A Sermon Preached by Pastor Justin Johnson
Our Saviour's Lutheran Church Bellingham, WA
4th Sunday of Easter (Good Shepherd Sunday) April 25, 2010
Text: Acts 9:36-43; Revelation 7:9–17; John 10:22–30

Grace to you and peace from God the Father and from the Risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Here's a thought for you: Did you ever think that Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas, was not excited about being brought back to life? Just think about it for a moment with me. Here Tabitha gets sick and dies. My experience in sitting with people as they are close to death is that it is not a pleasant experience. Sure, it can be made more tolerable through comfort care. I wonder if she arose and thought to herself, "Man, I am going to have to go through that all again… Thanks a lot, Peter."

We are not told what Tabitha thought about it all. But it is a question that I ponder in light of the promises that we have in Jesus Christ. We confess and believe that we will be raised from the dead on the last day. And thus death is but a sleep, and probably some of the best sleep that we will ever get. And it is sleep that we will need given the vision of John in Revelation where people are praising the Lamb day and night. Imagine being woken up from the best sleep of your life only to find out that you are back in your old life, in your old body. In Jesus, we talk about new creation and the old passing away. Paul speaks in Corinthians about in Christ being raised imperishable. I understand that to be a body that does not get sick and die. The vision of John in Revelation speaks of a new heaven and new earth. This is not what Tabitha experiences in being brought back to life. She wakes up to the way everything used to be.

But it is a life-changing experience for those around her. Tabitha seems to be a woman of some means. And it seems as though she has taken time to create tunics and other clothing items for the widows in that community. She has taken time to care for and show love to those who are alone in her community. And it is clear that she touched their lives with her work and caring. It is apparent that her work has not gone unnoticed by other followers of Jesus Christ. The disciples in Joppa heard that Peter was in the area and so not one person, but two men were sent to Peter and they told Peter to come without delay. And so Peter goes and when he gets there, he is led to the upper room where Tabitha is laid. And it is while he is in the

upper room that all the widows are there and they stand beside Peter weeping and they are showing him the tunics and the other clothing that Tabitha had made and given to them.

We can imagine this scene quite easily. Perhaps you have even experienced or participated in it when a family member or friend died. Those who gather around usually share stories of how the person touched their lives. They show things that were of importance to that person. I know that I could show you a cribbage board of my grandfather's that we used to mark our scores on as we battled against one another. No, this scene is not hard to imagine.

So what does Peter do? He sends everyone out of the room and gets down on his knees and he prays. We don't know if it was a short prayer or a long prayer or how much time passes, but after praying, he turns to the body and he says, "Tabitha, get up." And she opens her eyes and sees Peter, and then she sits up. Peter gives her a hand and helps her up and then shows her to be alive to all gathered.

And now at this point in the story, we would imagine there to be some sort of indication of joy or happiness of some sort and "then they praised God." Or, they thanked Peter for coming. But there is none of that. The author of Acts, Luke, tells us that "this became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord." (Acts 9:42)

Yes, it is through this outpouring of God's power that people come to believe in Jesus and the promises that he brings. One of the promises that we proclaim in Jesus is that death no longer has the final say and in this story in Acts, we get a glimpse of that. Even though Tabitha is raised to life again into what we might call her old life, I am pretty sure that she was a changed person and so were the people around her for they were given a taste of what is to come, when the dead will be raised imperishable and we will be made new creations as we worship God in the new heaven and the new earth that Revelation speaks of.

Yes, in this story, we get a glimpse of what it will look like for the Lamb of God, who is our great shepherd, to lead us through the valley of the shadow of death into life everlasting.

For it is Jesus Christ who has defeated death and has power over it and he has got death in a life grip. And he has us, his sheep, in a life grip as well. And Jesus tells us that once we are in his grip, there is nothing or no one that can snatch us out of his hand. He has got the life grip on us. And as he holds onto us in his life grip, he gives us life. He leads us beside still waters, he restores our souls, he makes us to lie down in green pastures, he leads us through the valley of the shadow of death, and comforts us. Yes, in his grip, we are given life. And in his grip, we are led to the table, where in the presence of our enemies who would threaten our lives, we can eat, for death can no longer grip us for we are in the life grip of Jesus.

And this is what Jesus comes for, to give you and me life. He comes to take us by the hand or by the scruff of our neck and put his life grip on us. And look out, for when Jesus gets a hold of you, all heaven breaks loose. Thanks be to God. Amen.