

“Ordinary Actions Can Lead to Extraordinary Results”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of

St. Andrew’s United Church

for Sunday, April 17, 2016 – Easter 4

Scripture Readings: Acts 9:36-43; John 10:22-30

(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

It’s a trick that can catch us easily when we read the newspaper, study history, or even hear stories from the Bible. It is common to assume that the big stories of life – the most dramatic and the most influential – are those where something amazing, even unbelievable, happens in our daily experience.

So we have today a story of Tabitha, or Dorcas (her name means “gazelle,” not as significant to us as it might be to the early church world, for names often brought with them an image of what kind of person would carry such a name).

Tabitha is raised from the dead, and all of a sudden we learn that the earliest disciples had great power of healing and resuscitation – powers that Jesus both had and by which he impressed those who met him.

We are left to think that the disciples are amazing, and maybe a little bit of us is ready to see in Tabitha a great woman who would be so sorely missed if she died and was no longer part of the church.

Both realities are present in this story – the disciples were amazing in their ability to bounce back from grief and despair, and Tabitha, indeed, was a great woman -- but the most important part of that greatness is that Tabitha is a generous person. Nothing particularly special, not a large donor or major philanthropist – she was a generous, caring person.

In the Gospel of John we have Jesus speaking to those who dismissed his teachings and did not accept his message, and he says the problem faced by his opponents is that they are not his sheep.

I always have heard in those words a sense of ownership or protection – Jesus the shepherd protects those who are truly his followers, his sheep. But I think the image is more basic than that.

Followers of Jesus – the memorable ones, people like Tabitha and the disciples -- are as simple and as ordinary as sheep out in the field. It is as simple, and as complex, as that.

Jesus called people as his disciples people who were ordinary folk - ordinary people who did basic, down-to-earth work (or should I say of the fishermen “down to the pier” work?).

People like Sean Schwarmer, who was so sick from cancer at age 16 that he was given the last rites, but eventually he recovered and climbed Mt. Everest, even though he did not have full lung capacity.

A student who was kicked out of school for asking too many questions eventually went on to create many significant inventions and was the originator of many patents: Thomas Alva Edison.

Probably the best known story recently of an ordinary individual was that of a single mom on welfare who picked up a pen and starting writing a book on wizardly that she felt she had inside her. When her first book was accepted for printing the publisher insisted that they use her initials, and not her real first name, because boys might not buy the book if they knew a woman wrote it. The empire of Harry Potter and J. K. Rowling was born.

A doting aunt once told her nephew that he would never make money playing his guitar, but he persevered and became part of a famous quartet – John Lennon.

Chad Moeller in his blog has written that “Great people are just ordinary people with great desire.”

Canadian east-coast singer-songwriter, now living in Halifax, has written: “My training has taught me that ordinary people can do

extraordinary things with vision, commitment, and a goal that calls you to look and reach higher.”

This week Ipperwash Camp has been returned to the band council of Kettle and Stony Point Reserve, 70 years after the end of World War II and the expected return of that property. Many ordinary aboriginal people and humble leaders have brought this situation to a conclusion after many failed attempts by much more famous and noted leaders. Perseverance was what was needed.

And perseverance was the one ongoing attribute that the disciples needed in their ministry and outreach in the days and weeks and months after the crucifixion of Jesus. They were often uncertain of where to go and what to do, but their perseverance to offer hope and encouragement to others carried them through each day they faced.

We may not always be successful, but ordinary people always can be faithful. We may not always be the best, but we can offer our best.

A speaker decided to get his afternoon audience awake for he knew most were ready for an after-lunch nap when he started his 1:30 p.m. presentation, so he took out a \$20 bill and asked how many people would like the \$20? A few hands went up, and so he said: “I will give it to someone, but first I wonder if you still want the \$20 after I do this?” He then took the \$20 bill and crumpled it all up and tossed it on the floor.

Still many were willing to accept the bill. Then he said: “Now before I give away this bill I want to see if you still want this \$20?” and he dropped the crumpled bill on the floor and stomped on it and crushed it with his boot. A few still were willing to accept the bill.

He held it up and said: “You know the reason that you still want the bill – it has gone through all kinds of transformation and abuse, but it still is worth \$20 – the same value that it was worth when it looked like new and I took it from the bank machine yesterday.

You are like this \$20 bill. You will face adversity, trials, and be in situations where people ignore you, treat you badly, even dismiss you, but you need to remember that the value that God gave you remains through all of that. You do not lose value to the God who loves you, to the people who love you, to the society that needs you.”

We are all as good as a \$20 bill – we have a value that does not diminish, but we can do much when we are prepared to apply who we are as ordinary people to initiate significant, even extraordinary opportunities.

What he did not do I will do – take the \$20 bill and see that somehow it has a tear in it. Yet now I will tape together that torn bill, and so it remains viable currency.

There are times we are broken down, our hearts ripped apart, our sense of the future unclear, yet even then, we are not abandoned.

Even in death our lives are seen as valuable and whole in God’s eyes.

Such is the message of Tabitha.

Not even death can take away our value and purpose in life.

Such value is with all of us, no matter what we face. This \$20 bill is for us this day a communal symbol that we all have value – wherever we are, whatever we try to do and accomplish, however we are received.

We all have value, because we are ordinary people given a chance to persevere, and accomplish extraordinary things, with God’s help.