

## **Dead or Alive?**

**John 10:22-30**

**Acts 9:36-42**

It's an upper room.... again. We are gathered in the upper room where Dorcas lies dead. Dorcas, some called her Tabitha. Well, dead she is now. And the room is full of people—people whose lives she touched. Can you imagine it? Of course you can—you who have lost your best friend, or your sister, or your mother, or your daughter. Well, Dorcas was our sister, our best friend, the mother to us all. She knit my prayer shawl for me. Just last week, she took a meal to John, who was recovering from surgery; she delivered flowers to Mary, and sent a card to Joe. Dorcas never, ever missed an opportunity to serve: she went on those mission trips every year, and went down to the Open Door each month to serve lunch to the homeless. And in fact, just yesterday she gave her entire Saturday to work on Rebuilding Together to help someone in need.

Did you know that Dorcas was a Stephen Minister for years? Yes, she walked alongside those who were struggling with changes or challenges in their lives? She used to be an elder, going month after month to those endless session meetings—not because she loved meetings, o my no!—she was really a quiet and retiring person—but she went because she understood that the church is not the pastor or the building, but the people. Dorcas was the quiet, constant, faithful presence of every person who takes their faith seriously... She brought others to Christ—not by eloquent words or profound preaching, but by the way she lived her life. I don't know how the church will get along without her. Why, Dorcas was the church....

You know, some people say *the church* is dying. Some say that it has lost its relevance for us today. Maybe that's because in this diverse world we are learning that people from many different faiths live lives that look ethically and morally a lot like ours. It's possible that the church might be seen as dying because it doesn't hold the authority it used to be able to claim. After all, in a post-modern world, we are a suspicious people, no longer taking at face value the statements of public figures—the president, your congressman, your corporate executive officer ... your priest... or your preacher. We all come from Missouri now - "show me" is our state today.

For many nowadays religion is not a matter of adhering to a particular teaching, or even a tradition. Rather, as someone said religion tends to be based on "an emotional response to the transcendent."<sup>1</sup> Did you get that? "An emotional response to the transcendent." In other words, "how we feel about something controls whether or not we believe it to be true." And so today, certainty comes from having a positive feeling, and in more and more churches the worship service is designed specifically to make sure y'all feel better so you can face the coming week.

But, some might say the church is dying - especially those old mainline churches which insist on the centrality of the Word of God, that dusty old Bible which in our post-literal world is no longer read. In this society where everything is visual and instant and convenient and self-gratifying, we do not want to hear Jesus' hard word to us about things like endurance and self-denial and taking up our cross. We come to church to feel good, for heavens sake, to hear a word of comfort, to recharge our batteries.

Or at the very most we come to get the answers, don't we? But the fact is, we are more frequently confronted by the questions! ...the questions...the questions... Yes, if the church still has something of relevance to say, and if we are listening at all, we will be confronted by the questions.

And that, I think, is a sign that perhaps the church is not dying. Because you see, a living faith is about the engaging the questions—about wrestling with the Word. Some 2000 years ago the church of Jesus' day asked many questions. The Pharisees—who were the church-going religious folk back then—were constantly bombarding Jesus with their questions: What sign can you show us? How can anyone be born again after growing old? Why are you healing people on the Sabbath? This woman was caught in adultery, *now* what do you have to say? Who *are* you? Are you the Messiah? Tell us plainly.

I think the church is not dying as long churchgoers continue to have lots of questions and come prepared to wrestle with the Word. The frustrating thing for the Pharisees then as it is for us now, is that Jesus' answers are not always particularly clear. If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly, we say, and yet he never really does. He speaks in parables and in strange metaphors that are anything but easy to understand: He is the door, the vine, the lamb, the light, the bread of heaven, the living water, the good shepherd..... But are you the Messiah? Tell us, Jesus! Because we need a Messiah and we need him now—to save us from all that frightens us, or threatens us, or hurts us. And there is plenty in the world that does all that.

And all Jesus says in answer is "I have told you, and you do not believe..... but my sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me." It's true—in spite of all the mystery about Jesus, in spite of the fact that we can barely comprehend him, there is something in his voice that we recognize. Something in his presence, something in his Spirit that touches our soul. And so we follow... we follow through the waters of our baptism, we follow to the communion the table... because somehow, in the sacraments, we do encounter the Transcendent. We are blessed by the Divine. The church is not dying as long as it is a place where we can meet Jesus in the sacraments. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He leads me beside the still waters, he restores my soul, he prepares a table before in the presence of my enemies and even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for he is with me.

Oh we follow imperfectly, and we meander off the path, and we have a tendency to go our own way and get lost from time to time. But we are here today - we are all here today because we have heard his voice. And when we come together as a flock, as a community of faith, we gain power, strength and support that moves each one of us beyond our own unique individual truths into a greater one—into the great truth and love of Jesus Christ that is made apparent when we encounter each other, when we learn to love each other and care for one another. The church is not dying as long as this is a place where we learn to be our best, truest selves. And so we follow in his footsteps...we follow him only to discover that the shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.

Yes, we come to church to feel good, but we follow a Shepherd who leads us all—sooner or later—in the way of compassion. That Latin word *patior* from which we get our English word *passion*, means suffering. And so *com-passion* means to suffer with, to put yourself in the place of another, to enter into their experience. This is the story of the incarnation, for Jesus is God's compassion to us... the radical notion of emptying oneself, and taking the form of a servant—humbling oneself—even unto death on the cross. To follow Jesus, as Dorcas so radically did, is to live a life of compassion...walking with those who suffer, traveling alongside the poor, the lonely, the frightened and the alienated through the valley of the shadow. I declare to you that the church is not dying as long as we point people to Jesus, not by our eloquent words, or profound preaching, but by the way we live our lives. Following Jesus in his compassion: bringing hope where there is grief, love where there is hate, healing and wholeness where there is alienation and illness, bringing life where there is death....

Oh, there's so many people in here, and we've been waiting so long for Peter to come. Would somebody please open a window? At last! Here he comes—now perhaps we can get on with the funeral. Oh! Shh! Shh! But wait, what's he saying? Tabitha, Get up! Dorcas, arise! There is work to be done - a whole world out there that needs your care. Dying? Dead? No, not you! Not as long as you, the church, are men and women like Dorcas, who answer the world full of questions with the compassionate living that demonstrates the very present reality that Jesus Christ is alive among us still, our resurrection promise. Amen.

<sup>1</sup>Young, James R.M. *Eyes Wide Shut, or How the Pastor and the Congregation Move from Friend to Foe.* The Register of the Company of Pastors, Vol. 6, No. 1, Spring 2004, p. 74-5.