

MELONIE HAMBLY'S SERMON NOTES FOR EASTER 4, 8 MAY 2022



If we did a quick quiz and the question was, “Name someone raised from the Dead in the Bible”; you would imagine that the top answers would be Jesus and Lazarus. But of course you have all heard our reading from Acts today so you are probably all shouting “Tabitha” at the screen. Usually, however, the raising of Tabitha is probably not the most well-known of such miracles.



We often forget that raising the dead was not confined to the New Testament. In Kings (1 Kings 17 17-24) Elijah raises a widow's son. This happens in an upper room and first Elijah prays, “Lord my God, let this boy's life return to him”.

In 2 Kings, Elisha similarly raises the son of a Shunammite woman. (2 Kings 4:18-37). Again in an upper room, again by first praying. Elisha knew the family through an act of simple hospitality some years before.



Elisha, or at least his bones, gets credit for another raising. Sometime after Elisha had died and was buried, some men were burying another body in the same area. The grave diggers saw a band of Moabite raiders approaching so hurriedly threw the body they were burying into Elisha's grave. Scripture records that when the body touched Elisha's bones, the man came to life and stood upon his feet. Why exactly Elisha's bones were exposed is unclear; presumably in a land composed of largely of rock and stone, burial sites were in short supply and communal graves were not uncommon.



The raising the dead miracles by Jesus are of, course, better known. The first is the only son of a widow in the town of Nain. In this account, it is worth noting that Jesus doesn't pray first; He calls to the dead man directly. Similarly, Jesus next raises Jarius' daughter. Again, he does this by speaking directly to the dead girl. Similar words are used to both: "get up". Jarius is a synagogue leader and you would imagine was not a natural follower of Jesus, but in his desperation he had turned to Him.

Lazarus, probably the most famous after Jesus himself, is next. The account of Jesus raising Lazarus is written by John not Luke and so feels a little different, but once again Jesus speaks directly to the dead man, who then emerges from the tomb.

The Resurrection of Jesus himself is of course the most important of all these, but having just done Easter this is not the focus today.



In Acts, we have two raisings, Tabitha and Eutychus. The story of Eutychus is that he was a young man who lived in Troas. Paul was speaking in an upper room until late into the night. Eutychus sank into a deep sleep (which is probably a comment on Paul's preaching!) and fell out of the window to his death three storeys below. Paul rushes down and throws himself on the young man and puts his arms around him. Eutychus comes back to life.

Now we come to today's reading. The story of Tabitha is straightforward enough. We have Luke's clear narrative to thank for that. Tabitha is a well-known woman of good repute. She is portrayed in Art works as a holy woman, and this might have been true; but more importantly she was a generous-hearted woman who worked hard to help those in need. She is clearly much loved by the people who know her. She becomes ill and dies and her body is placed in an upper room. Peter is sent for and responds immediately. He is nearby in Lydda but it is still a 12 mile walk to Joppa.



Geographically Joppa is further away from Jerusalem and on the limits of Jewish territory. Peter is moving away from his comfort zone. He gets to the upper room, gets everyone out of the room and then prays. He tells Tabitha to “get up” and she does.

Tabitha is not the first or last of Peter’s miracles; immediately before raising Tabitha, he has healed Aeneas, a paralyzed man with the words “Jesus Christ heals you, Get up.” In Chapter 3 of Acts there is a similar account of him healing a lame beggar “In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk”

All interesting stories which share several common elements. There is the drama of it all; a young man falling out of a window, a corpse leaping out of a grave, the rush of loved ones to get Peter, or Elisha or Jesus to come to the body. There is the desperate sadness in each story; family and friends bereft and mourning. There is hope in the stories; the hope that someone can do something wonderful and bring their loved one back to life; and there is belief following the raising. Many people coming to God or to Jesus.

These are the over-arching elements but there are similarities of detail as well: The upper room features in many accounts, and although this was a common living arrangement the repetition of the setting automatically sends our minds to the Resurrection of our Lord and his appearance to the disciples.

The people who are raised demonstrate an inclusivity. These are many ordinary people whose deaths would marginalise their relatives and friends

even more; or people such as Jarius who are not an obvious part of Jesus' followers.

A very important detail is that Elijah, Elisha and Peter all pray before raising the dead. Very clearly attributing any power of miracle to God or Jesus. In the story of Eutychus, praying isn't mentioned, but to be fair someone had just fallen out of a window; and Paul is very clear in his writing that he acts in Jesus' name.

The main exception is of course Jesus. He doesn't ask God to raise the dead, but speaks directly to the person themselves. This clearly places the power of miracles with Him. The others act in his name.



Finally, there is the commonality of the phrase "Get up". This is often repeated in healing miracles, as well as in raising the dead. Furniture such as beds and chairs were for wealthier people. Poorer people lay on mats on the dusty floor. When people were told to "get up", they were getting up from the floor. They were getting up a very long way, from a place where people stood over them to being part of the community again.

Listening to the stories of people being raised from the dead can be distressing to people today who have lost and still mourn loved ones. What we most want is for them to be alive again, but these miracles seem confined to Biblical times. We might wonder why our loved one wasn't healed or brought back to life. Possibly we think that somehow we didn't deserve this; that it was a comment or punishment on us. Such thoughts are, of course, unfounded and unhelpful, but grief and loss generate all sorts of tricky thoughts and difficult emotions. What the stories tell us is as much about God's compassion as his

power. The people raised are ordinary folk. Some are 'good' like Tabitha; others maybe not. It does not seem to be a qualification. Instead we should view the stories as a Revelation of God and Jesus; with the power to transcend death and the compassion to enact this for ordinary people. This is His capability and potential. By enacting such compassion and potential in Bible times we see the nature of God and of Jesus.

We can also take a broader view. Sadly, for some people, whether through traumatic experience, circumstance or physical or mental ill health, life has become more a case of existence than living. Figuratively lying on a mat on a dusty floor, watching the living go by. In John Chapter 10, Jesus says that "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (NRSV). As well as revealing God's power and compassion, surely the examples of raising the dead, should be seen in this light - that Jesus comes to give abundant life, not just existence.



Peter and those others who act in Jesus' name in performing these miracles are offering Jesus' abundant life, not just to the people they raise, but to all who are around them to witness the raising. The bible offers us the opportunity to be like those who were there, witnesses to this, and, just like them, to share in this life giving offer.

Amen