

Future Hope – Present Power

Fourth Sunday of Easter
The Reverend Glenn E. Ludwig

Sunday, April 25, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Acts 9: 36-43

Let's start with a little pop quiz on pop culture. What do you think are the three most recognized symbols in the developed world? Notice we are not talking about "third world" countries here, which are now referred to as "developing" countries. The quiz is asking only about the modern, industrialized countries of the world. So, write your answers mentally in your head.

You may score your own tests. In the spirit of David Letterman, we'll work backwards. Number three most recognized symbol in developed countries – Shell Oil's seashell logo. Number two, just ahead of number three – the Golden Arches of McDonald's. And the number one recognized symbol – the five interconnected rings of the Olympic Games.

Okay, class. A bonus question on the quiz – what symbol is conspicuously missing? I'll give you a hint – there are a few in this room. The cross, the recognized symbol of Christianity worldwide, came in a distant fifth on that survey. Remember, this survey was conducted among the leading industrial nations of the world where Christianity has had roots for centuries and centuries.

This somewhat disconcerting discovery got me thinking. Why would the cross be that unrecognizable in modern culture? Maybe it has something to do with us; with how we understand, view, and present that cross. The cross of course for us is a symbol of Resurrection. But how do most of us interpret that Resurrection of Jesus in our lives?

It is probably safe to postulate that most of us view the cross in one of two ways, or perhaps both. Some of us, no doubt, see it as an historical event in the past; something like the fourth of July, which is celebrated each year, only it's a moveable date because of the moon's cycle. And I'm sure there are those among us who see it as a future promise as well; that someday, when we, or our loved ones, die, we will be saved from death and resurrected because of what Jesus did long ago on that cross. The cross of Resurrection is viewed, then, as a past event that contains a future promise.

But there is a third way for the cross to have meaning, and it is every bit as important as the two just mentioned. Yes, the cross was a past event, witnessed to in history. And yes, it is also a future promise for those of us joined to Christ in our baptisms. But what we need to understand and grasp as living witnesses to Christ is that the cross is very much a present reality. And maybe the reason the world doesn't understand the symbol is that they don't see that cross lived-out in our lives.

Our first lesson for today gives us a sterling example of someone who lived the cross of Christ in her life. Tabitha, her Aramaic name, also known as Dorcas, which is the translation, holds the distinction of being the only woman in the New Testament who is specifically referred to as a disciple. Long before Social Ministry became a term for ministries done in the name of Christ in the world, long before there were Soup Kitchens, and Homeless Shelters, and Aids Clinics, and Thrift Shops, Dorcas' clothes and pantry

and homeless shelter were in full operation. Her ministry was directed toward the poor widows of Joppa, which is the modern-day city of Jaffa, just south of Tel Aviv on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Widows, in that culture, were the lost and least of the community. Without her ministry to them, many would have died. For those widows, Dorcas' death meant their death. The power of the Resurrection was at work in the love she shared so openly and freely with those who had nothing to give in return but their life-saving thanks.

And did you see what happened when she died? Her witness and the seeds of compassion that she had planted bore fruit in the response of the community. Those whom she had helped sent for Peter and urged him to come at once. As the mourners stood around and testified to Dorcas' positive influence in their lives, the women tearfully held up some objects that reminded them of their departed loved one. These were articles of clothing; everything from humble undergarments – which Luke refers to as "tunics" – to more elaborate outer clothing; each of these clothing items was made by the deceased. They were symbols of her love and caring – and her faith. Peter, moved by those symbols and led by the Spirit of Christ, acted in faith and prayed. And Dorcas was restored to life and to her work of faith.

Now, we need to be a bit careful here with our interpretation of this story. It would be easy to draw the conclusion that she was saved from death *because* of all the good she had done and the message to us would be, go and do likewise and you shall be saved. But that would be the wrong way to look at this story, for that interpretation would move us dangerously into "works righteousness territory," and we don't want to hear Martin Luther rolling over in his grave due to our misinterpretation and subsequent bad theology.

You see, Dorcas was not saved *because* of her good works; she was saved *for* her good works. Peter's miracle of life in Dorcas meant she could continue her work among God's poorest and lowest. There was more to be done, and Peter, acting in the name of Jesus the great healer, kept the power of the Resurrection alive in this woman so that she could continue to be a living witness.

By the way, this is the opposite of what happened back in 1957 at the funeral of Louis B. Mayer. The little-loved Hollywood mogul's funeral attracted a surprisingly large number of mourners and it drove rival studio chief Samuel Goldwyn to declare: "The only reason so many people attended his funeral is that they wanted to make sure he was dead."

That was not the case with Dorcas. She became a living witness of the resurrection power of God. She became a living witness of the power over sickness and death. She became a living witness of healing that God can bring to brokenness in our lives. She became a living witness of how our witness can bring others to believe in Christ.

And so this story is a challenge to us, to go and do likewise. We are being challenged to live in the power of the resurrection everyday. We become living witnesses by our acts of love and compassion in this world. We are being challenged today by this Saint of old to commit ourselves to "walk the walk," and not just "talk the talk," as the expression goes this day. Maybe if we learn to do that, the cross will be recognized in our world because it will be seen in and through us.

Bea Salazar is one of those people who made the cross visible in her community and in the world. Back in 1990, she had undergone back surgery and was on disability. She was depressed and simply trying to just get through each day. One afternoon, as she tells her true story, she was putting trash outside in the can when she saw a little boy digging in a nearby dumpster for food. She took him inside, made him a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich, and sent him home. Fifteen minutes later, there was a knock on her door, and she opened it to find six more kids standing there. The apparent ringleader asked her, "Is it true that you're giving away peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches?"

It was summer, she realized, and these children's parents had to work, so they had to learn to fend for themselves. Well, word got out and the next day, more children showed up, and more arrived the day after that.

But the visits didn't stop when school began in the fall. These kids would come to her and ask for help with homework. Volunteers and supplies from local churches and schools poured in. Her landlord saw what was happening and, instead of complaining about all the kids hanging around all the time, donated a vacant apartment for use. Soon, over 100 children were coming to visit each day. In ten years time, about half of them went off to college, when previously, the majority of them wouldn't even have completed high school – all because of one peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich.

What does it mean to live in the power of the Resurrection? It is a Bea Salazar giving out a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich from her little apartment in the midst of her own depression. It is a Dorcas committed to the lowest of the low and living a witness of service and compassion in the name of the Risen Christ. It is us, you and I, when the cross of Christ becomes visible in and through our lives.

In the words of the delightful poem by Mary Oliver, "The Summer Day," "Tell me, friend, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" A Resurrection question if ever I've heard one.

AMEN.