

*St. John Lutheran Church*

*The Sermon*

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May 8, 2022

Acts 9:36-43

John 10:22-30

When you read history books, you will usually find out about big name people, like Abraham Lincoln or George Washington, or Queen Elizabeth I. You don't hear so much about the ordinary, everyday people.

In the New Testament, you hear about big name people and ordinary people as well. You will hear big names, like Mary the mother of Jesus, who set the tone in the Gospel of Luke when she sang "God has scattered the proud in the delusions of their hearts. . . God has cast the mighty from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. . ."

Mary Magdalene is also a big name in the New Testament. In all four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, she is one of the women who come to the empty tomb on Easter morning. In the Gospel of John, she is the first to recognize the risen Jesus, and the first to proclaim him risen from the dead.

Peter is a big-name person too. In the first lesson for today, Peter has been brought back from his failure. During Jesus's trial, he denied that he ever knew Jesus, three times, and yet now he is doing miracles.

In the verses immediately before the first lesson for today, Peter heals a man named Aeneas, who was paralyzed for seven years.

Now, he heals a woman, Tabitha.

This, by the way, fits a pattern in Luke and Acts, where we hear stories in pairs, one about a man, one about a woman. For example, Jesus tells two stories in Luke to describe what God is like. First, he says God is like a good shepherd, who finds us, the sinners, the lost sheep. Then Jesus says God is like a woman who searches for her lost coin, again, for us sinners. This is what God is like, described in male images and female images.

So also now Peter heals a man, then a woman. Peter is a big name.

But Peter's name is not the only name in the first lesson for today, is it? There is another name. This name is not nearly as big as Peter's. This person is more ordinary, more every day. Her name is Tabitha, which means, Gazelle. Isn't that a beautiful name?

Tabitha is not mentioned anywhere else in Scripture. She is one of those regular people who hold the world together.

We hear her name in both the Jewish language of Aramaic and the Greek language, which may indicate that she was bilingual, maybe even bicultural. That is, she would live in and understand both Jewish culture and Greek culture.

This would have been a great advantage in the early church, because we know that there was tension in the early church, between people of Jewish culture and people of Greek culture—people who spoke Jewish languages and wore Jewish clothes, and those who spoke Greek language and wore Greek of clothes. Gazelle could have gone back and forth between both cultures and helped them work together.

If she did help people work together, she would have done so with an audacious, bold, courageous, quiet love. Because here's what Gazelle did: she worked with widows. This was a bold thing because widows were not regarded as important in either Jewish or Greek society. A woman's place was in the home, so if you weren't rich already and if your husband died, you could be destitute. You could go back to your father's family, if they would take you. Or could live with your brother, if he was well off enough to feed you. If not, you were in trouble. There was not a place for you in society. You were not important. You did not belong.

In the church, you were important if you were a widow. You belonged, if you were a widow. Because in the church, our importance, our dignity, our value do not come from our position in society, on whether we have a big name or not.

In Roman society, your importance depended on whether you had money, or power, or a prominent family, or whether you were popular. You were important if you were a man, or related to an important man, and if you were a citizen.

In the church, it didn't matter. Whether you were a man or a woman, you were important, you belonged. Whether you were rich or not so rich, you were in important, you belonged. Whether you had lots of power to get people to do things for you, or you didn't, you were still important, still belonged. Whether you were a citizen or not, you were still important, you still belonged because in the church, or importance, our belonging does not come from our gender or our wealth or our popularity or our power or our citizenship. Our importance, our belonging comes from the hands of Jesus.

In the Gospel lesson for today, Jesus says, "No one will snatch [my sheep] out of my hand." Our dignity comes from the fact that we are in the hands of Jesus, and nothing can snatch us away. Nothing.

So Gazelle is bold enough to contradict what her society says about who is important, and who belongs. Instead of ignoring the widows, she works with the widows, and they love her for it. We see this because now, Gazelle has died. And the whole church is heartbroken. They send a couple of the men to walk ten miles to find Peter. Maybe Peter can do something. The men ask Peter, "Please come without delay." So he comes. After a twenty-mile walk, they get back, and the widows are still in tears. They show Peter the clothes that Gazelle has made for them.

You know how, if someone makes a quilt of an Afghan for you, with their own hands, you can feel those hands blessing you as you sleep under it. If someone makes you a shirt, you can feel their fingers touching your shoulder or your back, encouraging you and giving you strength through your day.

I can imagine the widows saying things to Peter like, "Look at the careful stitching that she made on this tunic she gave me. That takes a lot of time and skill to do." And, "Look how she sewed a lining into this cloak, to keep me warm at night."

God works through people like Gazelle, who show common, every day grace. We may be able to make clothes, or cook food, or count money or repair cars. All kinds of things we do. If we do them with courageous love, outrageous compassion, like Gazelle, then we hold the world together.

There are plenty of things that are pulling the world apart these days. People tell lies, and then back them up with guns and bombs and missiles. God holds the world together through people like Gazelle, through ordinary people like you.

So Peter puts everyone out of the room, he kneels down and prays, he looks at Gazelle, and he says, "Gazelle, get up. She sits up, Peter helps her to stand. She is alive again.

Here's my point: Not even death can snatch us out of Jesus's hands. Our dignity, our importance, our belonging come from God's hands and from nowhere else. So we are free to use our dignity to bless others, like Gazelle did, like Peter did, like Jesus did. That holds the world together. Thanks be to God.