Talk series we took a brief look at what it might mean to think "world". It was, unhappily, a rather complicated process of thinking, but at its heart the question was, "what *is* the world" or, more generally, what *is* "creation"? "Creation" is a notion which, scripturally, has in fact very little to do with the origins of the world and much more to do with the *character* of the world in which we live. Or, to put it differently, "creation" relates to what can be said to be "real" – what is, and is not, "so", and so what *matters*.

But the very notion of "reality" is a slippery one. Our sense for reality is something which is formed by our personal experience – the particular things which happen to us – but it is also shaped very much by what we are taught by our language and culture about what the world is like, and what our place in it happens to be.

Living in the time we do, we are quite thoroughly shaped by the two hundred years or so of scientific thought behind us, and this greatly

affects our sense of what the world is – of what is most real. Now, being scientifically shaped, there are a couple of ways of dealing with the mismatch of our sense for the real with such a text as our Acts one this morning. One way, of course, is to reject it as impossible and so as being, at best, wishful thinking. Another is to accept it, but by means of a kind of double-think which, on the one hand, declares that the world is "really" as we know it to be scientifically, while, on the other hand, there can be "miracles" like the story relates, which interrupt the otherwise regulated and predictable world. The main problem with this is that it leaves us with divided minds – now "rational" or "scientific" or "realistic", and now "faithful". We find ourselves in the situation of "believing" one thing but in fact having to act as if another were *really* true, "Sunday thinking" and "rest of the week thinking" – kind of a "Trust in God, but keep your powder dry"² approach to living and believing in the world. Perhaps the most important thing to notice about this way of thinking is that it treats faith as *another piece of information* about the world. "Trust in God" is a back-up for when the powder is wet – another string to the bow, another tool in the kit, although we work *very* hard to keep the powder dry in the first place so that we don't need to call on the "last resort" of "faith".

But allowing the story as we read it in Acts to stand is not a matter of believing one more thing about the world – in this case something which is very difficult to fit in with everything else: that, under certain circumstances, the dead might arise. If what is said to happen to Dorcas is what "actually" happened, what "real-ly" happened then we have here a total paradigm shift, a *totally* new conception of the world.

I want to illustrate the point by re-stating something I proposed on Wednesday, drawing on a line from St Paul. In his discussion in Romans of the way in which Abraham is set right before God, Paul describes the justifying God as the one who gives life to the dead and calls into existence

¹ See it on YouTube:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tSAC3dux3p0> !

² That is, *gunpowder*: "Put your trust in God, my boys, and keep your powder dry!" from the poem "Oliver's Advice" by Valentine Blacker (1778 - 1823), published in *Ballads of Ireland* (ed. Edward Hayes, 1856.

the things that do not exist (Romans 4.17 NRSV). While it might sound like there are two attributes of God mentioned here – that God first creates (calls into existence) and then gives life to those who've subsequently died within creation, I suspect that his point runs much more deeply than this. Resurrection is not another thing on top of creation or in addition to it – one more "aspect" of creation, or a thing which comes *after* creation. Creation and resurrection participate in each other – in fact are inextricably intertwined. What God does when he raises the dead to life is what happens when the world is called into existence from nothing. If "creation" refers to the world which is there in front of us, then its fullest meaning is not to be discovered only from our current experience of it (or from its past), but from the resurrection of the dead, beginning with Jesus.

The interconnectedness of calling into being from nothing and raising the dead to life runs so deep that the one cannot be considered without the other. As soon as we try to separate the two, neither makes any sense in relation to the other; resurrection simply "interrupts" the created order, and so is incomprehensible because it leaves us with our divided minds. To overcome this doublethink we could say that God doesn't just "do creation again" when it comes to raising Jesus. Taking lead from Paul the resurrection can be considered to be the *first* thing which God does, the start of the story, its true beginning, which reflects back upon the nature of the world we think we have known all the way along.

This makes possible a startling suggestion. Instead of the resurrection somehow being an interruption of the normal pattern of things, the apparently normal pattern of things can now be seen to be an interruption of "resurrection" – of creation as it *should* be, and be experienced. The miracle of the raising of Tabitha, then, is not an invitation to believe that the whole system of natural laws has been broken here and there in ways like the story of Peter and Tabitha relates; it is rather an invitation to shift gear, to re-image ourselves and what we think to be most real about us and our worlds.

The God who raises from the dead, in that very action – *makes* the world, calls it into being, reveals what we *thought* to be creation to have been only a pale shadow. For a creation which dies and decays to nothing discovers, in a resurrection, that its God is *free* – free to create it again. And a creature which never really knew this, and then learns it, surely now truly, "really" exists for the first time.

A people which holds to this is no longer a "creation" people living out of its knowledge of the ways of the world, but a "resurrection people" which lives out of its hope for more than

can yet be seen. Creation – "reality" with *this* God – is not something which took place a long time ago and is now running its pre-determined course, for better or for worse, with God occasionally breaking in with a resurrection here or there. If resurrection is the key to interpreting the character of God and God's world, then creation is properly something which takes place in the space between "dead" and "alive", between "lost" and "found", between accursed and accepted, between condemned and redeemed.

The sign of the raising of Tabitha invites us to consider that we are not yet finished, indeed that we don't even know what it means to be perfected, for as much as we are not yet raised so we are not yet created, not yet fully alive.

And yet that does not matter, for God *is* coming, and when he does *what* he does *is* to call into being that which does not yet exist – raising to life the dead souls that we are, guiding us to the springs of the water of life and wiping away every tear from our eyes. This is our hope; this we name to be the destiny and true character of the world.