

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

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Last Sunday, I had a rare joy. I got to go to church and hear my wife preach. I got to enjoy the brilliance, the commanding pastoral presence, and fierce love that is Jenna. I want to thank you for the gift of that time... What I will not thank you for is the battle that is worshiping with an 11-month-old. Oh, I drastically underestimated how hard that would be. The last time I held him while Jenna preached, he just laid there. Easy. But now, he's mobile, and vocal. So vocal! You would have thought we were in a Pentecostal service. By the time the benediction was given, I looked a mess: I'm sweating, my hair's sticking up, tie askew, I'm panting, I think I found my first gray hair. I have a new, and unwanted, empathy for those of you do this every week.

If being a parent has taught me anything, it's that chaos is normal.

I admit that my first instinct on Sunday 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 whenever one of our brothers or sisters 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. I’ve seen that courage recently. If you’ve been following the news, you’ll know that one week ago, Rachel Held Evans, a leading voice of a radically inclusive Christianity, a *mathetria* like Tabitha, died suddenly at the age of 37, leaving behind a husband, a three-year-old son, a one-year-old daughter, hundreds of thousands of followers, and a whole lot of mess. She had gone to the hospital with the flu; she tweeted that she was bummed to miss *Game of Thrones*. The simple antibiotics that were supposed to heal her sent her into violent seizures. She died days later in a coma.

As she lay dying, the Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber anointed her forehead with frankincense and prayed over her, like Peter, whispering, “Lord, let your servant go in peace.”

There are people who would not be Christian today, who would not believe they belonged or were loved, if it were not for Rachel. There are women who would not be pastors or authors or activists if it were not for Rachel. They wear her thoughts, her doubts and wounds, her faith and love, her humor and curiosity, like the widows who wore the clothing Tabitha had knit for them. And every day since her death, they have gathered, in churches, in articles, on Facebook and Twitter, thousands upon thousands, posting photos, memories, stories, tears. There have been some nasty things written as well by people who didn’t like the ambiguity, the chaos, she invited.

But most have declared the worth of this Christian who was not afraid to wander through the sanctuary, like that toddler, topple idols and make people smile and wonder.

Rachel didn't create the chaos, anymore than she caused her death. She simply was brave enough, faithful enough, silly enough, to name it, own it. And now, in the chaos of her death, we speak her name, show her life, and say, "Rachel, get up! Rise!" Rise in the God who holds you. Rise in the hope of resurrection. Rise in the lives you touched. Rise in the love you unleashed. 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, 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.**