

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
305 EAST MAIN STREET
DURHAM, NC 27701
PHONE: (919) 682-5511



“Lady Lazarus”

A sermon by Barbara Brown Taylor

4th Sunday of Easter

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Acts 9:36–43

I am so happy to be here with you this morning. Thanks to Joe Harvard for inviting me and to you for welcoming me. Though I am an Episcopalian, I spend so much time with Presbyterians that I think I could get a permanent visa. Are any of you old enough to remember when Protestants did not mix like this? I am—which makes me all the gladder to be alive *now*, when so many believers are looking past the boundaries that divide us to discover the bonds that unite us. There is no place I would rather be.

During Easter season, resurrection is high on the list of things that unite us. Whatever we make of it, whatever questions we continue to have about it, this up-from-the-grave thing, this love-is-stronger-than-death thing, is central to Christian faith: not just that it happened to Jesus but that because of him it is in our futures too: “We look for the resurrection of the dead,” we say when we say the Creed, “and the life of the world to come.”

If nothing else, this affirmation means that we expect our life-giving community with God and one another in *this* world to continue in the *next*. We trust that there is no expiration date on it—that it is durable, not disposable—that the God who made us once can make us again, in any world of God’s own choosing.

I don’t know anyone who can prove resurrection—or disprove it either. I don’t even know anyone who can explain it very well. Why do I go on affirming something that can’t be proven or explained? Maybe it’s wishful thinking-- although I promise you there are people I do not wish to be reunited with after death.

I still remember a widow I visited soon after her husband died. That he died before she did was a great surprise to everyone who knew them. She was very ill—had been for years—and she relied on him for everything from toast in the morning to turning out the lights at night. He may have reminded her of that a little more often than he had to, too.

Then one day she heard a big crash in the bathroom and he was gone. People from the church poured in to see her, pulling chairs up to her bed and saying all the usual things:

“Well, at least you know right where he is.”

“He went ahead of you to get things ready.”

“You’ll be together again soon.”

On the day I am remembering, she looked at me with big pleading eyes and said, “Will I *never* get away from him? This world *and* the next?”

Now I let other people do most of the talking about “the life of the world to come”—because people imagine it so differently, and no one knows for sure. Even Jesus was a little vague on the subject after he got back. All we really have are a handful of crossing-over stories, and the very great freedom to decide—both individually and together--what we will make of them.

Today’s story from the book of Acts is the most ignored resurrection story in scripture, at least in my experience. Everyone knows about Lazarus, but what about Lady Lazarus? Tabitha, I mean—or Dorcas, depending on whether you speak Aramaic or Greek—raised from the dead by *Peter* and restored to the community of widows in Lydda who could not imagine life without her.

Technically it’s a resuscitation story, since Tabitha is restored to life in this world and not the life of the world to come, but that doesn’t explain why it gets such small press. Is it because the story is in Acts and not one of the gospels? Is it because Peter did the raising and not Jesus? Is it because Tabitha was a she and not a he?

She was a disciple, Luke says—using the feminine form of the word that shows up only here in the New Testament. Her name meant “Gazelle.” She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. Yet none of this protected her from falling ill and dying, in case we needed reminding. The best die the same way the worst do—the only difference being that the best may have some friends so loath to let them go that they send for the most powerful help they can think of—Peter, in this case, who had just healed a paralyzed man in nearby Joppa.

“Please come to us without delay,” two of Gazelle’s friends begged him, so Peter got up and went with them. It was eleven miles from Joppa to Lydda, so there was that much delay at least, but it is hard to know what the hurry was about. Tabitha was dead. Her friends had already washed her body and laid it out.

When Peter arrived to see for himself, Luke says, the same two disciples who had fetched him from Joppa led him upstairs into a room full of weeping widows. No one said a word to him. They just cried and held out their arms so he could see the clothes Tabitha had made for them while she was still alive.

I don’t know how a man was supposed to know something like that. Maybe Tabitha had gotten a bargain at the market and made all the tunics out of the same

bolt of cloth. Or maybe the widows thought Peter could tell just by looking that the clothes were too good for them, made from fine stuff they could never have afforded on their own.

Whatever it was, Peter was less interested in the clothes than he was in the disciple who had made them. The first thing he did was put all of the crying women outside, which meant there were no witnesses in the room. Then he knelt down to pray, though we do not know what he prayed. When he was ready, Luke says, Peter turned to “the body”—not “Tabitha,” but “the body”—and said, “Tabitha, get up” (as in “Lazarus, come out”).

And Lady Lazarus did. She opened her eyes, she saw Peter, and she sat up. Then Peter offered her his hand and helped her up, as if he had just talked her out of buying a pair of shoes that was too tight for her. Once the saints and widows saw she was alive, Luke says, word spread throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.

It sounds like a perfectly good story to me, but according to one of my sources it is not. There are several details missing from the story that really ought to be there, this source points out, just as there are several details *present* in the story that really ought *not* to be there. The problem is not who is in the story or where it appears. The problem is that the story lacks *theological clarity*.

For instance, why did Peter fail to invoke the name of Jesus when he told Tabitha to get up? He did it when he healed the paralyzed man in Joppa. “Jesus Christ heals you,” he said to the man; “get up and make your bed!” And why did he send everyone out of Tabitha’s room before he healed her? Isn’t the whole point of a miracle to have as many witnesses as possible?

Then there is the problem of Tabitha’s good deeds. Isn’t it a mistake to point out that she was devoted to good works and acts of charity? There was nothing like that in the Lazarus story, or the story of the paralyzed man either. The only thing those two had going for them was that they needed help—that they were *beyond all human help*—not that they were great helpers themselves. So why mention the good works, the acts of charity, the tunics and other clothing? Do you want people to think Tabitha *sewed* her way to new life?

These are the kinds of things my source pointed out. Since the text offers no interpretation of these anomalies, he said, there is a limit to its helpfulness. An odd miracle may make an impression, but what kind of impression? People may come to believe because of it, but what do they believe? To avoid misunderstanding, he says, “the miracle needs to be clothed in explicit theological meaning.”¹

¹ Lewis Mudge, “Theological Perspective” on Acts 9:36-43, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 428.

I am sure this says more about me than it does about him, but that strikes me as an odd statement in itself. We are excused from paying too much attention to a story in the Bible because it does not line up *theologically*? As far as I can tell, that is less of a problem for most people than the fact that they are not able to reproduce this miracle no matter *where* they line up theologically. They too pray for people they love who are dying if not dead. They too call on the most powerful help they can think of, but their prayers do not work the way Peter's did. Their Gazelle's eyes stay closed. Her too-tight shoes stay on her feet, while they stain their tunics with their tears.

I have a friend who reports miraculous things to me from time to time. No resurrections yet, unless you count the spiritual kind, but other things that defy the usual laws of nature: lights that appear in the dark, people who get well without doctors, turtles that say significant things to him. I try to listen as best I can, but last time I got irritated.

"So *what*?" I said. "I'm sure that's wonderful for you, but if it doesn't happen to everybody then why does it matter? What is it supposed to *mean*?" (I was using different words, but I heard the echo: "the miracle needs to be clothed in explicit theological meaning.")

He said, "It means you don't know how things work. You think you know, but you don't."

"Huh," I said.

"Like when Jesus came back from the dead," he said. "People thought they knew how things worked, then they found out they didn't. That's an important thing to know."

He had a point. I mean, I don't know how a fig tree sets its buds while there is still snow on the ground. I don't know how a setting hen turns an egg into a chick. I don't even know how a fax machine works. I know these things work, but I don't know how—so why can't there be other things at work between this world and the next that I don't understand?

One of my favorite saints is Nicholas of Cusa, a fifteenth century German cleric who wrote a book called *On Learned Ignorance*. There are at least three kinds of ignorance that show up in those who seek God, he says.

First there are those who *do not know* that they do not know.

Then there are those who know that they do not know but who think they *ought to know*.

Finally, there are those who know that they do not know and who receive this learned ignorance as God's own gift—because it relieves them from the terrible burden of thinking they have to know everything God knows, because it frees them to live in a state of perpetual wonder, because it saves them from ruling

out new life for themselves and those they love on the grounds that they *know how things work* and life like that isn't possible.

This is very high-level ignorance, Nicholas says. These are the people who do not know where the wind comes from or where it goes, but who can live with that because they trust God *does*.

I think Gazelle's friends were that kind of people. They wouldn't have sent for Peter in the first place if they hadn't already let go of what they once thought they knew about life and death. When he showed their friend to be alive again—well, that reinforced their ignorance in the best possible way. *We don't know how things work! Praise God!*

But even if Peter had come out of Tabitha's room and said, "I'm so sorry; she's gone," I think that same ignorance would have saved them in the end. *We don't know how things work. But God does, so let's go do what we know how to do: let's get Peter some food, and say our prayers, and tell stories about Tabitha all night long while we wait to see who God will raise up in this community next.*

Isn't that how it works? We are the people who don't know how things work but who trust that God does, whose high-level ignorance frees us to live in unusual ways and say unusual things, even things as odd as "We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come."

What will that look like? How does it work? Who will be there and who will not? Hear the good news: *we do not know*—and we can live with that, because we trust God does.

©Barbara Brown Taylor
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The Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor was our 2010 McPherson Lecturer. An Episcopal priest since 1984, Taylor spent fifteen years in parish ministry and was named one of the most effective preachers in the English-speaking world by Baylor University in 1996. She teaches religion at Piedmont College in rural northeast Georgia and is an adjunct professor of spirituality at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur. She is the author of twelve books, including the *New York Times* bestseller *An Altar in the World*, published by HarperOne in February 2009. Her first memoir, *Leaving Church*, met with widespread critical acclaim, winning a 2006 Author of the Year award from the Georgia Writers Association. A contributing editor to *Sojourners* and an at-large editor for *The Christian Century*, Taylor lives on a working farm with her husband, Ed, and a yard full of animals.