



First United Church of Oak Park

ARISE!

Acts 9:36-43

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The Book of Acts picks up where the Gospel of Luke left off. It shares the same written style and perspective, shares the same concerns. Particularly among the Gospels, Luke is concerned with the wellbeing and centrality of women, highlighting the role of women as recipients of Jesus' ministry, and as disciples doing the work of Jesus' ministry as well. The Gospel of Luke ends with Jesus arising from the earth into the heavens. And the Book of Acts begins by retelling the very same story: Jesus arising from the earth into the heavens. This throws the faithful into disarray—what should they do now? Before this, they had a clear purpose, to follow Jesus. But as the risen Christ disappears from view, the disciples—the women and the men—are left standing on God's good earth wondering, "What shall we do now?"

What shall we do now? Well, the disciples decide to do themselves what Jesus did when he walked among them. They travel the roads and lanes of the Holy Land, they preach the good news that the realm of God was just around the corner. They feed the hungry, they heal the sick, they proclaim release to the captives. They build the church, that is the ekklesia, that is the gathering of those who were called. And the ekklesia, the church, the gathering of the called, it was gathered around mission, around purpose.

As our passage from today picks up, Peter is doing his part to live out that purpose. He is traveling. Specifically he is heading west from Jerusalem. And what the church had been doing, it is almost like they are testing their wings, seeing whether they can live up to the great things that Jesus did. It's a bit on the nose, really, because what they do is a mirror image of Jesus' own marvels. Jesus fed a multitude, so the church did the same. Beginning with the most vulnerable women—the widows—the church fed a multitude, and it was a marvel, it was their mission. Jesus called marginalized women into the center of mission; the church did, too, from Easter morning to the founding of far-flung congregations, the good news was preached by women on the margins. Jesus cured the sick, the church did too. Jesus healed a paralyzed person, allowing them to reenter the heart of community, so the church did too. It was as if they were testing

their wings. Jesus could do this marvelous thing—are we capable of marvels, too?

Then came the greatest test. Peter was in Lydda, west of the holy city. And the other disciples, hearing that he was nearby, sent word for Peter to come to Joppa, a neighboring city. They called because one of the disciples had grown ill and died. Her name was Tabitha, whose name in Greek meant “gazelle.” Those who loved Tabitha pleaded with Peter to bring her back from the dead. With tears in their eyes, they spoke of what Tabitha had done. They made clear that Tabitha was a disciple, calling her that specifically. In addition, it says that she was someone who cared for the community and served it. She had woven them clothing, fine enough and lovely enough that they held them up to Peter as if to say—see what she has done for us.

This, then, was a final test. The disciples had been testing their wings, seeing if they could perform the same wonders Jesus had. They had fed multitudes, healed the sick, restored the grievously injured. That was one thing, but this? Tabitha was dead.

Peter asked everyone to leave. And there alone with the power of death, his mind must have cast back to his time with Jesus. Once, Jesus had been called to a house just like this. Summoned because a girl had grown ill and died. And Jesus told everyone to leave, except for Peter and James and John. And with just that gathering of the called in the face of despair, Jesus said the words—Talitha Cumi. Little girl, arise. Talitha cumi.

Peter stood alone in the face of the power of death, and spoke the words—Tabitha Cumi, Tabitha arise, Tabitha rise up. And Tabitha, the disciple of Jesus, rose up. The mission of the church: it was confirmed that day—to do the wonders that Jesus did, nothing less. Nothing that Jesus accomplished was beyond the power of the church. To be a community, an ekklesia, a gathering of the called to do the same wonders and live by the same values that Jesus did. Calling women into discipleship in a world that denied them agency, caring for the afflicted beginning with those on the margins, especially women, working wonders, traveling the roads and byways of the holy land, co-creating a realm of wonders with women at the heart of it. In the gospel of Luke Jesus’ miracles were particularly centered on women, “Arise,” said the voice of Christ. Arise, arise, arise, went the call of the church to all who would hear, and first to the women.

We stand today at a precipitous and uncertain moment for women in this country. The rights of women centrally at issue in public life. Indigenous women are going missing at a terrifying and largely unnoticed

rate. Trans women have their very existence turned into a hot-button issue with anti-trans violence rising in a terrible though predictable wave. And, of course, we see this week the constitutional right to an abortion, a right that was ten years old the day I was born, suddenly and fundamentally called into question. My grandfather, dead now 14 years, my grandfather built a women's health clinic in Davenport, Iowa, now named the Edgerton Women's Health Center. An OB/GYN practicing in Iowa today already has fewer medical resources available to them than my grandfather had during his career. They are already under restrictions enacted during the Trump administration that prohibits them from making referrals for abortion even when they are medically necessary. And the clinic may soon be in the impossible position of making referrals like this: based on your ultrasound results you need to see an obstetrician in a different state. This matters to me personally, I will own that outright, this matters to me personally because I am seeing my grandfather's work undone.

Let me be clear on something. It is not my role as a preacher to call balls and strikes on Constitutional Law, because the Constitution is not holy writ. I am not fundamentally concerned with the Constitution. The Constitution is not Scripture and in those times—which have been frequent—in those times when the Constitution has conflicted with Christian values, many have chosen their faith to be the greater light. Abolitionists, suffragists, civil rights leaders, equal marriage proponents, all of these worked to secure the well-being of the vulnerable because of their faith. In those times when the Constitution has conflicted with Christian values, many have chosen their faith to be the greater light.

The church is not the representative of the Constitution, nor its judge, nor its servant. The church is the ekklesia, the gathering of the called. Called to do what? To continue the work of Jesus—the wonders he did. Caring for the afflicted, beginning with those on the margins, especially women, working wonders, traveling the roads and byways of the holy land, co-creating a realm where all people can thrive, the women first. Arise, arise, arise, went the call of the church to all who would hear, and first to the women. As the church was originally built with the well-being of women at its heart, as its leadership included women from the very beginning.

I'm going to close today by reading selections from the original Mother's Day proclamation, written by Julia Ward Howe, abolitionist and suffragette. This was a radical and faithful document. At a time when the law and the Constitution did not allow women even the right to vote, the Mother's Day proclamation made a radical claim. It called for women to take up roles in the center of public life, in matters that had long affected

them deeply but from which they had been excluded in leadership, in matters of life and death, war and peace, the conduct of great nations.

“Arise, all women who have hearts, whether your baptism be that of water or of tears! Say firmly: ‘We will not have great questions decided by irrelevant agencies, our husbands shall not come to us, reeking with carnage, for caresses and applause.’

“As men have often forsaken the plow and the anvil at the summons of war, let women now leave all that may be left of home for a great and earnest day of counsel. Let them meet first, as women, to bewail and commemorate the dead. Let them then solemnly take counsel with each other as to the means whereby the great human family can live in peace, each learning after his own time, the sacred impress, not of Caesar, but of God.

“In the name of womanhood and of humanity, I earnestly ask that a general congress of women without limit of nationality may be appointed and held at some place deemed most convenient and at the earliest period consistent with its objects, to promote the alliance of the different nationalities, the amicable settlement of international questions, the great and general interests of peace.”

The original Mother’s Day proclamation.