

“Get Up!”

Introduction: I think it’s fair to say that as we walk this journey of faith, we experience times on the mountain top as well as times in the valley. Those valley times can come from a variety of reasons. One certainly can be the hard and even suspicious attitude the world can have about the faith we profess.

Peter Kreeft, professor of philosophy at BC, gives voice to this in his book, *Back to Virtue*. He writes:

If you are at a fashionable cocktail party and offer in conversation that you love to play with porcupines, or plan to sell CIA secrets to the Russians, or that you are considering becoming a Palestinian terrorist, you will find a buzzing, fascinated crowd around you, eager to listen. But if you confess that you believe that Jesus is God, that he died to save us from sin, or that there really are a Heaven and a Hell, you will very soon be talking to empty air, with a distinct chill.

Such an attitude can leave us mired in discouragement, so we need to be reminded, and encouraged, as the two accounts in our text do for us today, that Jesus is Lord, and that he is risen from the dead. Further, we need to be reminded that the resurrection of Jesus is not just a one-off event, but that in the resurrection of Jesus, the life-giving power of God has been let loose in the world. “He is risen” makes a claim about reality now: It is not a closed reality in which we live; anything can happen, anytime and anywhere! Luke doesn’t answer all our questions about miracles in these brief narratives; he simply inserts them into his broader story-line, and therefore into the flow of life that the followers of Jesus had begun to live. He does so both for their encouragement, and for ours as well.

I. A Pair of Miracles

A. As we come to this pair of miracles in Acts, Pentecost and the dramatic arrival of the Spirit on that day has taken place. The church has begun to grow, but, at the same time, to face opposition. The intensifying persecution actually served to move the followers of Jesus out from Jerusalem and to “scatter” the good news about him into the surrounding cities and towns (8:1-4). At this point as well, Paul has undergone his dramatic conversion, from chief persecutor of the young church to an avid proclaimer of the good news. But before chronicling his many church-planting adventures, Luke pauses to share a bit about what Peter is up to.

B. Peter is introduced as being engaged in a kind of itinerant ministry. That is, he traveled about the country not only to bear witness to the good news to non-believers, but also to encourage and strengthen “the Lord’s people,” those who had already begun to follow Jesus. We first meet Peter in a town called Lydda. Today it is known as Lod; it is the site of the modern Tel Aviv airport. It’s a sparse account but what Luke wants us to know is that in Lydda, Peter meets a man named Aeneas who has been paralyzed, and so bed-ridden, for eight years. Peter declares to Aeneas that Jesus Christ has healing power and then he commands him: “Get up and roll up your mat.” Immediately Aeneas does just that. He gets up and makes his bed. One commentator wryly observes that this truly is a miracle as many of us have been exhorting our teenagers to do exactly that for years without any success!

C. Peter then moves ten miles up the coast to the town of Joppa. He has been fetched there by two men in the faith community who were desperate to have Peter come back with them. We’re not exactly sure what they expected Peter to do but most likely they had heard of the wonder working that

had taken place in Lydda. Their concern focused on a woman named Tabitha, who had recently died and had been prepared for burial. When Peter entered the room where she lay, he could see that her death had caused a crisis for this community. The widows seemed particularly upset. They were the poor, the most vulnerable ones who had no one to look out for them. Tabitha, it seemed, had done so. Her care included making needed clothing for these widows. Her name means “Gazelle,” which seems to match the very graceful life she lived. Well, when Peter arrived where Tabitha lay, he cleared the room, got on his knees to pray, and then told Tabitha to get up. Which she did. She opened her eyes, sat up, and when Peter took her by the hand she stood up. And there was great rejoicing!

II. Works that Testify

A. As I said earlier, Luke really explains nothing about how these two miracles happened. After all, how do you explain a miracle?! But we can make a couple of observations as we consider how they testify to the presence and power of Jesus and so help guard against discouragement and despair.

1. Both miracles were accomplished by the power of Jesus. Jesus, in fact, had performed similar miracles while he was still with his disciples. To a paralytic who was lying by the pool called Bethesda, Jesus said, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk” (Jn. 5:8). And to a girl who had just died, Jesus first cleared the room of the mourners, and then, taking her by the hand he said, “Talitha koum,” which means “little girl, I say to you, get up!” (Mk. 5:40). Peter thus knew, it seems, that if anything life-giving were to happen, he would need to operate in the power of Jesus, not any power of his own. And that’s what we see. In the first, Peter declares: “Jesus Christ heals you.” In the second we see him on his knees praying before doing anything else.

2. Both miracles were signs that the power of the risen Jesus was now at work in the world. “Get up!” is actually the same word used to describe the raising by God of Jesus (cf. 2:24). We see that this power testifies to the person of Jesus and leads people to faith. We see that this power overcomes that which seems impossible to overcome. We see that this power provides not only for life in the future, but for needs in the present, as the widows now had Tabitha to care for them once more.

B. In our gospel lesson for today we hear Jesus say, “The works I do in my Father’s name testify about me” (Jn. 10:25). What these works, these miracles testify to is that the resurrection power of Jesus has been set loose in the world, and it is capable of overcoming bondage and isolation and alienation and helplessness and even death. The world after Easter is not like the world before Easter. After Easter, death does not have the last word. After Easter there is a power for good and for life that has been let loose that is greater than the power of evil and of death. After Easter we can be confident not only that we will be raised in the future, but that we are also being raised in the present. The risen Jesus is at work, in us, and in the world.

C. Where are you most discouraged these days? Where do you feel you’ve reached a dead end? In the midst of our discouragement and defeat, perhaps we need to recapture, and be reminded of, and seek to live more within, the reality of Jesus, risen from the dead. In doing so, we need to pray for a holy boldness, to be sure. But we also need to be careful, I think, that we don’t miss this life-giving reality by only looking for the dramatic, and so miss its everyday nature.

1. I experienced this life-giving reality at our men's retreat last weekend, as I heard, during our closing worship on Sunday morning, the many ways God had met us, and ministered to us, from where we had first come into the weekend on Friday night.

2. I experienced this life-giving reality during the progressive dinner we participated in for the Essex Bicentennial celebration. From a main course that began with being delivered 80 lbs. of rancid chicken at 1:00 that afternoon, to a delightful and tasty main course of Moroccan chicken over rice with a side of green beans, numerous progressive diners commented on how welcomed they felt coming into our building and being both well-fed and well-received.

3. I experience this life-giving reality every time I spend time with a group listening to God, and then listening to one another, through a practice called *lectio divina*, or holy reading. The Spirit of the living God who inspired God's word always seems to be at work in life-giving ways to those who spend time pondering that word.

4. I experience this life-giving reality in the expressions of gratitude given by the guests who stay with us for a week every few months through the ministry of Family Promise. With nowhere else to go for many of them, the provision, in the name of Jesus, of a friendly smile, a hot meal, and a warm, clean, and safe space to sleep, helps to restore life, even if just enough to be able to go forward, and take some next steps, on that next day.

5. I experience this life-giving reality every time a marriage, which seems to have reached a dead-end, is healed as both spouses put into practice for one another the sacrificial love that Jesus has for them.

6. I experience this life-giving reality when those who don't feel worthy to serve Jesus in some way come to receive and rest in his grace, perhaps noticing that if Peter, who was filled with character flaws, can be used by Jesus, so can they.

7. I experience this life-giving reality whenever someone is enabled to overcome a pattern of sin, or addiction, or idolatry, by recognizing that only thing that can truly satisfy is the living water that Jesus brings.

And so in the command "Get up!" which is filled with resurrection overtones, Jesus calls us to arise from any discouragement or despair that might be keeping us down and continue to put our trust in a God who is loving, invested, and present in our world. We can be, as poet Wendell Barry has put it, "joyful, though [we] have considered all the facts," because our hope for rescue is not in ourselves but in the God who has conquered sin and death and promises to redeem and restore all things.

Get up; He is risen; anything, anywhere, can happen now!