

“Rise”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Revelation 7:9-17 and Acts 9:36-43

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Oh for the days when I thought having one kid was hard. Little did I know! I mean, we're over the moon happy with Josephine, but I'm pretty sure I'm approaching... I believe the clinical word for it is... insanity. But who am I kidding? I've been there a long time!

I'm particularly remembering a day about three years ago when I had the rare joy of going to church and hearing my wife Jenna preach. I was adamant: I was not going to take Emerson to nursery care; I was going to worship with my son, in a beautiful, special father-son bonding moment in the holy presence of God. See, insane. Emerson was 11 months old at the time. He was so vocal you would have thought we were in a Pentecostal service. By the time the benediction was given, I looked a mess: I was sweating, my hair was sticking up, tie askew, panting. Suddenly, I had a new, and frankly unwanted, empathy for those of you who do this every week.

If being a parent has taught me anything, it's that chaos is normal. A new baby in the house has only reinforced that truth.

I admit that my first instinct on that Sunday three years ago was to hide the chaos. I feared that people were getting upset with me and my loud baby. I tried to distract him, shush him, bounce him. And when that didn't work, we stepped out of the sanctuary. Meanwhile, the other parent in the service, a young mother with a one-year-old, adopted a different strategy. I don't know whether it was out of wisdom or just resigned exhaustion, but she embraced the chaos. She let her daughter play. The toddler wandered the sanctuary, climbed the chancel steps, grabbed Jenna as she spoke, babbled with other parishioners. And you know what? Not only were people fine with it, they loved it. As I watched these stiff, distant individuals erupt into a laughing, smiling community, I realized that this child was ministering to them in a way Jenna and I never could. God was using the chaos to meet them.

Now this might seem like an odd story to pair with our Scripture readings, but it occurs to me that we do the same thing with death: we hide it. It makes a mess of our plans, our bodies, our relationships. It's loud and scary. It makes us wonder whether our life mattered. And so we shush it, sanitize it, lock it away in hospitals, conceal it beneath layers of anti-aging creams and pills, counsel its bereaved to move on and be happy.

Honestly, who can blame us? There is no chaos more terrifying. But I wonder if by running away from this chaos, we might not be missing out on God's presence, like that little girl wandering the sanctuary.

In our reading from Acts, we learn that a disciple of Christ, a good and faithful woman, has died. And what strikes me about this story is that the people don't hide.

In what is one of the first recorded funerals of the early church, the people accept the disruption of death. They do not turn away when she becomes ill. They do not turn away when she starts crying out at night or losing weight. They do not turn away when she gets angry and latches onto them, like the closest lifeboat. And when she dies, they are there, to lovingly, painstakingly wash her body. This may seem like little to us, but at the time Romans despised the idea of touching a dead body; Jews and Christians considered it a sacred act. Cleaned, her body is taken to an upper room, not unlike the upper room where Jesus shared the Last Supper with his disciples, or met them risen from the dead.

They send for Peter, their pastor. When he arrives, the house is full. There are people there from every part of her life. But most numerous are the widows who weep for the friend who helped them in their hour of need, who knit the very clothes on their back. As Peter walks among the crowd, they speak her name: Tabitha, or in Greek, Dorcas, meaning "Gazelle." They call her *mathetria*, a woman disciple. They tell stories of her life and show what she had created—evidence that her life did matter. Beth Scibienski imagines the scene as a "living fashion show. The works of her hands walking around while stories are told of her love and compassion."

Peter kneels down and prays; he turns to the body and says, "Tabitha, get up! Rise!" And miraculously, she does!

"And then calling the saints and widows—Peter show[s] them Tabitha. Not the work of *her* hands but the work of God's hand, the work of the Spirit to resurrect, to give life, to re-create, to lift up. Peter show[s] them God's handiwork" (Beth Scibienski).

This may be hard for us to believe. But isn't this what we do when someone dies? We gather; we grieve; we speak the name and life of the dead; we insist that they matter; and we call them to rise—and through our stories, through our faith, we show them alive to the gathered. Every funeral is an Easter upper room.

I am consistently amazed by the unexpected courage of wounded people to rise and meet the chaos of life and death. We've had a lot of funerals here at Westminster over the last several years—some of them, we especially remember today, for mothers and grandmothers. I have sat with many of you in living rooms and parlors, across dining room tables and in chairs drawn in a circle, in my study or in the social room of this church. We talk for hours. We plan a service to witness to Christ's, and our loved one's, resurrection. But more than anything, we tell stories. Memories. Ones that make us cry. Ones that make us laugh. Ones that inspire. Ones that still hurt, are still unresolved and ask for forgiveness.

We pray. We speak their name. We vent our pain, our anger, our doubt. We do the very thing society and so often our own hearts tell us not to do: we drag our grief into the light of day. We allow ourselves to feel it, name it, touch it. And as we do so, something as miraculous as our story in Acts today happens. In accepting the reality of death and the chaos and hurt it brings, we

come face to face with the paradoxical reality of a Love that defies death, defies every barrier, every separation, and binds us to the one we love, in the God who loves us.

We find that, despite death, our relationship with our loved one has not ended. Not only do we remember them, but we continue to live with them, to learn from them, to come closer to them in understanding, and to share our joy with them. And in that way, we receive a glimpse of the resurrection that takes place in the fullness of time, in the mystery of eternity that is God.

In the chaos of death, we speak their names, we show their lives, and say, "Get up! Rise!" Rise in the God who holds you. You did your work; now let God do hers.

This is the model set for us by the Book of Acts. We look upon a world of death, mess and loss, weep our tears, shout our rage, dance our chaos, and declare that our God of infinite love and triumphant life shall meet us there, in the chaos, in the storm, and RISE. Like a toddler dancing through the pews.

I know it can feel impossible, like we're being swallowed up. I recall that in the Book of Revelation, just prior to our vision today of people singing before God, the prophet describes a shaken earth, a moon like blood, a people afraid, innocents killed, stars falling from the sky, and he begs this one question: "Who is able to stand?" Who can stand when there is so much death and chaos, so much loss and hurt?

And the answer is: no one. No one can stand, not alone. But when God stands, when the lamb that becomes the shepherd leads, then a host beyond count, from all nations and languages, all the ones discounted as weak or lost or unwanted, you and me, we're all there, standing, rising.

Isn't it amazing that God doesn't ask us to be strong? God doesn't ask us to order the chaos. God doesn't ask us to hold back our tears. God asks us one thing alone—that we not turn away, not hide, but take one more step, and then another, and another, trusting that God will be there to raise us up.

It is not when everything goes according to plan that God appears. It is when things fall apart, when toddlers make a mess, when stars fall from the sky, when nations invade and churches schism and injustice threatens, that God shows up, to reveal, not our handiwork, but hers: a risen life. It is then that we discover that only the fallen can rise. **Amen.**