

I picked this story this morning because I think it's unfamiliar, many of us don't know that a woman named Tabitha was raised from the dead by Peter, and I think it's too important not to know.

I think it's kind of a big deal that a woman was raised from the dead, and not by Jesus, but by Peter nonetheless.

But you see, there's a glaring problem with this story, and others, like Lazarus, in which people are raised from the dead.

The problem is that it sort of leaves a giant question mark in our minds when the 'happy ending' is that the beloved person was brought back to life.

I know that mortal death is part of the life cycle, it's going to happen to all of us.

I don't think it's bad or wrong, so when the message is that life overcame death, what do we do with that?

I mean, we will all die, and we won't be brought back to life for our loved ones, so if the good news only happens when someone is brought back from the dead, umm, well, that's not such good news for me because I know that's not happening to me or my loved ones.

So, now what, what do we do with stories in which the moral of the story is unrelatable?

Well, for me, all the resurrection stories, whether of Jesus or Lazarus or Tabitha, they're not about denying death but they symbolize the new life and new hope that are manifested all the time in our world.

Whenever someone turns their life around, or makes a leap of faith or finds belonging in a power greater than themselves, that's a resurrection.

Whenever one part of us dies so that something new and better can be born, that is the resurrection power of God at work in our lives.

And that is something that CAN happen to each and every one of us.

This story might have been used to inspire the new Christian community, to ensure them that they were following the right savior.

After all, Tabitha used her status and privilege to serve the most marginalized people, specifically, widows.

And if an unknown cause were to strike her down and kill her, that could have caused them to question Jesus' message of living for others.

That could have scared them into denying their own resurrection experiences.

It was risky to be a Christian, and if her faith did that to her, well, that wasn't much of an incentive to bear the risks and live into Jesus' call.

But Tabitha's resurrection kept her message alive for those who knew and loved and mourned her.

It was her life and her life-after-death that inspired them to emulate the life she lead.

It prevented them from being scared by what happened to her.

And I imagine that the example she set was life-transforming for the widows she served.

She's the only woman in the Gospels to be called a disciple, and she's commissioned to head up a welfare program amongst Joppa's poorest and most vulnerable people.

In those days, widows languished at the bottom of the social latter; they had no protection or representation, which is why Tabitha played such an important role.

Not only did she clothe them, but she must have inspired them.

When everyone else in the world was telling these women they were worthless, Tabitha was using her gifts of wealth and power to help them.

So whether or not she literally came back to life, I am sure she brought new life to those whom she served.

If you have ever been supported or encouraged by someone, then you know that sometimes all it takes is one person to tell us they believe in us.

And Tabitha did that for many people, I am sure her legacy of support and care lived on long after she passed, she was resurrected through every widow and marginalized person who believed in themselves because of her.

But I don't think she's the only one who experienced a life-after-death, here.

I mean, last week we heard about Peter's encounter with Jesus on the shoreline, who commissions Peter to serve the world in his name, or in his words, "feed my sheep."

And this week, he has the courage to get down on two knees, in that upper room, and pray three words, "Tabitha, get up."

It makes me wonder, what was going through his mind and heart that gave him the hope, or audacious confidence, to think that anything he said would make a difference?

*"Joseph Harvard suggests that the story gives us reason to hope even when we think that there is no possibility of restoration:*

*he says that we live in a "Humpty Dumpty" world in which we are convinced that things can not be put back together again, but the book of Acts tells a different story, about people "empowered to 'turn the world upside down' (17:6)"* (Matthews, Rev. Kathryn. UCC Sermon Seeds, April 17, 2016).

We can change the world when we allow ourselves to be turned upside down, whether it's making a big life change, or taking a risk or making a new commitment.

Peter went from someone who doubted Jesus, to someone who doubted himself, to someone who completely trusted the power of God and was able to heal others through his transformation.

He experienced his own kind of resurrection, from a betrayer to a healer!

So, it's true that we might not experience a literal bodily resurrection of our loved ones, but this story still has a message for us.

That we can experience individual resurrections and transformations all the time.

The same way Peter did.

They same way Tabitha's disciples did.

But here's the deal, in order for something new to emerge in our lives, we have to say "no" to something else.

Elizabeth Gilbert is the author of the infamous book, "Eat, Pray Love."

Whatever you think of the book, I want you to put that opinion out of your mind.

She wrote some profound words on what it means to start over, chart a new course, experience our own kind of death and rebirth, or resurrection, although she doesn't say it in those words.

She says, "*Most of us, at some point in our lives (unless we have done everything perfectly...which is: nobody) will have to face a*

*terrible moment in which we realize that we have somehow ended up in the wrong place — or at least, in a very bad place.*

*Maybe we will have to admit that we are in the wrong job.*

*Or the wrong relationship.*

*With the wrong people around us.*

*Living in the wrong neighborhood.*

*Acting out on the wrong behaviors.*

*Using the wrong substances.*

*Pretending to believe things that we no longer believe.*

*Pretending to be something we were never meant to be.*

*This moment of realization is seldom fun.*

*In fact, it's usually terrifying.*

*I call this moment of realization: NOT THIS.*

*Because sometimes that's all you know, at such a moment.*

*All you know is: NOT THIS. Sometimes that's all you CAN know.*

*All you know is that some deep life force within you is saying,*

*NOT THIS, and it won't be silenced.*

*Your body is saying: "NOT THIS." Your heart is saying: "NOT THIS."*

*Your soul is saying: "NOT THIS."*

*But your brain can't bring itself to say "NOT THIS", because that would cause a serious problem.*

*The problem is: You don't have a Plan B in place.*

*This is the only life you have.*

*This is the only job you have.*

*This is the only spouse you have.*

*This is the only house you have.*

*Your brain says, "It may not be great, but we have to put up with it, because there are no other options."*

*You're not sure how you got here — to this place of THIS — but you sure as hell don't know how to get out...*

*So your brain says: "WE NEED TO KEEP PUTTING UP WITH THIS, BECAUSE THIS IS ALL WE HAVE."*

*But still, beating like a quiet drum, your body and your heart and your soul keep saying: NOT THIS... NOT THIS... NOT THIS.*

*I think some of the bravest people I have ever met were people who had the courage to say the words, "NOT THIS" out loud — even before they had an alternative plan.*

*People who walked out of bad situations without knowing if there was a better situation on the horizon.*

*People who looked at the life they were in, and they said, "I don't know what my life is supposed to be...but it's NOT THIS."*

*And then they just... left.*

*I think my friend who walked out of a marriage after less than a year, and had to move back in with her mother (back into her childhood bedroom), and face the condemnation of the entire community while she slowly created a new life for herself.*

*Everyone said, "If he's not good enough for you, who will be?"*

*She didn't know.*

*She didn't know anything about what her life would look like now.*

*But it started with her saying: NOT THIS.*

*I think of my friend who took her three young children away from a toxic marriage, despite that fact that her husband supported her and the kids financially... and the four of them (this woman and her three children) all slept in one bed together in a tiny studio apartment for a few years, while she struggled to build a new life.*

*She was poor, she was scared, she was alone.*

*But she had to listen to the voices within her that said, NOT THIS.*

*I think of friends who walked out of jobs — with no job waiting for them. Because they said NOT THIS.*



*I think of friends who quit school, rather than keep pretending that they cared about this field of study anymore.*

*And yes, they lost the scholarship.*

*And yes, they ended up working at a fast food restaurant, while everyone else was getting degrees.*

*And yes, it took them a while to figure out where to go next.*

*But there was a relief at last in just surrendering to the holy, non-negotiable truth of NOT THIS.*

*I think of friends who bravely walked into AA meetings and just fell apart in front of a room full of total strangers, and said, NOT THIS...*

*Rationally, it's crazy to abandon a perfectly good life (or at least a familiar life) in order to jump into a mystery.*

*No sane person would advise you to make such a leap, with no Plan B in place.*

*We are supposed to be careful.*

*We are supposed to be prudent.*

*And yet.... And yet.*

*If you keep ignoring the voices within you that say NOT THIS, just because you don't know what to do, instead...you may end up stuck in NOT THIS forever.*

*You don't need to know where you are going to admit that where you are standing right now is wrong.*

*The bravest thing to say can be these two words.*

*What comes next?*

*I don't know. You don't know. Nobody knows. It might be worse. It might be better. But whatever it is...? It's NOT THIS."*

(Gilbert, Elizabeth, Facebook post on April 12, 2016)

And saying, "not this," is the start of any resurrection story.

Because by articulating those two words, we are deciding what needs to end so that something new can emerge.

At some point after betraying Jesus, Peter said, "not this," and turned his life back towards Jesus' message.

And at some point after Tabitha died, her followers knew it wasn't the end, and they said, "not this" and summoned Peter for help.

And when Jesus was killed, God said in the clearest and most uncertain terms, "NOT THIS."

Now we all live in new life, through Christ, and may the story of his life and death and new life, give you the strength to say, "NOT THIS" when you are at a pivotal moment in your life.

For that is the start of all resurrection experiences. Amen.