FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

Jeannie D. Thompson

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*“Healing Community”* Acts 9:36-43

Let us start by a few questions. Has anyone here heard of the Taize Community? A lot of us do. We may not have known where the music comes from but we know the Taize Community by its music. It is an ecumenical community located in France—but it’s also a movement in music and in reconciliation. It was started in 1940 by a Reformed Protestant, a man named Brother Roger Schutz, who wondered what it was like to really live a life according to the Scriptures. He chose France to found his community after WWII because it seemed like a place in deep need of spiritual rebirth and comfort.

Over the years, the Taize Community has welcomed and included people from many different faiths. Their outreach is especially to youth these days, although the music that has been developed and shared with the world enjoys worldwide appeal. So that is one.

Has anyone here heard of the Catholic Workers Movement? The Catholic Workers’ Movement came out of a meeting between Dorothy Day and a man named Peter Maurin in 1932. Together they founded a movement within the Roman Catholic Church that aimed to unite workers and intellectuals in joint projects ranging from farming to educational discussions.

One of the central parts of their work was the founding of the journal, *The Catholic Worker,* which focused on Day’s deep devotion to the church’s “preferential option for the poor.” In addition to her work among the poor, Dorothy Day was also dedicated to peace and pacifism.

Over the years, the Catholic Workers Movement has inspired and ministered to millions.

One more: Martin Luther King, Jr. Contrary to what a lot of people often think, King did not *start* the civil rights movement. It had been working, marching, protesting and praying for many years before he came along.

King became the brave, eloquent, charismatic face of the movement for some years. He joined the already active community because he had been formed in the Christian community which shaped his heart and his hunger for more than what the world was showing him. In being so guided, taught, and supported, Martin Luther King Jr. and his community changed the world for all of us.

As I am sure you noticed, all three of these examples started with one person with a dream, a dream of bringing comfort and wholeness to many. With these things in mind, let us turn to the lesson that was just read for us.

Now, I must start with a confession: One of the things I always forget to do when I preach from the Book of Acts is to write out the full and complete title of it. It is not *just* “Acts.” The title of the book we have just heard from is *The Acts of the Apostles*.

And it is important that we remember and call it by its whole and complete name because, as the title suggests, this part of the Bible is about *all* of the apostles—not just one—it is about the group of them and what they did, and how they lived, and where they went.

In fact. one of the most important things to remember as we read through the *Acts of the Apostles* is that the apostles are no longer in Jerusalem. They have moved out of the city, and out of the definition as a community that Jerusalem once gave them.

*Acts of the Apostles* is about *new life* in a *new* community—a community that is gathering around the stories and teachings of Jesus Christ. It is a community of those first believers and (not only what happened to them), but also how they were gathering and *building* communities of believers in the years after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension.

In *Acts of the Apostles,* the believers are now on their own—these are the stories about their lives after Pentecost. The stories in this book, are about the lives of the apostles after they have been filled with the Holy Spirit. However, the difference is that now, they are not only believers, now they are the leaders.

Now, they must depend on what they have learned when Jesus was with them. Now, they must depend on how deeply all of that experience has been instilled in them—the learning, but also the trauma, the healing but also the miracles, also the violence, also the suffering…and most of all, they are to be shaped by the resurrection. How that has shaped them into the people they are now, and the communities they gather. This is what their lives are about now, and ours too.

The story of Tabitha, which we just heard is a good example of all of this. It is a short story, but it is filled with all of the things we would hope to find among a group of people who call themselves “the followers of The Way.”

First, we should notice that the story features a woman. Not only that, her name is actually recorded. Imagine that! Two thousand years later and we know her name and we still proclaim what has happened with her. Not only that, but Tabitha is also described, very deliberately, as a disciple—this is also something new.

Women are consistently mentioned in the gospels, but usually in a subordinate way. Think of how on Easter morning, this same writer, Luke, tells us that a group of women (three are named, but the suggestion is that there were quite a few more), they are the ones who first witness the empty tomb, but it does not go well with them when they go and report it.

Indeed, the Gospel of Luke records it this way: *“it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.* [Luke 24:10-11]

But now, in the passage that we heard, this same writer describes Tabitha, calls her a full-fledged disciple. How much things have changed—and for the better!

The second thing to notice is the way all of these stories are—once again—they are about the whole group of people—the community—it is important to notice what they are doing, and how they are responding to one another.

Tabitha is featured in this story, but rather than individual stories of her trotting along to visit this person and the next doing good deeds, rather than anecdotes from her life, we are given a portrait of a *community* as they react to her death and describe how much she has meant to them.

So great was their love and admiration for her that a delegation is sent hurrying off from Joppa to Lydda, where they have heard Peter was preaching. *“Please come to us without delay,”* they tell him. [v. 38] The two cities were about ten miles from one another. So, Peter and the delegation could have gotten back to Joppa within a few hours.

At this point, the attention shifts over to Peter. He does not delay but goes to Joppa and to that community of believers. With him, Peter brings—not his own power but the power that has been given to the whole church.

Indeed, at this point, as one commentator has written: Peter is the “epitome of the authority and capacity and mission of the church.” Peter *is* the church—he stands in for each one of the believers and all of them together as one community gathered around the healing and wholeness of God.

What Peter brings—what the church has been given since the beginning—is the capacity to live within the love of Christ. We are *in* Christ. We are the body of Christ in the world. And that means that the world has been transformed toward well-being for all people—for every part of the body.

In fact, when we remember Tabitha—the one in this story and the ones in this room and in the history of Nu’uanu Congregational Church—what we realize is that the story that we tell about her is a story that is still shaping our lives. This is exactly what it is meant to do.

We are shaped by Tabithas’ stories—all of them—and we have been given the power and the opportunity to shape others. We can make a difference in the lives of individuals, but also among whole communities of people.

We can do this for good or ill. We can do this just for ourselves, or we can push out the boundaries of our understanding of community and gather in many, many more.

What is equally important is recognizing opportunities to join with many others beyond our own sphere of family, friends, and acquaintances. When we recognize the movement of God’s spirit in some aspect of our lives beyond our church, we can, and hopefully will carry the resurrection power of Christ into those circles, too.

We *can* carry God’s love and compassion and create safe spaces for families in need.

We *can* carry God’s desire for strength and support for children and youth by sharing our church home with programs and groups dedicated to education and recreation.

We *can* open our church home to more congregations looking for space to worship.

As most of us know, we are already doing all of this. In fact, a couple of weeks ago, we stayed here in the gym and listened to how our church is continuing to be the healing community we have always sought to be. So much is already happening, and there is so much more to come.

It will not look the same as it once did, and I suppose that is the hardest part because most of us are much more comfortable with what is familiar—what we have always done. However, we must not be discouraged or alarmed because the effect will be the same—new strength, new hope, new life. And there is a place and an offer of partnership and inclusion for each and every one of us in such a community endeavor, in such a community that cares about and wants to be a people dedicated to God’s healing and wholeness in the world. Indeed, we need each other. We need and want all of us as we work and worship.

I was really glad to help our children learn some more of your names and faces this morning. Thank you all for “being Tabitha.”

Just as the children are learning your names, I am still learning the names of the Tabithas of the NCC’s past who made-up this healing community. The Wednesday evening Bible study group, were to me, like I was to the children. I have learned more names of the past, and I am still learning the names of the present…and the future.

For today, I would like to end the sermon by reading the names of the Tabithas I was told about this past Wednesday. As I read their names, let your minds and hearts remember their faces and their ministry. Let yourself remember and give thanks for the way in which their hearts and spirits were shaped by the love and support of this church—this healing community—and the way in which they shaped and are shaping us, and many others.

By the way: the names you will hear are of people who are no longer with us in body, but who surely are with us in spirit. (I know how modest you all are, so I did not include the living.)

John Nakamura

Mrs. Soh

Yugi and Naka Miyamoto

Yoshiko “Shimi” Shinamura

Toyo Nakamura

Walter Nomura

Please feel free to introduce me to others I have not had a chance to hear about yet. I am eager to know them. But also: realize that although we lift the names of a few, *all*  our names are included because we were a community of compassion and support, formed by the love of God, the peace of Christ, and the communion of the Spirit.

Friends, in *Acts of the Apostles* we hear about the way in which the life of Christ is continuing to move and form lives—especially those of the apostles. They are no longer in Jerusalem. They will return there, but from now on, their community is much larger. It is the community of God’s people—*everywhere*—a community who are in need of healing and wholeness.

*We* have been called to be that *healing community,* too*,* for more than a hundred years. And thanks be to God, we are still loved and led by Christ into new opportunities and new life.

Amen.