

St James United Church



Message for May 11, 2025 Fourth Sunday of Easter (Mother's Day)

"Risen to Serve" - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Revelation 7:9-17; Acts 9:36-43; Excerpt from Julian of Norwich, *The Revelations of Divine Love of Julian of Norwich*, trans. James Walsh (Harper and Brothers: 1961), 162

As Glenda noted, we didn't hear a gospel reading this morning. We made that choice in part because at this point in the Easter season the lectionary moves from stories of the Risen Christ to instead present passages from earlier in Jesus' life. This is because there are so few Easter stories, and yet, I would argue, we have an entire gospel of resurrection to draw on. We just heard from it, the Acts of the Apostles, intended by the author of Luke as part two of his gospel.

So let's begin this morning with an exploration of our reading from Acts, chapter 9, as an Easter story. An obvious place to start is with the end of the story, where Peter raises Tabitha from the dead. Peter goes into the room where her body has been laid, speaks with the widows who are praying, and after sending them out, like Jesus did when he raised a twelve-year-old girl, says to the body, "Tabitha, *anasthethi*, arise." The command is like the Greek Easter greeting, *Christos anesti*, or Christ is risen. And that's what she does. She opens her eyes, she sits up, she rises.

She rises miraculously through Peter's command, because she had lived within the power of Christ's resurrection already, raised in her death because she had been raised in her life. That is clear by what is said of her, how she had been devoted to good works and to giving alms (to acts of charity from out of her means). In this she was being a mother in the community and being a way for the Risen Jesus to be a mother through her as she tended to others, especially to those who were vulnerable. Based on the widows praying with her, they were likely the main recipients of her charity, widows in that time always quite an economically vulnerable group. It was to tend to the needs of widows that Stephen and six other men in Jerusalem were set apart as the first *diakonoi*, diaconal ministers, and Tabitha seems to have been the same in Joppa.

So what is a diaconal minister, or a deacon as the ministry is called in other denominations? It comes from the word *diakonia*, service. The symbol is often the pitcher and towel, which as I shared in our Learning Together time is based on Jesus using these when he washed his disciples' feet. As Protestants we're familiar with the priesthood of all believers. The teaching is that we share in Christ's priesthood through baptism, all of us equal before God and called to ministry. But in my doctoral studies I came across how we're a diaconate of all believers too, Jesus calling all of us to serve. The idea reminds us that our main field of ministry isn't in this building but the world. A diaconal friend described this ministry as standing on the threshold, acting as a bridge between the church and the world, going out to respond to the needs of others and returning to raise awareness of those needs, especially of the most vulnerable. This is a

shared call. As such we're messengers, ambassadors of Christ's love, sharing the gospel through our actions even more than our words.

An important part of this ministry is social critique, it never being enough to assist those of us in need without also asking critical questions about why they are in need. Doing this is not without risk, especially in today's world where those raising the alarm south of the border are arrested for speaking out. But this aligns us with Jesus, sharing in his resurrection meaning that we live as he would if he were us. This is the context of Revelation 9, as the multitude worships the lamb who was slain, their robes washed in his blood. They praised him not just for his sacrifice but because they had passed through their own ordeal. The Book of Revelation is less a prophecy for a future time of peril than an apocalypse, a word of hope and encouragement for those going through their own peril. Christian in the first centuries of the church went through such peril because as they did as Jesus had done, their focus on caring for others, treating everyone as a beloved child of God, they were viewed as a threat to the state. In our time, they'd be accused of being "woke", which just means being aware of issues around social justice and inequality and so having compassion for those hurting because of them. Appropriate then that Peter told Tabitha to rise up, to wake up. She'd awoken to the *diakonia* Christ called her to and as Peter restored her to the community, she'd keep doing the same. That's our call as well.

This call is grounded in our being siblings, God as our Father and our Mother, across every tribe and nation. Our threshold ministry then is directed not just to our immediate neighbourhood but to recognise the whole world as our neighbourhood. So even though we face troubles at home, we need to advocate for the people of Gaza, do the same for the families of the Israeli hostages as their loved ones are forgotten about, be in solidarity with both our Jewish and Muslim siblings in Canada, seek peace in Sudan, Ukraine, most recently between India and Pakistan, encourage activism in the US, especially on behalf of immigrants and the trans community, in other words do what Jesus would in our context, be bridge-builders as the new Pope said from the balcony of St. Peter's: "God loves us, God loves you all, and evil will not prevail! All of us are in God's hands. So, let us move forward, without fear, together, hand in hand with God and with one another other! We are followers of Christ. Christ goes before us. The world needs his light. Humanity needs him as the bridge that can lead us to God and his love. Help us, one and all, to build bridges through dialogue and encounter, joining together as one people, always at peace." That is a powerful summation of the gospel, a diaconal gospel, Jesus with us as we live it, sharing his resurrection, living through us as we serve others.

And he helps us to do that by feeding us with himself, like any mother does, nurturing us in our prayer, as we reflect on his word, and as we gather around this table. So friends, in the continued unfolding of Easter, not just in this season but in our lives, may we draw on his presence here so that we can be his presence in the world, awake to him as we are awakened to the needs of others, risen in him so that as we go out into the world as *diakonos*, as servants, the whole world rises in his justice, in his compassion, and in his love. Amen.