



Richmond Hill Reflections

“Moonlight” (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

May 12, 2019; Fourth Sunday in Easter

Reading: Acts:936-43; “Mother” by Lola Ridge

It's easily overlooked. How often do we hear about Tabitha being raised from the dead? Next to never. It's understandable given that the story is sandwiched between two big stories: Saul's conversion on the way to Damascus (wow) and Peter's vision while meditating on a rooftop (again, wow). But it's a shame we overlook it. To me it's a resurrection story and that's what this season is about. It may be in Acts, Jesus long since ascended, but it's a resurrection story just the same.

You may say, “is it a resurrection story if Jesus isn't in the picture?” Yes. Because it's what Peter tells Tabitha to do. “Rise up,” he says to her body laid in the upper room. It's no coincidence this is a similar place to where the Spirit descended upon the disciples at Pentecost. As she opens her eyes, she awakens to the fullness of the Spirit that had always animated her. After all she was known for her charity and good works for those in need. Lola Ridge's words seem apt: her “love was like moonlight turning harsh things to beauty.” She'd taken seriously what it meant to live in Christ, sharing more than her resources, but her whole self, offered in love so others could shine. We see how much the community loved her too as the widows show Peter her handiwork.

I wonder if a reason we overlook this story is contained in how it's told. The details suggest she shares in risen life through the Spirit, but not until she has died. But earlier in Acts, there's a group who also tended to those in need, especially the widows, not unlike the ones who showed off tunics that Tabitha made. But these seven men are described as full of wisdom and the Spirit - while they are still alive. Interesting. Perhaps Lola's poem offers insight. She poignantly describes her mother as moonlight, a mirror, reflection on water. The images capture what so many of us experience in mothers: a love that draws out of us our own capacity to shine. It isn't about the spotlight. As we see their love for us reflected back, we come to love ourselves and stand on our own. It's a beautiful capacity mothers have, yet easily dismissed: “You are less an image in my mind/than a luster” Lola writes. We easily downplay the understated way women often lift up others and focus on the showiness of men. This bias is reflected in Tabitha's story.

Our culture still seems to prefer the brightness of the “sun” to the subtle glow of the “moon.” Consider this. A few days ago, I was listening to a show about parenting on CBC. The person interviewed observed how social and economic policy seems to be rooted in assumptions from the 50s and 60s. “Why is it,” she observed “that the workday and school day don't line up? Policies still assume women are at home while men are at work, leaving every family stuck for an hour and a half or more.” I was struck by that. Despite reality, our practices are based on ideas that undermine equality. This may seem awkward to say on Mother's Day, but we still seem to honour women mainly for the capacity to give birth and raise children. And there are currents at play doubling down on just that. Recently while scrolling through a Facebook feed, Glen saw a venn diagram. At the

centre of four overlapping circles it said, "You are here". Each circle was named for a dystopian novel: *Brave New World*, *1984*, *Fahrenheit 451* and *A Handmaid's Tale*. I naïvely said, "We can't be at *A Handmaid's Tale* yet?" He promptly replied, "Haven't you heard of the new law in Georgia? Some men just want to control women." I won't go into details, but I invite you to research laws that have recently passed or are in process, all intended to erode women's reproductive rights and other rights as well. It seems the more we've advanced in gender equality, the more some men feel threatened, not wanting to share the spotlight. While we're not the US, the recent protest at Queen's Park that included MPPs remind me there are groups here trying to turn back the clock as well.

So how do we respond? As much as we there is gender bias in the Tabitha story, we also see the solution. On one level we should continue to respond with compassion and love like Tabitha did. She understood that being joined to Christ meant being called to serve. But there is another layer to this story. After all, despite great acts of love and compassion in history, moving forward in terms of equality has been slow. As Paul Shepherd insightfully observed at the Men's Breakfast, humans are reluctant to change. But there are details about Tabitha that I feel point us in the right direction. One is her Greek name, Dorcas. It suggests she walked between cultures, not bound by either. The second is we're not told her marital status. The gathering of widows could mean she was one, but they could be the people who most benefitted from her charity. She wasn't bound by culture or gender norms but transcended both. She lived what Paul wrote in Galatians: in Christ there is no male or female, Jew or Greek, slave or free; we are one in Christ. This is resurrection.

But resurrection presupposes a tomb. Tabitha's death reminds us we can't be attached to identity, especially when rooted in our privilege. We need to lay it down if we are to rise in Christ, to take on his identity. We see this in Peter who continues what Jesus did, raising Tabitha from death as Jesus raised Jairus' daughter. Rising into Jesus' identity means modelling ourselves after him. It seems to me that Jesus is like Lola's mother. We often associate Jesus with the sun. But if we look at his life, he was more moon, reflecting the light of G-d, helping those around him see that same light in themselves. We live in a culture that expects everyone to be the sun, yet in the end we know too well that some groups get to shine more than others. But something happens when we start to reflect light more than be it ourselves. We are able to see it in others, to see it all around us. We can be one because we are able to see what we all share. We don't need to be the source of light, or power, or control. As we reflect the light on others, we are much more able to become the equal and just society that we strive to be, and not just in terms of gender.

Friends, in a world that encourages the disparity that comes when everyone wants to be the sun, thankfully there is another way. Each of us is called to rise, to model ourselves after Jesus, after Tabitha, after Lola's mother, shining a light on others. We can be the moon, reflecting light, mothering a world hoping for justice and equality, a world yearning for love. Amen.