

## “LIFE FORCES AND DEATH FORCES”

A strange thing happened to me this week. I was driving home from church and it was really dark. I turned left off 82 on a pretty deserted road. Bright lights surrounded me and I could not see a thing. My door opened and I was lifted out of the car. In the midst of these bright lights I rose up in the air, coming closer and closer to the source of the light. That is all I remember. It was 9:30 when I turned onto that street; now it was midnight. I was abducted by aliens.

Now I bet you don't believe me. What really matters is that Sharlene did. “Where have you been and why didn't you call?” I confess this did not really happen. Sharlene I will talk to you after the service. But even though you have no way of knowing whether this really happened to me or not, there would be a lot of tough questions if I stuck to the story. “Are you all right? Have you been sleeping well at night? Working too hard? Hitting the prescription drugs a little too hard?” If I insisted that this really happened to me, you would put me away or try to find some quick explanation for why this could not have possibly happened.

The bottom line is that it is terribly difficult to believe in something that we have not experienced personally. Nothing can happen that has not happened before. This is particularly true of religious experience. As Peter Berger has said we live in a culture that is engaged in the constant process of devaluing and deligitimizing the religious experiences we have. There are hucksters who make a very good living by deception. Steve Martin played a faith healer based on a real life story, who using radio transmitters and research into people's lives in small towns, appeared to be able to see into their lives and heal them. He was eventually exposed as a crook and

run out of town. How do we differentiate between the legitimate and illegitimate, how do we discern between miracle and hoax? How do we enter into the mystery of God's working in the world if we ourselves have not had a particular experience?

In the passage we heard from Acts we are introduced to a woman named Tabitha who lived in Joppa. She is an older woman and is the only woman in the entire New Testament who merits the feminine form of the term “disciple.” She is known for her “good works and acts of charity.” Like Mother Theresa of Calcutta, Tabitha cares for those whom no one else cared about, making them clothes. Tabitha becomes ill and dies. When Peter arrives at the scene of death the women, mostly widows, were crying; who would take care of them now that this big hearted woman was dead? Their benefactor was dead and now these women were as good as dead. Widows made up the bottom rung of the Jewish social strata, much like they do in most cultures. Single mothers and their children make up the bulk of those in the United States who live in poverty.

Reminiscent of Jesus raising Lazarus from the tomb Peter looks down at the lifeless body of this disciple and says, “*Tabitha, get up!*” Jesus raised Lazarus, Peter raises Tabitha. Apparently Jesus' disciples have tapped into the same power that Jesus knew in his lifetime. Easter does not just happen once, but again and again. Where death seems like the final reality suddenly there is a power greater than death. Into the regions of death comes a force of life so powerful that the dead are getting back up on their feet. Do you believe it? As I said earlier there are strong cultural forces against believing in something so wild. The dead do not come back to life. They stay dead where they belong.

What does this story mean? We have known many good people who have died. Those who have dedicated their lives toward serving God and others yet when they died they stayed dead and buried. We have all lost loved ones and they are still gone. There is more to this story than what is at stake with one life, regardless of how good that life was. We may have as much trouble believing in this person back from the dead as we do believing that we too are raised. I am not talking about life after death. I am talking about being raised here and now. As I said on Easter Sunday the resurrection is not so much about one man's escape from the grave as it is a victory of seemingly powerless love over loveless power.

Loveless power we know much about. We have seen incredible tragedy over the past few years due to loveless power. We saw a group of men turn commercial aircraft into weapons that took thousands of lives and billions of dollars in damage. Students at Columbine high school killing classmates, a mentally unstable college student at Virginia Tech going on a shooting rampage. Loveless power delivered by paranoid fanatics, who in their own warped and twisted way think they have accomplished something. It was the same loveless power that saw Jesus as a threat to the political and religious authorities of his time. The cross is a deadly brutal symbol. Just like terrorism, the cross was intended to spread fear among the masses---do what we want or this is what you will get. Resurrection was God's way of dealing with terrorism, to bring life out of the ruins. When Tabitha is raised from the dead God is sending a message of hope to those whose lives were in ruin. When Jesus raised Lazarus it was the beginning of the end for him. Peter too is risking his life as witness to God's life giving power.

Jesus' words were often directed at the religious leaders, but his actions were with the poor. Jesus knew that radical change was necessary, but not through a bloody revolution. His words threatened, but his actions were things like healing, feeding, restoring life. Tabitha is doing the ministry that Jesus himself had done for so many. The promise of this story is that when we do ministry in his name, that healing restorative power will be with us as well. We are being faithful when we carry out acts of mercy and compassion. We are being faithful when we strive for social justice that reaches to the core of why people suffer so miserably. We are being faithful when we hope for the change that users in Thy Kingdom Come. We are being faithful when we live with the reality that loveless power always wins over powerless love.

The death force is strong in human beings. We are self-destructive; we see it in the way we treat the environment, the ways in which we treat each other, and the ways we treat ourselves. I don't know where it comes from but I remember one very strange incident when I was about 20. I was sitting on the ledge of a hotel window in Chicago, about 20 stories up. There are not too many

high rises where the windows open completely if at all, but these did. As I was looking at the activities on the sidewalk below, a chill ran down my spine. I had the sudden urge to jump! This is not like my alien story. I wasn't depressed or sad and had never considered suicide. Yet for a split second I had an overwhelming urge to throw myself out the window. I didn't do it. Thank goodness the life force within me was stronger than the death force. Freud has written extensively about human beings having a latent death wish. I remember years later in a psychology class reading that he thought most people's fear of heights was not a fear of falling, but a fear of jumping. It wasn't an exhaustive study, but I am right there with Freud. Suicide is still one of the leading causes of death for teenagers.

The most frightening metaphor I can imagine continues to plague the world. Suicide bombers are wreaking havoc not only in Iraq, but in many countries. Suicide bombers, whether driving a truck full of explosives or wearing a belt of TNT represent the culture of death in an alarming way. There is really no way to stop them. Charismatic leaders whip up hatred and convince these people that the best way to use their lives is to give their lives for the cause. Of course this is not new---kamikaze pilots for Japan wreaked terror on our Navy in WWII, but there at least it was used as a weapon of war and not a weapon against whoever happens to be in the way. The rhetoric of extremism, the hate and anger seems to me to be rising exponentially.

There is nothing more dangerous than charismatic leaders who are driven by a death force. Not only do they want to jump out of the window, but they want to take as many others with them as possible. "*Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits.*" I do not know much about sheep though there are many references in scripture to sheep and shepherds. I love lamb chops. Most of what I have heard about sheep is unflattering. They are supposed to be pretty stupid, lacking in initiative and likely to fall over cliffs and entangle themselves in brush. That is why they need a good shepherd.

Speaking of false prophets I almost didn't finish my sermon for today and did not plan to come to church this morning. Why you ask? Not because I had a golf date or wanted to sleep in. The reason was that I did not expect to have to come this morning. Some evangelical Christian predicted that April 25, 2010 would be the beginning of the Rapture. Talk about some violence! All non-Christians (and that would include all of you and me) would be boiling in nasty hot stuff while they would be swept off into paradise. The bloodbath would make Baghdad look like a walk in the park. The vast majority of the world's people would be destroyed according to the Book of Revelation read the way most evangelicals read it. It would be like the nuclear holocaust we have avoided through the long history of the cold war. And God would be the author.

The culture of death in the wolves clothing of religion! How could one move from the incredible sacrifice on the cross, the life giving act of resurrection, the tremendous compassion of the disciples as they followed the risen Lord to looking forward to most of the world's people being wiped out by fire and brimstone. It is insane. If the fruit is death and destruction it can have nothing to do with the Christ. We have to stand firm against the culture of death in all its forms. But it requires more than being against culture of death---we are required to act in ways that affirm God's intention that all of creation has a dignity to their living.

Easter faith calls us to believe that there is a power let loose in the world. It is powerful life force. In Acts Peter raises Tabitha from the dead. Do you believe it? The problem with the story for us may not be that we doubt that Peter could raise this dear old woman to life, but rather that we are unsure we could be raised to life. Where in your life are things fixed, closed, settled and dead? Where do you need to be healed and made alive? Start there. Let God restore you to life and then do whatever you can to share that new life with those who need a good word.