

Love Without Borders

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“There was a great multitude that no one could count.” – Revelation 7:9a

Some of you may have noticed that during these Sundays after Easter, there's been no reading from the Old Testament except for the psalm. The reason for that is that the editors of the Revised Common Lectionary are following an ancient practice that goes back at least to the fourth century, when the church began to emphasize Easter to direct the attention of Christians not to our past, which is important, but rather to the future, which is more important because the future is where God is waiting for us, the abode of that for which we long and hope and work.

So instead of an Old Testament reading during Eastertide, we read first from the Acts of the Apostles, which contains stories of the spiritual power that came upon Jesus' apostles after his resurrection. These stories, which often contain accounts of miracles, are intended to show us that the loving power of Jesus the Christ is available to his followers when the historical Jesus is no longer present to us in his physical, earthly form. You and I, just like Jesus' first disciples after his resurrection, live in the power of the risen Christ – and that power can work wonders. Peter's resuscitation of Tabitha is one manifestation of that power.

But let us attend carefully to what Scripture is telling us and what it is not. Peter's restoring Tabitha to life is a powerful and rare miracle, but it's not unique. There are several accounts in the Bible of spiritually powerful people who are able to channel God's Spirit-that-is-life with such clarity that they can restore that life in people from whom it had departed. The prophets Elijah and Elisha, for example, are both recorded to have brought a child back to life, and Jesus raised a widow's son, a temple leader's daughter, and, most famously, Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary.

So Peter's restoring Tabitha to this life is noteworthy, but it's not unique. And it is also not resurrection. It's resuscitation – physical restoration to this life – rather than the spiritual as well as physical transformation for which we reserve the word resurrection, which we apply in its complete form only to Jesus.

Now, it may sound like I'm splitting hairs by saying that resuscitation and resurrection are different, but I'm not and they are. They're quite different. Resuscitation refers to bringing back, and resurrection refers to leading forward. Tabitha, the widow's son, Jairus' daughter – they were all brought back to the natural life they had been living, and would continue to live, until they died – again.

That is completely different from Jesus' resurrection, which is the supreme sign of that new way of being in the world that he called the kingdom of God. Jesus' resurrection in the biblical tradition is the seal of his life and teaching, the confirmation of his living God's world in this world, and the revelation of what God has in store for us in the future. The resurrection of the Christ is about moving forward into a new way of being, not about dragging Jesus back into this life with us. We Christians have badly misunderstood this, despite Paul's telling us, clearly and unambiguously, that restoration to this life is not the point of Christ's resurrection.

“If for this life only we have hoped in Christ,” Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died” (1 Cor. 15:19-20).

By referring to Christ as the first fruits of those who have died, Paul is telling us that the process of the resurrection – that is the resurrection at the end of time – has begun. Christ's resurrection is the beginning of that process of the passing away of this world and the restoration of that world that God always intended for this creation to be. That's why Paul says in that same passage that just as death came through Adam, life comes through Jesus Christ. Paul links the beginning of the Christian story – the story of creation – with the end of that story – God's restoration of creation in the Christ as a new heaven and a new earth. In the metaphoric language of Scripture, one human being fixes at the end what an earlier human being messed up at the beginning. And that fixing process begins with Jesus' resurrection.

That's the new creation, the realm of God, heaven – they all mean the same thing – that God has promised. And Christian believers experience that new creation now IF they have allowed the risen Jesus Christ to be the definitive shaper of their reality. Believers don't experience God's new creation fully or to the exclusion of the old creation, but we do experience it, in bits and pieces, as a foretaste of of God's new heaven and new earth.

So if Christ's resurrection is the beginning, what's the end? That's where that strange and wonderful book of Revelation comes in, and that's why it's part of our Bible and the direction of Christian hope. From that book I have taken as my text for the morning the ninth and tenth verses of the seventh chapter: “After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God, who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

That is the end of the process for which Jesus' resurrection is the beginning: a great multitude, that no one can count, who rejoice eternally in God's presence and in the presence of the Lamb of God who was slain for them. And the key phrase for us, who are living through difficult days of division and polarization and isolation and suspicion, are those few words we usually read right past, “that no one could count.” No one, in the final analysis, can count the redeemed. No one can count those who have responded to the Lamb's invitation. No one can count those who have said yes to God's yes to them.

The Orthodox, who claim to know the truth, can't count them. The Roman Catholics, who claim to have the truth, can't count them. We progressives of the religious left, who claim to have the truth, can't count them. The Southern Baptists and the traditional United Methodists can't count them. The charismatic Pentecostals can't count them. No one can count those who have responded to God's love with their lives.

We who are religious historically have expended a great deal of time and energy counting who's in and who's out, but the good news of Jesus Christ, portrayed in Revelation as the Lamb who was slain and lives eternally, is that all of our counting is in vain. We cannot draw the boundaries around those who will be included in the world to come because those boundaries do not belong to us; they belong to God, and the number God has gathered in is beyond reckoning.

That really is good news. It really is good news to believe that God's love is so broad and vast and deep that we cannot plumb its depths or its reach. It really is good news to know that we are surrounded, as Hebrews puts it, by a great cloud of witnesses. It's a wonderful thing to trust that our

limitations, our prejudices, our fixations, our obsessions, our fears, our cold-heartedness, our small-mindedness, our lack of pity, our inability to empathize, our myopic and misplaced loyalties – all of that is, in the final analysis, not ultimately true. They're all false. They're all distortions of reality. They're all part of what we commonly call our fallen world.

And, mercifully, they are not eternal. They are not all there is or all that has been or all that will be. The limitations of our earthly perceptions will pass away, to be replaced with a reality much deeper, much broader, and much more loving.

What we see in this vision of John is love without borders. We see God's love at work, drawing more people to God's loving self than we can count or imagine. Our love, even at its best, is always partial and imperfect, but God's love is not. The gloriously expansive nature of God's love is what John caught a glimpse of on the island of Patmos out in the Aegean Sea, and that vision was preserved by John's disciples and made part of the Christian vision of ultimate reality. That's why Revelation is so important to the Christian faith and why I'll be leading another, fuller study of it this summer. What we see in Revelation, among many other things, is love without borders.

This past Wednesday, I participated in a webinar led by Dr. Katharine Hayhoe, a professor of political science at Texas Tech University, and the director of their Climate Science Center. Dr. Hayhoe is an atmospheric scientist as well as a political scientist, and she is also a self-styled pro-life, evangelical Christian. And what being pro-life, evangelical, and Christian means for her is that all Christians must take seriously their mandate to be good stewards of God's creation, which is the source of life for all living things on earth, and which, the scientific data is telling us, we're not currently doing. Dr. Hayhoe regularly speaks at theologically and politically conservative Christian institutions, such as Dallas Baptist University, where students were surveyed before and after one of her talks. Students there were asked if they thought global warming was happening, and before Dr. Hayhoe's talk, 51% responded yes; after her lecture, that figure shot up to 87%. Young evangelical Christians are genuinely interested in using truth to guide their decisions, and when they are exposed to the truth from a trusted source, such as a scientist with impeccable credentials like Katharine Hayhoe, they respond appropriately. As my evangelical friends would say, Praise God.

Evangelicals make up about a quarter of America's population, and they are politically very influential. Imagine, then, the changes that are possible in our country and around the world as more and more evangelical Christians come to accept the reality of anthropogenic climate change. An enormous force for the good of God's creation could be unleashed to help us all be better stewards of this precious gift that we call home. Dr. Hayhoe's presentation reminded me that those of us on the left of the theological spectrum, who have been engaged in this struggle for years or even decades, have allies on the right that we can't even begin to count, and the reason we can't is because of the artificial boundaries that we place between ourselves and others – boundaries which the love of God does not respect.

I want to close by quoting from a hymn that captures the essence of John's vision of the innumerable throng before the throne of the God of infinite love. The hymn is about a vision of our differences being overcome by a God who gathers us in, which is the title of the hymn.

Gather us in, Thou Love that fillest all;
 Gather our rival faiths within Thy fold;
 Rend each man's temple veil, and bid it fall,
 That we may know that Thou hast been of old.

Gather us in—we worship only Thee;
In varied names we stretch a common hand;
In diverse forms a common soul we see;
In many ships we seek one spirit land.

Thine is the Roman's strength without his pride;
Thine is the Greek's glad world without its graves;
Thine is Judea's law with love beside,
The truth that censures and the grace that saves.

Some seek a Father in the heav'ns above;
Some ask a human image to adore;
Some crave a spirit vast as life and love;
Within Thy mansions we have all and more.